

PERSPECTIVES FROM PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Bridging the Communication Gap: Supporting TSR! Partnerships Through Communication

By Mary Ellen Douglas, Technical Assistance Specialist

As the work of the Children's Learning Institute expands to include more and more communities in Texas, the challenge of creating and maintaining strong community-based partnerships also increases. Integrated approaches to building school readiness skills include a variety of partnership situations. In every partnership, the goal of collaboration is to improve school readiness of children, and make the best possible use of limited community resources.

Once established, a key to sustainability of the partnership is ongoing, effective communication (Gasko & Guthrow, 2008). Thanks to modern technology, the internet offers a convenient, easily accessible means of connecting to all stakeholders in the "team". Simply by clicking a button an update, message, or announcement can be sent to all. What are the necessary ingredients to ensure that everyone is informed? Across Texas, there are innovative efforts at work.

In Amarillo, TSR! Coordinator **Cheri Sherley** has developed a unique and exciting means of communication for the partners in the TSR! Project. She has created a website through www.wix.com as a means of introducing the mentors, the leadership, teacher "Treasure Chest" ideas, news about School Readiness, and much more. See for yourself at www.wix.com/csherley/TSR. During a recent conversation, Cheri explains more.

How did you assess the need for a way to communicate with all?

I used to send emails to everyone for many different reasons. It was time consuming, and I would still get requests for the same information. I realized the information that everyone needed should be in one spot that was easily accessible at any time to those who needed it. I tried to figure a way to put all important information in one place.

How did you find the website?

I wanted to do a website, and could not find a way to obtain a domain name. I used Google, and discovered the wix.com website.

Who is your website meant for?

It's for teachers, administrators, lead agencies, mentors, and anyone else who can use the info. We send the link to all the partners! There's information meant for teachers, such as each mentor's monthly calendar as well as classroom activity ideas, and eCIRCLE assignments. Mentor calendars are posted, with an announcement email which directs them back to the website. We include material that we as mentors would share anyway.

What kind of information do you share?

There's something for everyone! There are links to WebEx training, a link to SRCS application, mentor schedules, teacher resources, leadership profiles, mentor profiles, mClass training and news, just to name a few.

Tell us about the time involved in this effort:

It took a long time to set up initially, and it needs to be updated monthly or as needed.

Essentially everything is linked to a document. I upload the links, but I add the headlines. I used a template that was already created to save time, and selected one that was colorful and set the mood. The template is a background. I added the buttons. As webmaster, I spend a couple of hours a month uploading the links to current information, such as eCIRCLE assignments, new Mentor Calendars, new teacher activities, new training, etc. It's definitely been worth the effort.

According to Project Manager for the Amarillo TSR! Project **Barb Tuynman**, "The website is a bonus for the community, and for connecting all the partners. It builds camaraderie among the teachers, and builds up the image of the project. It's a way for the partners to see all that's going on. For everyone involved in the success of the project, the website is a neat validation of the work toward the meeting the goals of the project."

In another TSR! Grant location, **Lori Smith** is in her 6th year as TSR! Coordinator for ESC 18 (Midland/Odessa). As Lori explains, "At the beginning of the grant it was important that we all got on the same page. We held meetings with all the stakeholders to work out problems. Our main way to communicate is through email. We also have bimonthly meetings using distance learning."

As Lori explains, most of the participating sites are more than an hour away from the ESC 18. It doesn't make sense to use valuable time in traveling to and from. The child care centers and Head Start centers are allowed to go to the meetings at their local ISD's Distance Learning site. One plus for this arrangement is that it allows for great networking while attending the meetings. The local administrators meet together at the ESC 18 site.

Using this modern technology, the partners in the TSR! Grant stay informed while strengthening their cohesiveness. The meetings are for the coordinator, all mentors, and the administrators of all sites. With a large number of participating child care centers, a CCMS representative is also included. By attending all the trainings, and meetings, the CCMS rep knows what she should be seeing in the child care centers she visits. Also invited is the Permian Basin workforce board representative.

Kerry Miller, TSR! Coordinator in Temple plans monthly Directors/Principals Meetings.

"Directors host meetings which allow all sites to become more knowledgeable on partners in the program," she informs us. Partners in the grant share resources and professional development opportunities. In addition, there are the day-to-day phone calls and email communications as needed to respond quickly to situations and questions.

Modern technology has paved the way for new and innovative means of communication. The efforts of leadership to continually seek better methods for building the strongest possible

collaboration will help to attain and sustain a successful project. Whatever the means, the end result leads to the same goal: a coordinated partnership designed to make school successful for each and every Texas child.