

NCTN Promising Practice Series: *Building Relationships with Elected Officials Through Program Visits*

The NCTN Promising Practice Series presents detailed descriptions of strategies from the field designed to promote the successful transition of students from ABE/ESOL to postsecondary education.

CONTRIBUTED BY

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Ribbon-cutting ceremony at Dorcas Place, opening up the new wing of the center to house the Learning Resource Center and the Career Academy. To the left of Brenda is Governor Donald Carcieri and to the right is Providence's Mayor, David Cicilline. Also pictured are Joseph MarcAurele (President and CEO of Citizens Bank of RI), former City Council President John Lombardi, former U.S. Senator Lincoln Chafee, State Representative Thomas Slater, and Congressman James Langevin.

INTRODUCTION

Reaching out and building relationships with elected officials is an important way to advocate for your students, program, and the field of adult education. As you will see from this practice, inviting an elected official to your program is just one part of building these important relationships.

PROGRAM CONTEXT

Mission

Established in 1981, the mission of Dorcas Place is to assist low-income adults in realizing their full potential through literacy, employment, advocacy and community involvement. In carrying out this mission the agency embraces these values: advocacy, collaboration, community, family, empowerment, compassion, diversity, hospitality, life-long learning, respect and responsibility.

National College Transition Network (NCTN)
at World Education, Inc.

Services

Dorcas Place provides a comprehensive range of education programs and related services designed to fully support students in meeting their goals in relation to the adult roles of family member, worker, and citizen:

- Instruction in reading, writing, math, English, and computer literacy in a classroom setting up to 30 hours a week. Programs are available in different formats.
- One-on-one and small group instruction by staff and trained tutors in the Learning Resource Center.
- Workforce literacy program including on-the-job internships and support services.
- Support services to help students identify their strengths and address obstacles that may interfere with attaining their education and work goals with referrals to outside agencies, when necessary.
- Family literacy program that brings parents and children together in a creative learning environment.
- College Bridge program to help students make a successful transition to college after earning their GED.

RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND OF THE PRACTICE

We invite elected officials to visit our program to learn about our agency and the issues in adult education as a way to promote our program and our literacy agenda. While this practice focuses on building relationships with elected officials, it is also possible to extend this practice to other community leaders, including all elected officials and key policy makers, corporate executives, and heads of foundations. Bringing elected officials to your program gives you the opportunity to show off your program, demonstrate both the need for it and its impact, and help community leaders personalize the need for your program(s) by connecting with students. It's also an important opportunity to begin developing relationships with decision makers who can be literacy advocates and allies. When elected officials visit your program you gain an opportunity to advocate for additional services and discuss regulations or policies that would improve your program services. It is a chance to develop and deepen relationships with officials who can provide both support and the political will to advance your literacy agenda.

Initially, program visits were part of our civics education program, but we've learned that this strategy can be used to focus on any program or issue. It works especially well with college transition programs because a skilled workforce is so important right now and that's a hook for both employers and elected officials.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

The visit is one event, but it is not just a one shot deal. What we're aiming for are strategic, lasting relationships with a number of political leaders. Building these kinds of relationships is a long-term commitment. It can be done on a small scale in one class or on a larger scale including the entire adult education center. This does take a fair amount of preparation and some help on the part of your staff. I would say that it takes two people to organize a well-planned visit. Before even organizing a visit, it's important to establish some relationships and prepare data and information you want to share with those who come to your program or agency.

Preparing for the Visit

Identify who to invite

The first step is to identify the key elected officials and policy makers that could be literacy allies. I have always maintained a relationship with elected officials (on the local, state and national levels) and their staff. It is easy to overlook the importance of building relationships with the staff. But I would urge you to take relationships with staff very seriously—staff members are critical to carrying the message to the elected representative. An additional benefit of developing these relationships is that as staff and officials get to know you, your program may start getting student referrals, volunteers, and even interns who have been referred by the staff or office. When

working with Congressional members at the national level, it's also important to maintain relationships with both district and D.C. staff.

Contact the officials

Begin by inviting an elected official's staff member to your program or agency. I generally write a letter or call them up. I'd say something like "I'd love for you to come to Dorcas Place." It's important to let them know that you would really be honored to have an elected member come visit.

It's important to be flexible about scheduling the visit. I work completely around the community leader's schedule. It doesn't work for me to set a date and then see if the person is available. Keep in mind, they might not accept your first invitation. It may not be their top priority, so it's very important to be persistent. One thing we've learned is that it's hard to get members of Congress to attend events during the week but they are usually in their local districts on Mondays and Fridays.

Gather data and prepare information packets

Gathering data and putting it together takes time but it really works. Policy makers and elected officials don't expect research and data on program outcomes so it's impressive when you provide it and it shows that you take your work very seriously. Numbers speak volumes to a lot of people, especially policy makers.

