Side by Side Gets National Spotlight

The following is adapted from a talk given by Executive Director Joe Murchison at Side by Side’s annual fundraising breakfast on March 5, 2011.

**Side by Side** is making a difference in the lives of elementary school students in Prince George’s County. It is not only attracting local attention. It is gaining recognition nationally.

The national PTA and the Harvard University School of Education produced a pamphlet last year that described five model programs from around the country that increased parents’ involvement in their children’s schools. One of the five models was Prince George’s County. The pamphlet praised the work of the school system’s Office of Community and Family Involvement, its placement of parent liaisons in all its schools, its annual Men Make a Difference Day – and its Side by Side Family Academy. “Wow,” I thought. “We’re part of a national model.”

The **Family Academy** is a monthly event for parents from seven elementary schools with a free supper, workshops for parents in English and Spanish and enrichment activities for children.

The cruel irony is that almost everything the pamphlet mentioned has been dismantled due to budget cuts. Except the Side by Side Family Academy. It has not been cut back. Because of its effectiveness, it is being expanded. Next fall, in addition to our regular Family Academies, we will launch our first series of workshops specifically for kindergarten and pre-kindergarten parents at five of our schools. Our aim is to catch parents when they first enter the schools and their interest in learning is highest. We will offer them concepts and techniques to help them get their children off to a strong start in school.

The urgency for Side by Side’s Family Academy and other programs is intensifying. This spring the Prince George’s County school board passed a budget for next year that would slash 1,300 positions – 400 of them teachers – and a number of important academic programs.

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A Principal’s View

Tom Tucker, principal of Deerfield Run Elementary School, is retiring this spring after dedicating 37 years to educating Prince George’s County youth. He has been a wonderful friend to Side by Side, providing his school as the site of most Family Academies. Here is his view of our work.

I have been impressed with Side by Side on many levels, but most of all for their perseverance.

In 19 years as principal of Deerfield Run Elementary School, I have experienced many community groups that have attempted to help the Laurel schools. But when the times got tough – poor turnouts and cold weather – those groups faded. Side by Side as proven to me that they are here for the long haul to help our schools and the communities they serve.

This commitment to persevere is important because we know that it takes an innovation about three years to establish itself into the culture of the community. Most groups give up long before that – not Side by Side.

Side by Side is the most effective community outreach program I have been associated with in all my years as principal.
Parent Testimonials

Wilnetta Thomas - I'm a single parent raising three girls by myself. A lot of the workshops on behavior and why children do the things they do, they were really useful. And one put on by a math teacher, I could relate to that because my daughter was struggling with math at the beginning of the year. That helped me out a lot in working with her.

Yamileth Corea - The Family Academy is a lot of help for me. For the little one, it's a help to me for reading. To take the correct book for the age and the grade, sit down and help the child sound out the correct word. My husband or me will sit with my little one in a comfortable space, no TV, no nothing, only the book.

Maria Hernandez - I have learned how to better direct my children with the discipline of 1-2-3 Magic. How to change my strategy from shouting and harsh punishment to being in more control. How to speak to them and give them advice and not scold them. How to make them understand and how to have better communication with them and more patience.

Cassandra Young – The workshops helped me learn to slow down and have more patience; slow down and focus on my children's education. I know they're in school learning, but it takes more than school. As far as the workshops for the kids, they enjoy them - to learn something new and to socialize. Iyanna has been in tutoring with Side by Side for two months in her math and her reading. At first she didn't want to read and was hesitant in front of other people to read, but now she reads aloud and seems to enjoy it.
In our work with elementary students like Jessy and India, a lot is at stake. The Annie E. Casey Foundation issued a report last summer noting the crucial importance of children not falling behind in reading in the early grades. The report noted that there is a strong correlation between children not reading on grade level at the end of third grade and the likelihood of those students not completing high school. That’s because up through third grade, children are learning to read. But after that, children are reading to learn. If they can’t read well, they fall farther and farther behind in all their subjects.

Side by Side is making a difference during this crucial window of opportunity for children in grades 1 to 3. It is also making a difference in the overall quality of our schools because of our ever-increasing community involvement.

For example, last month Side by Side arranged a meeting between the principal of Montpelier Elementary and the research director at a U.S. Food and Drug Administration research facility nearby. As a result, FDA employees are going to coach a chess club for students two mornings a week, and both the principal and research director are excited about lots of other future possibilities, such as tutoring and field trips.

Our goals are not timid or small. More and more parents who are well-equipped to support their children’s education. More and more children who are getting a solid foundation in their early primary years. More and more enrichment programs that prompt people to say, “Something special is going on in Laurel’s schools.”
Ways to Contribute

Side by Side is in special need of **volunteers** to:

- Tutor an elementary-school student
- Plan children’s activities for our Family Academies
- Develop our website

You also can help Side by Side strengthen schools and families with a **tax-exempt donation**.

- **Contribute by credit card or PayPal on our website,**
  www.sidebysidelaurel.org.

- **Mail a check to**
  “Side by Side”
  15808 Kerr Road,
  Laurel, MD 20707.

- **Contribute through fall campaigns of the**
  United Way of the National Capital Area,
  Combined Federal Campaign or
  Maryland Charity Campaign.