

grantee spotlight: reading partners

Building the Partnership: Reading Partners, Sanchez School, and Vision for Community

Volunteer Karlos Guerra steps off the 16th street BART into the buzz of the Mission neighborhood on his way to his weekly volunteer session at the Learning Partners' reading center at Sanchez Elementary School.

"I walk up 16th street to Sanchez Street and Sanchez Elementary is right there on the corner," he describes. "As soon as I hit Sanchez I can feel the vibe of students with a burning desire to learn. Sanchez is very lively, it's very goal-oriented. Reading Partners is on the far end of the school in its own building. Students who go there know that it's serious – it's serious business in terms of the curriculum – and they know that they're there to learn to read."

Reading Partners and Sanchez Elementary demonstrate the successes that are possible when community programs and schools align their objectives for student achievement. Looking back on their first year of partnership, Reading Partners and Sanchez attribute their fruitful collaboration to the fact that each is committed to learning, partnership, and results.

In ten years as principal at Sanchez, Raymond Isola has developed a clear partnership philosophy. "I see it as a mosaic. I have the teachers here, and they're part of the mosaic. And I have the Reading Partners program, I have the Boys and Girls Club, and I have the relationship with

Café H and the Tangerine Restaurant. And I have volunteers coming in and senior citizens from the Beacon Program next door. Parents are getting involved in the school community. That's the mosaic... The work we're doing is so large and so important that we have to build effective partnerships. But they have to be very thoughtful and deliberate partnerships."



Raymond Isola, Principal, Sanchez School

According to Reading Partners executive director Michael Lombardo, a deliberate partnership relies on shared commitment to student achievement. "Immediately upon setting foot in the school you get the sense of the value the leadership places on measurable results, and we're cut from the same cloth in that regard. Raymond has a vision for how he wants to improve achievement at the school, and he brings that vision down to reality, into the nuts and bolts of running a school."

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The Need

Reading Partners has helped struggling readers by providing one-on-one, volunteer literacy tutoring in the Bay Area since 1999, focusing its work on the peninsula and the East Bay. In 2007, newly-arrived executive director Lombardo and staff measured the magnitude of need for reading support throughout the larger Bay Area, identifying forty thousand elementary students who fit the program's profile and receive no supports outside the classroom.

Raymond Isola

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This process further clarified scope of need within San Francisco. Explaining his decision to expand to San Francisco this past year, Lombardo says, “San Francisco offered an interesting opportunity in the existing structure it had for managing community-based organizations; compared it to other districts of its size, San Francisco's structure is much more articulated. There was an easy point of interface with the district; it was prepared for us. San Francisco was an obvious choice.”

The School

Reading Partners sought a school whose strategy for raising student achievement accommodated – and demanded –



Michael Lombardo, Executive Director, Reading Partners

To evaluate this fit, Lombardo asked, “What's the leadership's vision? What are they trying to accomplish? How do they look at look at deploying community based organizations tactically to accomplish that? Where do we fit within a whole array of programs they have that are trying to improve achievement for these kids?” Isola shares Lombardo's focus on fit. Describing initial conversations with Reading Partners, he says, “We were able to really clearly define common areas where we felt like we could join forces, put resources, and make something happen. It took very thoughtful, meaningful research to find out if this was going to be able to be meaningful and productive and successful.”

Confident that the fit was right, Reading Partners and Sanchez set out to identify the students who would benefit most from the program's skills-focused, out-of-classroom curriculum. As Isola explains, the profile of a Reading Partners student aligned to Sanchez's academic plan. “As we started analyzing data we [saw] that we were meeting the

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But this group of students that were at basic and that just needed a little bit of extra support to be able to get to proficiency at grade level standards, that was the group of students that we really wanted to focus in on. Teachers felt that they just needed some individualized instruction: that half hour, forty-five minutes of extra support.”

The Support

Isola and Lombardo were clear, however, that it would not be enough to define which students would participate in Reading Partners; they would have to also define how these students would participate by working with teachers to build a pull-out schedule which would support, not disturb, classroom learning. Both acknowledge that teachers were hesitant about removing students from the classroom and, as a result of that initial hesitancy, held high expectations for the program’s quality. Lombardo explains, “The time these kids have in school is precious. It is limited.

We’re asking teachers to give us some of that time. There’s no monetary cost, but they’re giving up their time with the kids during the school day and there is no greater statement of trust and respect that you can get from a teacher. So we’re ok that they set the bar high, and they should!”

