



# SchoolHouse 2010 News

A MODEL FOR HOME-DELIVERY  
NEWSPAPER IN EDUCATION PROGRAMS



# SchoolHouse News:

## A Model for Home-Delivery Newspaper In Education Programs

By Mark Toner

**W**hen The Patriot-News in Harrisburg, Pa., considered enhancing its existing stable of Newspaper In Education (NIE) offerings with a home-delivery program, its target was the neediest school district in its circulation area.

Harrisburg's school system serves an overwhelmingly poor population of minority students. Nearly two-thirds of the district's 7,000 students qualify for free and reduced lunch programs – more than double the state average. Nearly 95 percent are minorities.

Across all grade levels, fewer than half of the students score at or above basic levels of proficiency in state reading assessments. The urban school district also encompasses an area with extremely low circulation penetration for The Patriot-News, including several areas where papers were not delivered for safety reasons.

Susan L. Anthony, the newspaper's director of community relations, says The Patriot-News approached district officials with the idea of creating a "consistent program across an entire grade level." The newspaper provided school officials with research from the Newspaper Association of America Foundation suggesting that students using newspapers in school scored 10 percent better on standardized reading comprehension tests – with improvements of as much as 30 percent among urban students [see <http://www.naafoundation.org/docs/Foundation/Research/measuresuccess.pdf>].

District and newspaper officials quickly agreed to "see if what we had always said anecdotally was true – that using newspapers would increase comprehension scores," Anthony says.

The Patriot-News and the Harrisburg School District began an 18-week pilot of SchoolHouse News in January 2007. Nearly 250 fourth-graders citywide participated in classroom activities and completed specially



Two students collaborate on a SchoolHouse News activity.

designed homework assignments using home-delivered copies of the newspaper. During the trial, more than 21,400 daily and 3,500 Sunday copies of The Patriot-News were delivered to homes with no subscription history.

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Susan L. Anthony, director of community relations, The Patriot-News

Hard data confirmed anecdotal beliefs about newspapers' impact on student learning. When benchmark assessment results of students participating in the program were compared with a control group, SchoolHouse News participants scored between 17 percent and 20 percent higher, according to Debra K. Ferguson, the district's director of grants and federal funding.

"It's proof you can increase reading comprehension with a newspaper in short notice and pretty dramatically," Anthony says.

Buoyed by the results, the district applied for grants to help support the program, which won a global award for NIE excellence in 2007 from the World Association of Newspapers. After its successful pilot, the program was expanded and repeated at the sixth- and fifth-grade levels, respectively, in January 2008 and January 2009.

While The Patriot-News initially sought sponsors to help support the program, by the third year, the district fully funded SchoolHouse News through approximately \$35,000 in grants that covered all costs, with the exception of in-house staff time.

This case study shares lessons learned during the project's three years, including the importance of developing a good working relationship with the school district, the need for extensive planning and preparation, and the potential impact of home-delivery NIE programs on students in urban districts. "We had suburban districts that also wanted to do SchoolHouse News," Anthony says. "We did it where we thought it actually matters most."

## ● Twin Challenges: Curriculum and Circulation

Launching a district-wide home-delivery program involved major logistical issues with curriculum and circulation. The newspaper's ongoing relationship with the Harrisburg School District made the biggest challenges far easier.

"Schools have a history of being skeptical of people coming in with programs," says Deb Wire, the district literacy facilitator who became Harrisburg's SchoolHouse News coordinator. "That's a huge stumbling block for most programs."

During its long history of working with the district, The Patriot-News had begun framing its existing NIE programs in the context of state standards and their impact on student literacy. Long-standing personal relationships between the paper's NIE staff and district officials helped greatly with the program's introduction.

After curriculum officials approved the program in summer 2006, they selected Wire, a well-known veteran teacher who had become an instructional facilitator, as the school system's point person. Several months later, Wire personally invited all of the district's fourth-grade teachers to participate in the voluntary program.

That fall, all teachers were invited to a dinner at which Patriot-News NIE officials explained the program and how it would help teachers meet state standards. The home-delivery element of the program, Wire says, was positioned "as connected [to the classroom] but a different piece that's going to impact their kids in a different way."

Every fourth-grade teacher agreed to try the program in classrooms during an 18-week period to begin in January. "We had to sell it, and Susan was a great salesperson," Wire says.

Patriot-News NIE staff members developed all program materials, including in-class activities and assignments for students to complete at home with home-delivered copies of



SchoolHouse News activities incorporate a variety of subject areas.

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**Deb Wire,**  
SchoolHouse News coordinator,  
Harrisburg School District

the paper. Activities included a gamut of subject areas, and teachers were encouraged to use those that best fit their curriculum and students' needs.

