

FEATURE

Best Practices in
Building a Culture
of Reading

Using Parent Book Clubs to Build a School-Wide Reading Community

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What is a reading community? Examples from around the world are incredibly varied. There are classroom reading communities, county-wide mass reading events, and even evidence that French and Italian soldiers in the First World War formed reading communities in the trenches. History shows that reading communities are beneficial and dynamic. As school librarians, our goal is to discover what they have in common, and determine how to use the parallel tenets from each to create an ongoing culture of reading within our own schools and local communities.

A prevalent misconception is that reading must be a solitary endeavor. This view of reading creates an instant aversion for many teens who tend to be social creatures, spending hours “actively using social media sites to make connections with their peers, share stories and gossip, and voice their opinions on current happenings” (Heiting 2015, 30–31). A successful adolescent reading community in Illinois used this insight to design a program in which reading was a social experience. The high school English class began with a teacher read-aloud on the first day of school, and continued throughout the year, providing opportunities for students to interact with one another using blogs, book talks, and book trailers. The results were compelling. “The class engaged in meaningful relationships and social interactions tied to reading, and these connections mattered to them. Students took these connections seriously, and they authentically acted in ways to contribute positively to the reading community” (Heiting 2015, 31).

During World War I, reading communities were formed not only by educated officers, but by ordinary soldiers as well. “The habits of collective reading and reading aloud defined the reading community

of the trenches. Official photographs show collective newspaper reading as part of the male sociability of the trenches, while reading aloud was also a common practice” (Lyons 2014, 54). Not only did the communal reading provide the soldiers with escape from the boredom and the misery of trench warfare, it also created a sense of comradeship.

On the Same Page, a comprehensive community reading program serving families and schools around the Atlanta area, has a strong take on community reading. Based on

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data from national assessments, organizers conclude that when we read together, “we make better collaborators and problem solvers because we understand our world a little bit better. We become a community of engaged, educated, and empathetic individuals” (On the Same Page n.d.). The common idea that flows throughout these reading community examples seems to be the incorporation of positive social interaction and opportunities for discussion.

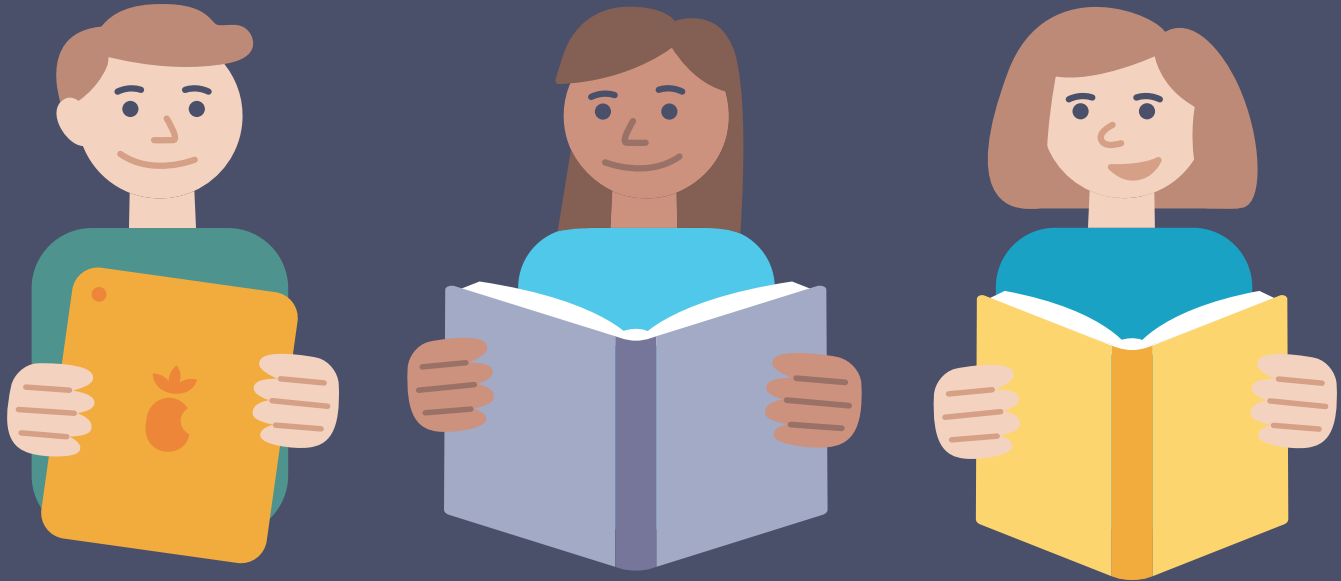
The authors of the article “Creating a Community of Readers” broke down the complex task of building a successful reading community

by suggesting that there are eleven necessary elements of collaboration and community-building between school and home:

