

ARISE Coalition

Strategies for Engaging Families in Building Literacy Skills

Schools that have unusually high success rates with struggling readers have high levels of family and community involvement. Students whose families are involved in their education learn to read sooner than their peers whose families are less involved.¹ Likewise, parents are more likely to become involved in their child's education when schools create home-literacy partnerships to engage them.² To that end, the ARISE Coalition³ recommends that the Department of Education (DOE) provide schools participating in the Universal Literacy Initiative and the Literacy Coaches that work with them with a toolkit of strategies for engaging all families, including those of students with disabilities, in their literacy efforts. We have: reviewed evidence-based practices⁴; looked at schools highlighted in Advocates for Children of New York's paper, *A is for all: Meeting the literacy needs of students with and without disabilities in the New York City public schools*⁵; and consulted with staff at schools and programs run by members of the ARISE Coalition. While we are not looking to dictate any single strategy to educational staff in the NYC public schools, we would recommend that participating schools undertake some combination of the promising practices listed below.

Making parents partners in the DOE's efforts to improve literacy:

School staff may opt to visit families at home, or if that is not possible, invite families for individual conferences, where teachers and family members discuss reading plans for individual students. At that time, schools can share packets of engaging at-home activities (not homework!) to support students' anticipated reading progress.

- At least one option for these visits would be to use the weekly time set aside by the DOE for meeting with families where families can offer feedback on how their children are progressing as readers.
- These conversations should not, however, be limited to parent-teacher conference days and evenings, but should involve more frequent and targeted check-ins.

School staff can regularly share information, resources, and fun facts about learning to read with students' families. This may happen through regular newsletters home, teacher blogs, and shared websites.

¹ See Dolores A. Stegelin, National Dropout Prevention Center, *Family Literacy Strategies: First Steps to Academic Success* 31 (2003).

² *Id.*

³ See <http://arisecoalition.org> for a list of our members.

⁴ Including The National Institute for Professional Practice (See, for example, http://www.professionalpractice.org/about-us/building_literacy_partnership/); MDRC (See Voorhis, F.A., Maier, M.F., Epstein, J.L., & Lloyd, C.M. (October 2013). The Impact of Family Involvement on the Education of Children Ages 3 to 8: A Focus on Literacy and Math Achievement Outcomes and Social-Emotional Skills. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED545474.pdf>); Reading Rockets (See, e.g., <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/getting-parents-involved-schools>); the Journal of Literacy Research (see O'Brien, L.M., Paratore, J.R., Leighton, C.M., Cassano, C.M., Krol-Sinclair, B. & Green, J.G. (December 2014). Examining Differential Effects of a Family Literacy Program on Language and Literacy Growth of English Language Learners with Varying Vocabularies. Retrieved from <http://jlr.sagepub.com/content/46/3/383>); and the National Literacy Trust (Clark, C. (January 2007). Why it is Important to Involve Parents in Their Children's Literacy Development. National Literacy Trust. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED496346.pdf>).

⁵ See Advocates for Children of New York. *A is for all: Meeting the literacy needs of students with and without disabilities in the New York City public schools* at http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/library/a_is_for_all.pdf.

- These strategies should take into consideration the reading levels, languages spoken, and access to the internet of families. All things sent home should be done both electronically and by backpack, if possible. Teachers and school staff creating materials for parents should check readability levels of their text and add graphics and pictures to support the content of the updates.
- Additionally, websites recommended for families should have content that is accessible to people with disabilities in compliance with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.⁶

Classroom teachers can encourage family members to engage with their children around literacy development in a number of ways. They can suggest, for example, that families:

- Talk frequently with their children.
- Use daily activities, such as cooking, to stress the importance of literacy.
- Listen to audio books together.
- Add closed captioning to their televisions for all programming, increasing the likelihood that students will come to read as they watch.

Parent Teacher Associations and School Leadership Teams can be brought into efforts to reach parents—particularly with regard to arranging parent workshops and family literacy events.

Families can be encouraged to visit classrooms and read with students or send in taped readings reflective of cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Schools and Districts may choose to host adult literacy instruction programs for parents, caregivers, and older siblings—enabling even those with low literacy levels themselves to aid in the child’s literacy growth.

Teachers and related service providers (including those delivering special education supports and services) who support students with reading interventions can invite family members to attend a session so they can get a sense of the work being done.

Engaging families in helping students learn to read for pleasure:

Students should never be assigned “reading for pleasure” as homework.⁷ While schools can send books home throughout the year for families to enjoy with students on a daily basis, they should take care that they don’t burden the opportunity to read for pleasure with requirements like reading logs. This may be done any number of ways, depending on the resources available. For example:

- Families may receive literacy bags of books they can keep at home to support their children in learning to read.
- Classes may create together student and teacher-written class books such as poetry books, recipe books, and books written in the style of iconic children’s books like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* or *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See*. Those books may go home with a different student each night/week to be shared with families.

⁶ See <http://www.section508.gov/content/learn/laws-and-policies>.

⁷ See, for example, “The Power of Reading,” by Stephen Krashen.

- Books read by students during the school day can be sent back and forth from school to home to share in the evening with students’ families to reinforce the day’s efforts.
- For students who typically use Bookshare or access texts online, school staff can direct families to appropriate sites and make sure that all youth have access to the books their peers are using for all academic and pleasure reading after school hours.
- Schools can insure that students who require Assistive Technology (AT) or utilize Accessible Educational Materials (AEM) to access curriculum during the school day have an opportunity to use the same technology or varied formats at home to support homework and pleasure reading. For more information on the rights of students around AT and AEM, see our website at <http://arisecoalition.org>. For resources for educators using AT and AEM, see <http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/SpecialEducation/programs/relatedServices/Assistive+Technology.htm>.
- Classroom teachers can send students home with books of their own choosing (pleasure readings) over the summer to enjoy on a regular basis, share with their families, and avoid summer slide. Here schools should be conscious of the need to send reading in formats that all students and their families can access as per Universal Design for Learning constructs.⁸

School staff, including Parent Coordinators, can facilitate library cards for all members of students’ households.

Providing support and information to all parents, including those with children who are struggling with reading:

School or district staff can sponsor or lead parent workshops at their schools or family literacy events covering a variety of subjects, including, but certainly not limited to:

- How reading instruction is typically delivered at the school.
- How parents can support that instruction at home.
- Where parents can turn for help when their children are struggling to learn to read—within the DOE and outside of the DOE.
- Information about reading disabilities—what they are and are not, developmental milestones students should be expected to hit in each grade, warning signs that a student might need extra help, etc.
- How Assistive and Instructional Technology may be used to support literacy development.

Schools should explicitly share information with parents about how to access help within their schools and throughout the DOE, including the name of at least one person at the school who can work with the family to identify and put in place additional services, including special education supports and services, if necessary.

⁸ See, for example, CAST.org.