By December, teachers had received plastic storage containers with all necessary materials. They bought into the program, Wire says, "because it was totally organized for them. They didn't have to re-create the wheel."

The second key challenge was ensuring that the newspaper's circulation department could deliver to areas "where there was greatest need," according to Anthony. These included public housing projects where safety concerns had precluded home delivery.

Circulation staff members conducted

a feasibility study based on students' home addresses and busing information provided by schools. To accommodate safety issues, officials developed a plan to deliver to certain areas during daylight hours, instead of earlier in the morning. The Patriot-News also committed to seven-day home delivery as part of the NIE program to ensure that students and parents could "experience the newspaper every day of the week," Anthony says.

Participating teachers then asked parents at parent-teacher conferences to sign up for the home-delivery program. Of 240 students who participated in the pilot project, 206 ultimately received home delivery. (Students who didn't receive the paper at home still participated in classroom activities and school literacy events.)

While parents provided significant amounts of positive feedback, Anthony acknowledges that only a few converted to paid home-delivery subscriptions at the end of each 18-week NIE program, despite promotional offers. "It's an economic issue," she says.

The transient nature of low-income students and their families proved another challenge. "These kids follow the heat in the homes throughout the winter, so they often end up going to several different schools," Anthony says. NIE staff members constantly checked with teachers to see whether they had lost or gained students and then worked with the circulation department to ensure that papers followed students to the best extent possible.

Critical to ensuring that the home-delivery component would meet Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) requirements, these steps also generated good will among school officials. "I did not know there were places where The Patriot-News did not deliver the paper," Wire says. "It was great that they were willing to change that. There were kids who got newspapers delivered at home that had never seen them."

## ● In Class, at Home, at School

**W**hen the program began in earnest in January 2007, SchoolHouse News had three instructional components: in-classroom activities, family activities done as homework and activities at school during family literacy nights.

Participating teachers were asked to select a day they wanted the newspaper delivered to their classrooms. They then used lesson plans related to that day's content, including The Mini Page, Parade magazine's school edition and a serialized story that was part of a weekly NIE page. The NIE lessons were incorporated into an uninterrupted 90-minute literacy block mandated by the state. Depending on the activity, students worked alone or in groups.

Creating weekly activities to complement the program's home-delivery component was another challenge. Designed to be completed with parents' help, these wide-ranging activities included encouraging students to clip photos and describe what they depicted, to write classified ads or editorials and to keep journals about their experiences in reading the newspaper with family members.

Because many Harrisburg students live in single-parent homes, with relatives or in foster homes, older siblings or other relatives helped students with these activities. After-school mentors, tutors and volunteers from Big Brothers Big Sisters also helped students with their assignments.

Ensuring that homework was finished and returned was critical in meeting the 75 percent completion rate required by ABC for home-delivered NIE newspapers. But in urban districts, "kids come to school most of the time without their homework," Wire says. Of immense help was that the program involved adult family members and had been explained ahead of time.

Among tools developed by The Patriot-News NIE staff to help teachers track and collect homework were classroom sets of folders for individual



Father and son participate in a scavenger hunt during SchoolHouse News Family Fun Night.

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students and wall charts with stickers so students could see their progress. The newspaper also provided prizes, including stickers, pens, markers and books, for students who completed set amounts of homework. The newspaper's project coordinator collected homework monthly from teachers, sending e-mail reminders to those falling behind on

required activities.

Because SchoolHouse News was a voluntary program, individual teachers devised their own policies for ensuring that students did homework. Some included completed homework as part of language-arts grades, while others did not.

Still, of the 206 students receiving home delivery during the pilot, 130 had a 100 percent completion rate on all 18 weekly homework activities. Another 36 completed enough activities to meet ABC's 75 percent activity completion rate. Participation rates remained fairly steady in subsequent years, officials said.

One key to ensuring teacher buy-in, school officials say, was that Patriot-News staff members never directly monitored the program in the classroom. "That would immediately turn the teachers off," Wire says. Instead, newspaper officials collected homework materials and used teacher feedback to fine-tune activities and other materials.

The program's final component was family literacy nights, held once a year at each participating school. The Patriot-News provided food and child

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**Angela Giardina,**  
teacher, Camp Curtin School

care for younger children and “didn’t turn anyone away,” allowing community members who happened to notice the event to walk in and participate, Anthony says. The Patriot-News worked with Channels, a local food-rescue and training program, to provide hot meals.

“Once we hit upon spaghetti with meatballs, salad, bread and cookies, we were cooking,” Anthony says. The newspaper also ensured that custodians received honorariums for helping to set up and clean up.