Since a lot of programs don't have the time or money to pay someone to gather and analyze data I would strongly suggest using interns for this. We had an intern this spring from Brown University that conducted a customer satisfaction survey and a follow up survey on enrolled college students for us. One way to find interns is to meet with professors in the education and policy departments of a local college or university to see if you can be an internship site.

ADDITIONAL WAYS TO LOCATE INFORMATION

2000 Census Data

The main website at <http://www.census.gov> is an interesting place to start, particularly to locate facts at the state level. More detailed census data can be compiled through the American FactFinder link at http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en

Bureau of Labor Statistics

The Bureau of Labor Statistics provides monthly reports on the labor force, employment and unemployment using the Current Population Survey. This can be reached at <http://www.bls.gov/cps/>

Public Library

The reference librarian at your local library can assist you in locating a wide variety of data about your city or town.

We prepare a packet for each visitor to take away with them that includes:

- (1) Organizational materials (our annual report, brochure, information about volunteer opportunities, newsletter, financial overview, etc.)
- (2) a demographic profile of the communities we serve (risk factors, poverty level, numbers with HS diplomas)
- (3) a socio-economic overview of Dorcas Place students (race and ethnicity, age range, reading level, level of unemployment, percent on public assistance, income level, number of women, local geographic areas that students come from, etc.). We make a point to show data at the neighborhood level so that officials can easily see what the profile is of their district. We want to be able to tell them how many people lack high school diplomas, how many are

linguistically isolated, etc. We also want to be able to tell them how many program participants come from neighborhoods in their district.

- (4) student success data for each program we run (how many students were served, how many showed gains in different academic skills, how many received GEDs, how many enrolled in college programs, how many continued their education, etc.). For a sample of the data we share, see <http://www.dorcasplace.org/students/demographic.html>
- (5) a one-page story written by a student telling about their decision to come to Dorcas Place: what they are gaining from being here, what they've learned and how this learning is changing them, and their hopes for themselves. To read our students' stories, including students from our Bridge to College Program, see <http://www.dorcasplace.org/students/successstories.html>

Involve students

It is very important for visitors to hear from students. Students have a key role during the visit. Students prepare specific questions that they will ask the community member who is visiting. We also ask one student to give a 3-minute speech at the assembly. Students are well-prepared for these visits and it is very important to be prepared so that you can take full advantage of the visit. For each elected official that comes, a class is assigned to that person. They do research on that person's biography and prepare questions to ask. Based on the official's work and background, students also choose specific stories to tell that person about their experiences. Understanding well the elected official's role is important because you want to make sure the questions students prepare are ones that can be answered by that official. The Mayor might not be able to answer specific questions about garbage pickup, for example.

We always have one student give a 3-minute speech at the event that includes things like why s/he came to Dorcas Place, what s/he hopes to achieve, what his/her hopes for the future are. Our college transition coordinator identifies a student who would be a good speaker. That student is asked to participate and to write a speech. We provide a lot of support in the process. The student practices the speech in front of the class. I also hear the speech. This is an important part of our educational program because it gives students the opportunity to be public speakers. Our experience has been that students come out of it so empowered because they've made a great presentation.

The choice of the student speaker is often very deliberate on our part. For example, in 2003, the Governor came to visit our program. We spoke a lot about the low-literacy levels among those with high school diplomas. The student who gave a speech during that visit had a high school diploma but was attending our programs because she had been passed along by a system that didn't serve her well. She needed to improve her literacy skills so came to Dorcas Place to do that. She spoke very eloquently about her experience and her story was very moving. It had such a great impact on the Governor that he *still* makes references to that students' experience in public speeches today. This one speech went a very long way.

"Meet" Carleen Ferland, the student who's story so impressed the Governor, by clicking on the Student Success Stories page at Dorcas Place and scrolling down to her story. <http://www.dorcasplace.org/students/successstories.html>

Hosting the Visit

The whole visit should take about an hour. Always have photographers there to document the visit. When visitors arrive, they are greeted by students. I then take them on a tour of the facility. As we walk, I cite the important research on our students' needs and our program model. The information lends credibility to our work. I let them know about the research that underpins the program models we have developed. For example, in our college prep program, we use a cohort model based on research by Tinto¹ and a separate study done by Brookfield² that says adults

¹ To read more about Tinto's work visit http://soeweb.syr.edu/academics/grad/higher_education/vtinto.cfm

² Brookfield, S. (1999). "What is college really like for adult students?" *About Campus*. 3(6). 10-15.

feel like imposters when they arrive at the college campus. This kind of information is very important and, like the other data, impressive to many policy makers.