Having a full-time site manager at each of its schools is “one of the hallmarks of the Reading Partners program,” Lombardo explains. “When you are there every day, you’re able to be a part of strategy conversations and to understand what the school is doing.” Open channels for com-

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munication between the site manager and teachers make meaningful student-level focus possible, Principal Isola explains. “The teachers know students so well that they talk to the site manager and say ‘this student is really a visual learner, so include some visuals with this student,’ or ‘this student is really a kinesthetic learner, so do some movement with this student.’ There is dialogue between the site manager and the teacher to really individualize the learning for each child.”

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The People

With shared vision, focus, and structures to support student-tailored learning, the Reading Partners – Sanchez team turned toward recruiting and training high-quality volunteers. It was important to both partners that these volunteers contribute to student achievement and that their approach to volunteering hold high expectations.

Isola describes what he believes makes an effective volunteer: “To me it’s their mindset. It’s not doing it for a child but with a child and having high expectations as well. Not a sense of pity but a sense that “we know that you can do this.” It’s a sense of belief in the child, looking at the strengths the child brings to the experience.” Lombardo



looks for volunteers driven by passion. His goal is to create an entry point for community members who want to engage with schools and who are committed to seeing students succeed. “As adults, none of us are happy about the state of education and the problem is that we don’t know what to do about it,” he says. “What Reading Partners offers is a chance to engage with schools and to do something that is really clearly defined, has a beginning, middle and end, and that has an obvious outcome. It’s stunning how quickly – in a week or two – you’ll see your student

Karlos Guerra

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not only reading better but acting different, being more engaged, and that’s what keeps volunteers engaged.” The volunteer that Isola and Lombardo describe is found through active community outreach and is made through ongoing training. Reading Partners volunteers participate in a 2-hour training session and shadow a veteran tutor before beginning work with a student. Volunteers also attend workshops on strategies for working with English learners, supporting comprehension skills, motivating students, and supporting diverse learning styles. Having completed at least three workshops, volunteers are eligible to work as lead tutors.

Tutor Karlos Guerra describes his sense of personal accountability to improvement. “I am a go-getter. I am a person who wants to learn every day. Every time I jump on the BART to go to my tutoring session I have a ten-minute ride to [ask myself] ‘what I can do better to help the student learn? What are my resources?’ The most valuable thing,” he continues, “has been seeing the amount of progress that a student can make through Reading Partners.” Asked how he identifies his student’s success, he explains, “A lot of times I found out that he was learning because he was feeling good about what he was learning. It was that personal touch that helped him progress and led me to see, in front of my eyes, that he was learning and becoming successful.”

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Lombardo and Isola echo Guerra's certainty that Reading Partners students have made great strides toward self-motivated learning. Asked one way he has measured student progress this past year, Lombardo says, "It's simple. It's recess time at school. A kid shows up to the Reading Center near the playground and grabs a book and sits down in a beanbag in the corner. That's success right there."

"Reading is tied to your emotions and your self-esteem in a way that no other school subject it... At their core every kid wants to learn and enjoys learning. It's part of who they are and part of what it means to be a kid."

Michael Lombardo

Lombardo further explains the importance of this self-motivation. "Reading is tied to your emotions and your self-esteem in a way that no other school subject is," he says. "Reading is tied up in who you are, and an inability to read affects your sense of self fundamentally. What's happening with each individual student is re-engagement, this coming out of their shell where all these defenses that have developed because they feel dumb in class and don't feel like school is for them begin to drop away. At their core every kid wants to learn and enjoys learning. It's part of who they are and part of what it means to be a kid."

It is not simply the smiles on students' faces that point to Reading Partners and Sanchez's joint success, however; progress is evident in students' test scores as well. Of the 44 students who participated in Reading Partners at San

chez, 95% increased their rate of gain in core reading skills, 91% measurably narrowed their grade level reading gap, and 32% successfully achieved proficiency at grade level.

Looking Ahead

For Lombardo, the work is about growth. "We [have been able] to serve twice as many kids every year. That expresses that we, as an organization, feel urgency about what we do. We're not happy that we had a 'great little program' down in Silicon Valley. We could have hung out in East Palo Alto and had a 'great little program,' but we looked up the Peninsula – we looked at San Francisco, we looked at San Jose, we looked at Oakland, and we looked eventually at LA – and said 'these kids all need us,' and we're going to do what it takes to get the program to them. I'm very proud of our growth."

And for Isola, the work ahead is about hope. "I hope [Reading Partners volunteers] see that there are schools that are thoughtful and deliberate in how they are trying to educate young people. They have a role to play if they choose to be involved, and they can make a difference. I always say that you can be part of the solution or part of the problem. If you make a choice to not be involved you can be part of the problem. If you want to get involved, you can find a place to get involved starting one child at a time. That's how you move a school from good to great, by helping one child at a time. This is a place of hope. And I hope that volunteers who come in here feel that this is a place of hope, that they leave feeling more hopeful about the world."