
Authors Engaging Students: School-Community Collaboration to Improve Student Literacy

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Abstract: *Literacy is a basic skill that is essential to participate in society and to improve a person's knowledge and potential throughout life. Guilford County Schools, a school district in North Carolina, USA, is collaborating with Greensboro Bound, a local non-profit literary organization, to maximize student motivation to read and write through asynchronous author visits during library lessons. School library circulation data, exit surveys of program participants, focus group interviews with school media specialists and students, and student test scores suggest that learning from different authors motivate students to read more and recognize their own potential as readers and writers. However, programs like this require a shared vision and long-term collaboration among several community partners including authors, publishers, book sellers, all dedicated to the mission of increasing childhood and young adult literacy.*

Keywords: *childhood and adolescent literacy, community collaboration*

Introduction

Reading is a developmental process throughout a person's life. Students' regular engagement in recreational reading is highly encouraged as it offers benefits for literacy skill development



and maintenance well into adulthood. However, while some students gradually become more intrinsically motivated readers from childhood throughout adolescence, others either never develop interest in reading or experience a shift in reading motivation and lose interest altogether in recreational reading during early adolescence.

Situational interest in a particular book has been shown to promote growth in intrinsic reading motivation (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000; Renninger & Hidi, 2002). When students encounter a captivating text and this experience is supported by the environment, the situational experience becomes an opportunity to develop long-term intrinsic reading motivation. One way to create these opportunities in a school setting is to “facilitate student-initiated conversations regarding texts that are authentic, applicable, and relevant to real-life experiences” (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2018, para. 12). School libraries can facilitate the creation of these environments by inviting authors to engage students in authentic conversations about books.

Bringing authors to schools has had a relatively long tradition and taken various formats, including local in-person author visits, nationwide online broadcast events, and subscription streaming services (such as BookBreak). The main drawbacks of these programs are the associated costs (author fees and subscriptions) and the inherently disruptive nature of major live events during regular school days. By bringing authors directly into classrooms virtually via pre-recorded video interviews, community collaborations like the Authors Engaging Students program in Guilford County Schools of North Carolina provide a free alternative that can be seamlessly incorporated into daily classroom or library instruction. The goal of this paper is to introduce the North Carolina AES program to the international school library community as an example of a promising school-community collaboration that has been shown to increase childhood and adolescent literacy.

The Authors Engaging Students Program

The Authors Engaging Students (AES) program is a literacy initiative at North Carolina Guilford County Schools (NC GCS) developed in partnership with Greensboro Bound, a non-profit literary organization (Greensboro Literary Organization, 2024). This unique program is designed to spark a genuine, intrinsic interest in reading among students through conversations between authors and students of all grade levels. The program provides virtual author visits that include



the author videos, accompanying lesson plans, and new books to all participating school libraries. Participation in the program is optional for the schools in Guilford County. Each semester, school librarians choose to participate in specific author programs based on the needs of their schools, thus also becoming indirect contributors in shaping the program.

Greensboro Bound

The AES program was initiated by Greensboro Bound, a non-profit organization established in 2017 with the primary purpose of creating a book festival that would bring together readers, writers, students, academics, and volunteers who are passionate about books and literature. According to its vision and mission statement,

The Greensboro Bound Literary Festival will bring outstanding writers of poetry, fiction, non-fiction, young-adult and children's books to the Greensboro community and into its schools. It will encourage committed readers to further engage with literature and spark new enthusiasm for reading among beginners. By promoting reading and civil public discussion, the festival will bridge social and cultural divides across our city and region. Greensboro Bound will foster an understanding of writing as a process that allows free expression, deepens critical thought, and helps sustain a culture of inquiry and delight that is open to all. (Greensboro Bound, 2024, para. 2)

In addition to organizing the yearly Greensboro Bound Literary Festival, the Greensboro literary organization has dedicated itself to bringing authors in front of elementary, middle and high school students and to providing books to those students year-round. While the main goal of this effort is to increase childhood and adolescent literacy, Greensboro Bound also aims to create and strengthen local community bonds by celebrating diverse voices, honoring North Carolina's long and varied literary traditions, and welcoming an inclusive community of readers from Greensboro and beyond (Greensboro Bound, 2024).

