

The Village Project

By Tonya Artman, NBCT

We're all too familiar with the African proverb 'It takes a village to raise a child.' It speaks volumes and can be assimilated to numerous situations regarding children in our society. From my perspective, I saw a village of educators at Crosby Middle School in Louisville, Kentucky that had every student's best interest at heart. Aside from the hard-working teaching staff, there are many other unsung heroes in a non-instructional role within the building and if it were not for their efforts, the school would be in shambles. For example, Ms. Robards, Crosby's bookkeeper extraordinaire keeps the financial aspects of the building in check. Mr. Webb, the plant operator, assures that the building is maintained properly. Mr. Drew is part of school security and often times is only involved in negative situations.

It occurred to me as I walked through the halls of the most tightly packed school in Louisville, Kentucky that these people **could help directly** with a child's education. Motivation is always a problem, so I started thinking, 'Is there a way our non-instructional staff can help motivate an unmotivated 11 year old?' After all, most of my students are motivated by parents, coaches and some are self-motivated. Some of my students are ECE and have many resources already at their reach. But there are quite a few who do not have an educational safety net. I tried to empathize with them, thinking how tiring it must be listening and working for the same teachers day in, day out. My disenchanted 11 year-olds – I thought maybe all they need is just a little attention from another stake-holder within the building. A fresh face, fresh voice, a new perspective to ignite their learning. I quickly realized... *It may take someone other than a teacher.*

Keeping in mind the African proverb, but exchanging the word 'raise' for the word 'educate', I approached Crosby's principal Mr. Kelly with *The Village Project* and he was 100% agreeable. The Village Project is a simple plan to identify non-instructional adults within the school that had flexibility in their daily schedule, who would be willing to read and spend time with an underperforming child twice per week for approximately 20 minutes at each session. I approached each stakeholder individually, I explained the simplicity of the plan, and asked them for their help with a struggling reader. Many were excited and others were even honored to be included. Their job titles included plant operator, bookkeeper, school clerk, transition center coach and our security guard. Next, it was time to interview the teachers to identify 6th grade students who met the following criteria:



- Disenchanted learner
- Non-ECE
- Novice/Apprentice in reading
- Attempts made to conference with family with no change noted by teachers



The plan required matching a student with an adult (like a Big Brothers/Big Sisters pairing). Once the pairings were made, it was time to carve out the schedules. I provided the reading material and a small treat for each of their meetings. I suggested they find a quiet place, like outside on the park bench in front of the school, a place that was also new and fresh for learning. I met with the selected students, explained the plan's purpose and sent home a letter to notifying their parents of their child's involvement in the project. Additionally, I gave the child a simple

survey to better understand their attitude on the importance of reading. Once the upfront work was done, it was time to put the plan in to action. Students took the survey and the meetings began. Fortunately, Crosby has an RTI/Enrichment time so students were not missing their core classes to meet with their mentor.

The goal with implementing this project is for a child to build a connection with someone in the building, other than a teacher. Ultimately, It would be fantastic to motivate a child's desire for learning and change their attitude toward the importance of reading. I can't leave out the fact that I'd be overjoyed to see an increase in their assessment scores, whether it be classroom, district or the state-wide assessment. After all, that would be the data many are looking for to see if this project is reliable and worthy of repeating. As The Village Project is wrapping up, we can only qualify the results at this rather than quantify. It's important to note that this is not a new idea. Yet, what makes this implementation different is the measurability of the before and after attitudes, as well as the before and after assessment scores of the focus group of students.

Take a look at your school village. Talk to your principal (explain the vision, obtain permission, solicit participation) and school secretary (understand staffing and schedules) to see if you can implement *The Village Project*. All it takes is for someone to organize the effort, identify the students who need some motivation and solicit your non-instructional staff for their assistance. They are stakeholders, just as teachers are and can be an untapped resource in your building. In many cases, they are very appreciative to be included and ecstatic to know they're helping a child in need (and don't forget you would be adding some variety to their daily grind)! Think of the proverb again, and exchange the word 'raise' with 'educate'...



'It takes a village to educate a child. How's your village doing?'

{In 2015-2016, I was selected to join a team of Classroom Teachers Enacting Positive Solutions. The CTEPS team is an esteemed group of National Board Certified Teachers from around Kentucky. The call to action came from Lauren Hill of the Kentucky Department of Education. Without Lauren's and the team's inspiration, The Village Project may have only remained an idea in the back of my mind – you know, that idea that you'll get to one day}