“School principals, who know the neighborhoods, seemed appreciative of our respect for the community,” Anthony says. “The families were truly appreciative of having dinner served, and we always made sure we had plenty of leftovers for them to pack up.”

Along with the meal, staff members walked parents and students through an issue of the newspaper and led activities in which family members worked together to find information in the newspaper, including answers to such questions as “When is sunset tonight?”

Key to the program’s success, Wire says, was its holistic nature. “There are so many parts of the program,” she says. “The teacher is in the classroom working with students, students work with each other in the classroom and then they work with a parent at home.”



**Students work with the newspaper both in class and at home.**

## ● Measuring Results

The Patriot-News and the Harrisburg School District began the SchoolHouse News project with the goal of tracking its impact on student learning. By gauging student progress before and after the 18-week program, benchmark assessments provided the tool to do so.

During the 2007 pilot, school officials compared results of students participating in the program against a control group on the 4Sight benchmark assessment, which is certified by the Pennsylvania Department of Education as being predictive of results on the state's high-stakes Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test.

Comparing participating students' January and May scores in nonfiction and reading comprehension, district officials found that the scores of SchoolHouse News participants were between 17 percent and 20 percent higher than those of the control group, according to Ferguson. While the district did not disaggregate students participating in the program in its official PSSA test results, it saw modest improvement in reading scores for grade levels in which the program was offered during its three-year span.

"Our scores have been slowly rising, but we're always looking at alternative ways to get kids interested and involved," Ferguson says, adding that the SchoolHouse News program represented a way "to reach more of our students in unconventional ways."

Teachers agree that the program's holistic approach sparked student interest in new ways. "I loved that the children got the newspaper at home and then showed an interest in the [weekly] activities they had to complete," says Angela Giardina, a veteran fifth-grade teacher at Harrisburg's Camp Curtin School. "The children would also come into the [classroom] with stories they had seen in the paper and want to discuss them."

One reason the program made such a definitive impact on student



SchoolHouse News targets students in grades four through six.

*"These kids were exposed to the newspaper during the day in school and then at home. I believe it was that constant reminder and that habitual use that made a difference."*

**Susan L. Anthony,**  
director of community relations,  
The Patriot-News

achievement, Ferguson says, was that it exposed students to nonfiction. "If students do self-select [reading materials], they select fiction," she says. "Using the newspaper really encouraged them to look at nonfiction."

According to Wire, the fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade students involved in the program also benefited from using the newspaper as a learning tool because they felt "more adult." The home activities also helped many see their parents differently. "They generally don't see their parents pull out a paper and read it in the evening," Wire says. "Seeing their parents do something educational with them gives kids a different kind of relationship."

Just as important for urban students who often struggle to perform at grade level, the program was "something different and unusual, but something they could handle," Wire says. "A lot of times, these students aren't always successful at what they're doing in the classroom. They're allowed to get help – to ask classmates or their parents."

Anthony says she believes the program's holistic approach contributed to learning gains. "These kids were exposed to the newspaper during the day in school and then at home," she says. "I believe it was that constant reminder and that habitual use that made a difference."

## ● Lessons Learned

**C**ultivate your relationship with schools. Patriot-News staff members and district officials stress that the program's approval resulted largely from the paper's long history of involvement with schools through NIE and other programs. "Having a track record made a big difference," Ferguson says.

More specifically, district officials had worked with Anthony and other key players from the paper and respected their understanding of education issues. "The person presenting the project is huge," Wire says. "I knew [Anthony] had an education background, so I could relate that to the district officials."

Conversely, district officials should identify a point person equally respected within the school system. Wire, the project's facilitator, taught in Harrisburg for more than three decades and had been named teacher of the year by a local group before becoming a facilitator who worked throughout the district – a presence that greatly simplified introducing the program to individual teachers.

"You need a person connected to the district who knows the teachers you're placing the program with," she says.

● **Do your homework.** The Patriot-News explained to the district how SchoolHouse News activities, like previous NIE programs, would help meet the state's social studies and math learning standards. The newspaper's staff also knew that Pennsylvania includes implementation of newspapers and other media among its standards. "They had all the ducks in the row and did their homework," Wire says.

Knowing what is required of teachers in the classroom is critical. For example, being able to provide classroom activities seamlessly integrated into the state-mandated 90-minute literacy block was a key to winning buy-in, Wire says. "Teachers are overwhelmed," she says. "A big part of the relationship with teachers is being



Activities meet state learning standards in social studies and math.

*"When we saw a gain, we knew we were onto something. If you can show a measurable gain, you're more likely to get funding."*

**Debra K. Ferguson,**

director of grants and federal funding,  
Harrisburg School District

able to suggest things that help them."