After the tour, we have an assembly that includes students and staff from the entire program. Students from the class that has prepared questions for the visitor also act as greeters at the assembly. I begin the program by introducing the guest. It's important to do your homework on their background—know what issues they're champions of, know where they stand and what work they've done. When I introduced our councilwoman I was able to say that she had been a tutor in our agency. If you know something about the person's work supporting adults, mention it and thank him/her. It can be hard to remember that elected officials also need to be recognized for the work they are doing. Thanking them and encouraging them to continue what they're already doing makes them more inclined to do the right thing in the future.

We then ask the visitor to explain his/her job. If the visitor is an elected official, we ask him/her to talk about how important it is for students to be involved in the democratic process, and let students know that elected officials are accessible to students. Politicians will also talk about where they stand on issues. They are not shy about this and this is an important part of the visit—it is time for students to hear from the elected official.

Students who have prepared questions have a chance to ask them and one student also gives the speech that has been prepared for the visit. We thank the member from coming and making this a priority in his/her busy schedule.

Maintaining Relationships after the Visit

Once you have had an official come visit your program you want to maintain a relationship with that person. The first step is sending a note thanking them for visiting your agency. There are also several ways to develop your relationship further:

Send them your newsletter

Once you've initiated a relationship with a community leader or elected official, keep them up on what you're doing. Put them on your mailing list and send them your newsletter and annual report. *All* the elected officials should be on your mailing list, including members of the school committee.

Invite them to be on your advisory board

Some adult education programs have advisory boards. One way of deepening relationships is by asking a district staff person to be on the advisory council.

Visit the State House

Elected officials want to hear from their constituents and visiting them is a great way to build relationships. I go to the State house at least a couple of times a year to talk with legislators. I also make sure I'm able to go to Washington once a year to meet with the D.C. staff. I am not averse to calling elected officials and I always say that they should call me, too. I offer to give presentations, provide data for them, and bring students to testify or speak to them.

Support those who support you

I also personally support elected officials. It's important to give back to the elected official if you are happy with their service—support their re-election, go to their fundraiser. It should be clear that this is done on your own personal time and with your own resources, not those of your agency or program.

CHALLENGES

I would say there are two main challenges to being successful at this. The first is being flexible about the dates to have visitors. You simply have to work around elected officials and that's just the way it is. This can be a challenge because you have to accommodate others' schedules, but it

doesn't seem to work any other way. You also have to be persistent. Since people may not accept your invitation immediately you have to follow up consistently and continue to extend invitations to them. It can be frustrating, so you have to hang in there with it.

COST & FUNDING

Staff time is the main cost. Larger events mean more staff time and sponsors to cover any costs for refreshments or printed programs.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT AND EFFECTIVENESS

Building relationships with community members has resulted in several very important program impacts. One example would be that I have had Congressional people call me up to ask me to read certain provisions in a bill and comment on it. This isn't something that happened right away, it takes some relationship building before you can get there, but this is a critical role for literacy programs to have. And, as you can see from the example I gave earlier—that the Governor references the needs of students—is important because it enhances the ability to increase state funding not just for Dorcas Place, but for the field as a whole. By inviting the Governor to Dorcas Place we were able to encourage his advocacy efforts to increase support for literacy programs throughout the state. I've also received two congressional earmarks to expand our literacy services. I think these are direct results of having established relationships with policy makers.

As I mentioned in the first section, the practice of relationship building is also very applicable to the business community. I have been able to help key employers rethink their job entry requirements. Some major corporations insist on using GED or HS diploma as an entry requirement. But students who have participated in workplace training may not have either, yet have developed skills that prepare them to enter the workforce. I have convinced employers to focus on competencies and proficiencies rather than "credentials." Without relationships of mutual respect I don't think we would have been able to change the discourse on this.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH

The overall mission of a visit is to promote your program and advocate for the services your program provides by building relationships. You are informing community leaders and policy makers about an important aspect of their community. You must be able to talk about the economic benefits of postsecondary education and encourage them to advocate and support college transition programs.

This write-up has focused very specifically on building relationships through visits to the program. Our staff also participates in many ways in the wider community to promote our agenda and get our program known. There are ways to encourage staff to do this even if you're a small program. So, if you're a college transition program you might consider having staff attend meetings of your state's associations of financial aid or admissions officers. We've had staff members join a welfare implementation task force, and it turns out that one of the topics of importance to them was how to enable welfare recipients' entrance to college. Our staff can bring the perspective and needs of adult education students to these groups that may not already be represented. This is critically important.

About the author

Dr. Brenda Dann-Messier has been President of Dorcas Place since 1999 as it has grown from a program serving 100 women to one serving over 1,000 low income adults and their families. As part of her advocacy on behalf of adult students, Brenda has served on a variety of boards including an appointment by the governor -- approved by the RI Senate, to serve on the Rhode Island Board of Governors for Higher Education and as the mayor's appointee to the Board of Directors for the Providence Plan. Brenda has a BA in Secondary Education, an M.Ed. in Instructional Technology from Rhode Island College, and an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from Johnson & Wales University.