1. Create and use a print-rich environment.
2. Adults serve as role models who enjoy reading.
3. Make time for reading.
4. Create a sense of ownership.
5. Emphasize the intrinsic rewards of reading.
6. Make reading a social experience.
7. Create a structure of collaborative leadership.
8. Articulate values, goals, and expectations of reading.
9. Create effective two-way communication between school and home.
10. Sponsor special school-wide events that celebrate the value of reading.
11. Highlight books worth reading. (Baker and Moss 1993, 30–31)

There is no better person than a school librarian to combine these aspects into a program that will nurture a community of readers from elementary through high school and beyond. My position as a middle school librarian led me to create a method for promoting a love of reading; this method was particularly successful for the parents and students at my school. I combined two of my passions—community outreach and reading for pleasure—into the Piney Grove Parent Book Club. The goal of the club was to provide easy access to good literature, while at the same time opening up a dialogue between students, parents, and the school library about books

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and the qualities of a good story. The book club created the opportunity for parents to have another way to bond with their preteens who were pulling away and becoming more independent.

There are two truths that I can profess with great certainty. The first is that families are busier than ever. The second is that parents of middle schoolers are desperate to continue being an active part of their children's school lives despite fewer volunteer opportunities, and the utter mortification their preteens exude when catching a glimpse of parents at school. These truths are what made this program work so well. Parents were able to volunteer from home and choose how to involve their

children. I had parents read aloud to their middle schooler, practice echo reading together, listen to the audiobook version in the car, and simply read the same book at the same time.

The Piney Grove Parent Book Club was designed to be very simple. It was almost exclusively conducted via e-mail. At the beginning of the year, I would send out a welcome letter to all parents or guardians of students at the school, describing the book club and my purpose for creating it. I would also do a media blitz, including an article in the school newsletter, e-flyers, and messages on our school Facebook page and Twitter account. Those interested in the club were invited to e-mail me for more

information. As soon as parents responded, I sent them the Parent Book Club Guidelines including:

- a recommended book list,
- directions for accessing and using our online library catalog,
- a copy of the book review form,
- logistics for checking out and returning books,
- links to book review websites, and
- suggestions for reading as a family.

Once parents requested a book or two, their child simply came to the school library, checked out the books that I had pulled, and took them home. A note was placed in the

student's account to indicate that their parent was part of the book club, and that more than the usual maximum of two books could be checked out at a time. I would follow up with a thank-you e-mail, and a notice that the books had been sent home with the student. When books had been read, parents sent them back to school along with a paper or e-mailed copy of the book review.

club is not only an opportunity for parents to nurture relationships with their kids, it is a wonderful opportunity for school librarians to build relationships with families.

Dozens of moms and dads signed up to be a part of the Parent Book Club. Some chose to read books from a list I had compiled that included classics, award winners, and new acquisitions.

community provides school librarians and parents with a powerful tool. Reading with others has social benefits beyond measure. It provides the connectedness so lacking in this digital age, improves relationships with others, and builds self-esteem. These benefits are everything that we want for our middle-schoolers and more! Try creating a parent book club of your own and watch the magic happen!

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Participants were not required to fill out a review, but many parents found it enjoyable, especially when writing it together with their child.

Consistent communication was the key to making the book club a success. E-mails were sent out every few weeks just to check in with club members. The messages included reminders, stories about how parents were making a difference, and opportunities to share or ask questions. The e-mails helped to keep the club members engaged. Many of them commented that my messages were the impetus they needed to continue making reading a priority in their homes. They looked forward to them and relied on the reminders in their busy lives.

Twice a year I hosted a Parent Book Club get-together for all who could attend. The goal of the meeting was to get to know each other better, and to provide the opportunity for growth. In a comfortable and casual coffee-klatch atmosphere we laughed, learned about each other, and talked about the books we had read. A book

Others chose their own books from our online catalog. Kids often urged their parents to read some of their favorites and vice versa. Reading the same book can be a great way to get a conversation started.

Each year, the word would spread about the Piney Grove Parent Book Club. In addition to dozens of parents, I had teachers, grandparents, and extended family members jumping on board. People who couldn't check books out from the school library used the public library or purchased their own copies. Parents and students talked about the club outside of school. One day I received an e-mail from a local physical therapist. He told me that he had been hearing about the book club from friends, local families, and his patients. He wanted to know how he could join. That was the day that I realized that we truly were building a community of readers.

We live in such stressful times. The daily anxiety preteens live with is exacerbated by the persistent influence of social media. Building a culture of reading in a school



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