● **Plan extensively.** The Patriot-News worked with district officials for months before introducing the program to teachers. Along with developing and refining classroom materials, they dealt with such detailed logistical issues as ensuring that a classroom set of newspapers gets from the front steps of a building to the classroom (by providing custodians with doughnuts) and establishing an emergency phone number if a classroom set is lost or

stolen. "There are a million little pieces that change how a program like this impacts the kids," Wire says.

● **Work to ensure teacher buy-in.** Patriot-News staff members developed a wide range of classroom materials and homework activities, including translation of selected activities and forms into Spanish and Vietnamese. Non-educators may not understand the time or bureaucratic hoops required to copy materials, so The Patriot-News ensured that teachers had sufficient copies of everything needed. "We left nothing to chance and gave them every tool," Anthony says.

The paper's staff also focused on more intangible keys to buy-in. Along with providing teachers a modest honorarium for participating, The Patriot-News hosted a sit-down dinner during the professional development session for the program and offered teachers complimentary tickets to various events.

With a home-delivery program, teacher buy-in becomes essential because educators are often the only

point of contact with parents. “We didn’t always have a lot of people at the open houses, so that teacher has a very big part in communicating with the parents,” Wire says. To ensure that homework collection needed to satisfy ABC home-delivery requirements wouldn’t become a burden, the newspaper provided homework folders, charts and even the stickers used to track student progress.

● **Win the support of building-level leaders.** The Patriot-News and district officials also worked to ensure that principals favored the program. Newspaper staff members initially met with principals individually, but in subsequent years they discussed the program during meetings between principals and the district’s assistant superintendent. “You could see the district administrators were buying into it, which showed the importance of the program,” Wire says.

● **Measure.** School officials said from the beginning that they wanted to test the project’s effectiveness by tracking performance of participating students. Instead of waiting to disaggregate state test results, school officials used a formative assessment – the 4Sight benchmark assessment – that was given many times during the academic year and was certified as predictive of results on PSSA tests. Doing so allowed officials to track progress during the academic year.

“When the first scores came out, we were really amazed,” Anthony says. “Then we thought about it and [realized] this kind of holistic program should absolutely give you those kinds of scores.”

Pushing to measure the impact of such programs is worth more than bragging rights. When district officials saw how SchoolHouse News students performed on benchmark assessments, they became diligent partners in seeking grants to help underwrite the program. “When we saw a gain, we knew we were onto something,” Ferguson says. “If you can show a measurable gain, you’re more likely to get funding.”

● **Listen to educators and empathize with their challenges.** The district cautioned Patriot-News staff members about students’ high mobility rates, but the extent to which students shifted schools during the winter months was still a surprise. During literacy nights, NIE staff members were warned to keep food from leaving the cafeterias in some buildings because of rodent infestations in the surrounding neighborhood, while in others they encountered students who ducked whenever a balloon would pop, having been taught to do so upon hearing such sounds in order to avoid gunfire.

“I was not as aware of what dire circumstances some children actually live in,” Anthony says. “A child’s readiness to learn is affected by these real-life challenges.”

Feedback is critical to refining classroom activities, particularly in urban districts where students in one classroom may be performing at different grade levels. Patriot-News staff members worked with Wire and other school officials each summer to refine materials. “You really have to keep an eye on the activities,” Wire says.

● **Encourage district representatives to be frank about potential challenges to implementing the program.** “A big part of my job,” Wire says, “was to throw out negative things – ‘What are you going to do when this happens?’ I wanted to hand this to the teachers without kinks, because you don’t want to throw problems at them.”

● **Stress “home” in home-delivery.** Emphasize the importance of parents or other adults helping students with homework. “Our kids are dying for attention from their parents,” Wire says. “That’s a huge reason why this worked.”

● **Don’t underestimate the power of prizes.** Even minor incentives or prizes are critical to capturing students’ interest, especially in urban districts. “Any time you deal with poorer children, it’s important to give them some kind of incentive or reward,” Ferguson says.

● **Maintain excitement.** Along with

“constantly thanking teachers,” The Patriot-News ordered SchoolHouse News T-shirts for students. For the city’s annual holiday parade, participating students were recruited to form a step team representing the newspaper. “The kids were really into it,” Anthony says. “They were marching down the street chanting about the value of reading”

● **Think far ahead.** Because of the time required to develop curriculum materials, an ABC-compliant home-delivery process and good relationships with teachers and district officials, looking at a home-delivery NIE program as a multiyear project is critical. “You want it to become institutionalized within the district and within the newspaper,” Anthony says.

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