The literary organization promotes diversity and inclusivity by selecting authors for the AES program that reflect the diverse demographics of the students of North Carolina. The selection of authors for these visits focuses on representation that aligns with the diverse demographics of the Guilford County School student body, of which 71% are non-white. This emphasis on representation is crucial. When students see themselves reflected in stories, they



become more motivated to read them, and they are more likely to develop a long, lasting love for reading. In addition to collaborating with authors and publishers, the primary role of Greensboro Bound in the AES program is creating the author videos and fundraising to cover any other associated costs.

Guilford County Schools (GCS) Library Media Services (LMS)

Guilford County Schools Library Media Services contributes to the AES program by providing access to the asynchronous author videos, lesson plans connected to curricular goals, and a website with supporting resources, and by serving as the communicator of program details to individual schools and librarians.

The AES program started in spring 2018, and the impact on students in participating schools was immediate. One second grade girl announced after the very first Authors Engaging Students presentation that she never knew that she could be an author until that day, and now that she knew, she would be an author, too. One teacher noted that her students were amazed that they could watch interviews with real live authors. Another said that introducing students to authors and listening to those authors explain their early efforts to become writers is invaluable. Students are interested in the stories of authors who look like them and share experiences unique to their cultural background. Teachers regularly report that dozens of students are interested in writing, but do not know how to get started. The authors hold the keys to the kingdom of readers and writers at a time when funding for new school library books has fallen from already low levels.

During the first five semesters (before Covid-19), AES brought authors to schools for in-person presentations, served 17,500 students and gifted approximately 2,000 books. The program was paused during the Covid-19 pandemic (from March through fall of 2020), and it returned as a virtual program in 2021. The first virtual author was Ruta Sepetys, whose virtual session reached over 16,000 students almost equaling the total number of students reached over the previous five semesters. The explosion of numbers (both in participation and circulation) due to going virtual was a significant surprise, and over time it became obvious that virtual presentations were key to transforming AES from a special event to one that could be more easily studied, tracked, and modified.



As schools returned to in-person instruction after the pandemic, teachers and librarians consistently indicated that they wanted to retain the virtual program so that they could have a readily available tool that they might use according to the demands of their students and their schedule. There is a significant variation in schools and library sessions. Some meet weekly, others meet bi-weekly, and some might meet every three or four weeks. The virtual structure enabled teachers and librarians to bring the AES programs into the classroom at the optimal time for their students. Since 2018, GCS have had over 70 in-person and virtual author visits in almost 100 schools. More than 80,000 individual students have benefited from these programs, and more than 8,000 books have been donated to schools to support these visits. During the 2023-2024 academic year alone, AES donations accounted for over 20% of added titles in the AES participating school libraries.

Measuring Program Effectiveness

The AES program had a rapid impact on student reading engagement. School library circulation data and anecdotal evidence from teachers and school librarians suggested an overwhelmingly positive impact. In early 2022, AES began a collaboration to evaluate the program effectiveness with the School of Library and Information Sciences (SLIS) at North Carolina Central University (NCCU). The initial comparison of circulation and reading proficiency data between AES participating and AES non-participating schools expanded to include various types of data collection and research methods. Currently, the impact of AES is investigated in multiple ways:

- Annual surveys: Each year, school librarians are surveyed to provide feedback on the program, with longitudinal data going back to May 2022.
- School library media coordinator (SLMC) focus groups: In July of 2024, GCS LMS and Greensboro Bound brought together a small focus group of school library media coordinators who participated in the program. Through a three-hour conversation, they provided both feedback and ideas for how to modify the program.
- Action research: Through a partnership with NCCU SLIS, both quantitative (circulation and testing data) and qualitative data (student motivation to read and write) have been collected and analyzed to evaluate the impacts of the program.



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During the 2022-2023 school year, 42% of GCS schools participated in AES, which represented 36% of the GCS student population. Schools participating in AES saw overall library circulation that was 35% higher than in non-participating schools. The following academic year, in 2023-2024, AES recorded 10 virtual author visits and shared them among 68 participating schools and engaged over 61,000 students over the two semesters, which resulted in an 84% increase in library circulation of books featured in the AES program in the participating school libraries as compared to non-participating school libraries. This was up from 59% in the previous academic year.

The research collaboration between Guilford County Schools and North Carolina Central University School of Library and Information Sciences focuses on evaluating the impact of the AES program by collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. In addition to collecting hard data, such as circulation statistics and scores on standardized literacy tests, student focus group interviews have been conducted to gain additional insights into the impact of AES on students' reading motivation. In 2023-2024, circulation data and focus group interviews with groups of elementary school students revealed that students who had experienced virtual author visits, checked out more books and showed increased perceptions of reading as important to future jobs as well as for immediate academic success than those who did not attend virtual author visits. The next objective is to expand this research into a longitudinal study and make a case for considering author visits at school libraries as one of the best practices that increase students' intrinsic motivation to read and write, thus creating a foundation for lifelong literacy.

Expanding AES Collaboration: Additional Literacy Initiatives

The Authors Engaging Students program, a cornerstone of the partnership between Greensboro Bound Literary Organization and Greensboro County Schools (GCS) Library Media Services (LMS), is designed to create intrinsic motivation for recreational reading among students. By bringing authors directly into classrooms virtually, AES connects students with the minds behind the books they read, turning reading into an engaging, personal experience. Although AES was originally developed for K-12 students, it has been expanded to include pre-K classes through a partnership with the GCS Department of Early Learning and "Ready for School, Ready for Life," a community-based backbone funder that supports building an innovative system of care for



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Guilford County's children and their families. One facet of that effort, and a metric, is that all children will read at grade level by the 3rd grade.

The partnership between Greensboro Bound and Guilford County Schools began with the AES project and the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2017. Since then, the original partnership between Greensboro Bound and GCS Library Media Services has expanded, and now the collaboration involves several additional community partners all focused on building stronger communities through the love of reading. Authors are particularly intrigued by the program and lesson design and want to participate. Scuppernon Books, an independent bookseller in Greensboro, NC, supports the AES program by ordering books featured in the AES program and facilitating communication with major publishing houses (such as Penguin and Random House). Casa Azul of Greensboro, an organization designed to promote Latin American art and culture in the Greensboro area has provided funding and recommendations for including Latinx authors in the AES program. Their recognition of the transformative impact of representation in books is perfectly captured in a recent Casa Azul organization highlight (Marcellus, 20024):

Martin Acevedo, a board member at Casa Azul and Greensboro Bound, emphasizes the transformative impact of seeing oneself represented: "When you connect with an established author that looks like you, it is transformational," he says. "Students begin to dream and see a path for themselves becoming writers, creatives, and makers." (para. 3)

As the popularity of the AES program has grown and more community organizations elected to join the collaboration, new AES inspired programs have been introduced. As mentioned, Ready for School/Ready for Life for Pre-K (Ready/Ready) funded by The Duke Endowment and supported by the GCS Department of Early Learning has helped fund a version of AES focused on the youngest learners. The videos specifically prepared for pre-K students (2 to 3 years) are chunked into shorter segments and augmented with hands-on opportunities for active learning. This pre-K AES program directly supports "reading and discussing stories," which is one of the five science-based parenting and caregiving practices considered essential for optimal child development by "The Basics Guilford" initiative of Ready/Ready.

In the K-12 context, the Spring Break Reading Challenge provides an incentive for students to continue reading over spring break. Since its beginning in 2020, the challenge has



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encouraged students to keep reading even when school is out. During the 2023-2024 academic year, some 1,518 students from 56 schools each read at least 300 minutes over their Spring Break. That is at least 7,590 hours of reading by participating students in one year. Students who read at least 300 minutes over spring break receive a VIP invitation to the Greensboro Bound Literary Festival. Each year, 40 students who embrace this challenge are rewarded with gift certificates, allowing them to choose and purchase books that speak to their passions.

Greensboro Bound also supports a High School Poet Laureate program. Student poets from GCS and surrounding charter and private schools are invited to participate in a poetry workshop, read during the Greensboro Bound Festival, and are gifted a chapbook containing their work. These are simple but powerful initiatives that encourage creative writing and ensure that the joy of reading and writing continues, even during breaks.

Tips for Community Collaborations

Collaborations between community organizations and schools provide invaluable contributions to education by leveraging the strengths of community partners to meet the needs of the student population. Without community partnerships the AES program would not exist. While the partnership began with a collaboration with school libraries, the Greensboro Bound literary organization and a local bookstore, the AES program has grown to include support from other community groups that share the common goal of engaging students in recreational reading. The success of the AES program highlights some key factors that are necessary for an effective collaboration.

Shared Vision

Collaborators of the AES program have a shared vision and mission to create strong communities by increasing openness to new ideas and promoting literacy via engaging stories. They also share a common understanding of what a successful reading program looks like for students. All AES team members help plan and execute specific programs. Every year, the organizers of the AES program ask for feedback from participating and non-participating school librarians. The goal is to remain responsive and adjust the program to better serve the students and the needs of schools. Some examples of changes that have been made based on feedback include the shortening of videos to fit into one class period and creating a three-class



progression: a class for preparing students for the author visit, a second session to share the recorded author visit, and then a post-visit discussion and activity. AES also reduced the overall number of videos per year to allow teachers and students to better involve themselves in the topics for each of those visits. Elementary school picture-book videos are more active with authors leading in-class activities. AES ensures that the books of participating authors are cataloged in advance and are ready to go onto shelves and be shared with the students before the videos are shown.

Identifying Clear Roles for Participants

Each participating organization has its own set of well-defined tasks. Videos are produced by Greensboro Bound. Lessons are created by GCS Library Media Services. Schools that decide to participate in the AES program gain free access to their selected author visits (videos and accompanying lessons) and their libraries receive free copies of the authors' books. This arrangement allows school librarians to access ready-to-use lessons and author visits without the added responsibilities of organizing these visits and creating the lessons. Greensboro Bound, the schools' main community partner, absorbs all costs associated with producing author videos and providing books. Most authors participate for free due to book sales, and Greensboro Bound also provides or pursues grants to support the program. GCS Library Media Services collect and analyze feedback from participating schools and ensure that suggestions for improvement are immediately put into practice.

Leveraging Local Networks

The AES working committee that consists of representatives from all community partner organizations holds frequent meetings to reflect on the program and plan future events. These regular meetings of the participating organizations ensure a constant flow of fresh ideas and allow for planning and scheduling a program that is responsive to the community's needs. The AES team meets bi-weekly to leverage contacts of their members to pursue partnerships with other local organizations and individuals that can support the individual projects as well as the overall mission of the program. Having a clear and shared vision among those collaborators keeps the team focused on the literacy outcomes for the students. It is also important to highlight that having community partners that have complementary strengths is key to a successful collaboration. The AES team relies on mutual trust in each other to be able to make



joint decisions that best serve their community and fulfill their shared mission of creating lifelong learners.

Awareness of Potential Challenges

Collaborations tend to run into challenges in any context. Being aware of potential challenges can help plan a program where some of the challenges can be mitigated. There has been a rise in book challenges and a change in state laws that impact the types of books that can be used in instruction. The GCS LMS ensures that this information is shared with the schools and that the local policies and procedures for the selection of instructional resources are kept up to date. AES strives to set clear goals and expectations for the use of the program and to avoid any unclear communication that may lead to confusion.

While the AES program has been impactful, many librarians still do not participate citing “feeling too busy” or “forgetting to sign up.” In response, AES tries to actively increase opportunities for participation, send out regular reminders, and supply lesson plans and cataloging records for the books to make the program as user friendly and accessible as possible. Greensboro Bound and Guilford County schools also hope to continue to increase access to diverse authors and books that better reflect the student population and offer opportunities to the students to learn about their cultures as well as the life experiences of others.

Conclusion

The AES program, despite its challenges, has had a high impact on Guilford County Schools and the local community. Since its start in 2018, the community collaboration behind the AES program has expanded, and it now involves additional community partners, such as booksellers, publishers, authors, community-based organizations, and program funders, whose regular engagement in the planning process allows for a responsive program. Community members support the mission through donations as it is increasingly clear that the outcomes directly impact district goals for student achievement. Additional AES-based programs have been developed to further encourage reading motivation and literacy skill development. The Spring Break Reading Challenge, the High School Poet Laureate Program, the Pre-K AES Program, and the AES at the Greensboro Bound Literary Festival all aim to engage students in recreational reading and writing while also strengthening the community.



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All community partners are committed to extending the reach of this program and excited at the prospect of potentially inspiring the creation of similar collaborations that not only have the potential of creating lifelong readers, but also increase the visibility of local authors who represent their communities. Virtual author visits seem especially suited for rural communities that do not have easy access to authors or funding for similar events and services. Greensboro Bound, Guilford County Schools, and North Carolina Central University plan to continue their collaboration to determine the long-term impact of author visits on childhood and adolescent literacy.



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