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David Adelman earned his Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education from the University of Maryland and graduated from Loyola College of Maryland with a Master of Education in Administration and Supervision. As an Assistant Principal, David has enjoyed working with students of all ages, and has found that the best way to meet the needs of his students is to keep growing and changing with each new experience. He uses his own experiences, not only as an educator, but also as a colleague to his wife, who is a Gifted and Talented Resource Teacher for Howard County, and as a father to his ten-year-old daughter and six-year-old son.



## Coaching and Inspiring an Interactive Family Literacy Project of Excellence in a School-Based Setting

by M. Parker Anderson and David Adelman

### Shifting the thinking

“Oh no” is usually the first and only response I, as a coach, get at the mere mention of inviting my educational leadership clients to engage in a Project of Excellence. And then the silence comes, the heavy breathing, the look of doom and gloom, followed by a very expressive and overly detailed explanation of how busy they are in their school setting, the extent of responsibilities that are already imposed upon them, and that the mere thought of adding an additional duty into their schedule would be truly overwhelming.

I, of course, am totally empathetic, and I begin to quietly explain that in my role as an educational coach, my role is to stretch my clients — current and future educational leaders — into possibilities of success and results that go far beyond their present high-level of performance. That over the course of the weeks and months ahead, I will be there to motivate and inspire them to identify and achieve the goal and objectives in the Project of Excellence by highlighting their unique talents, skills, and values and in so doing help them to reconnect to their personal passion and to regain the deep-seated love that they have for their work and their career.

This is when I then invite them to breathe. To breathe in the joys and delights that brought them to this place of school-based leadership and to remember the energy, commitment, and dedication they had when a simple thank you or a gentle smile was all the appreciation they needed at the end of a day's work or the end of another school year. With that, the “no” most often turns into a resounding “yes” and we embark on an effort to co-create a Project of Excellence.

### Connecting to the missing link

The Project of Excellence developed by the co-author was designed to engage families in an interactive community-based school literacy program. After some reflection and debate, David recognized that one of his unique interests was in the area of supporting young children who were significantly academically challenged and that another primary interest was in the area of literacy. So these two areas of interest now became the “hook” for David in pursuing his Project of Excellence.

He genuinely seemed excited in sharing and informing his coach and others about the importance of strengthening the reading skills of young children, some of whom were challenged readers, slow readers, or non-readers. The level of success for many of these young students was often insignificant and as a consequence many of the children did not want to participate in classroom activities, acted out, and generally found themselves frustrated by the demands imposed by academic learning opportunities and the environment. Needless to say, the teachers were often frustrated themselves by these children who at times appeared unruly and demanded additional time and requirements that the teacher may not have been able to provide. At the same time, many of the parents felt disappointed in their children, in themselves, with their child's teacher, and with the school.

Although the goal of the Project became how to improve the reading skills of young children, the focus of the Project was directed toward what David calls the “missing link” in school-based literacy programs. Upon reflection and careful analysis, David recognized that teachers were receiving and vigorously pursuing high-quality professional development in the area of teaching young children to read. In addition, students



The families were given reading activities that they practiced and discussed during the monthly sessions and then were sent home to engage in these activities with their children. Some of the activities included reading aloud

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were regularly receiving a double-dose of reading and learning opportunities. The "missing link" for David as he assessed his passion was the involvement of the families in the reading program.

### Engaging the stakeholders and beneficiaries

Armed with this information, David sought out the encouragement and financial support of the school leadership, invited the involvement of teachers in identifying potential students and assisted with follow-up activities, and he gained the active and ongoing partnership of the reading specialist. David knew that he could not do this program alone. They invited and obtained the participation of 12 very skeptical, yet clearly concerned, parents. Although other families were invited to participate, this became the core group that was willing to be involved.

The parents agreed to participate in the once a month, early evening program; they read a book that supported families and adults in teaching basic reading fundamentals; they engaged in workbook and other interactive learning activities with one another; and they were given assignments to complete independently, at home, and with their children. Child care was provided on the evenings the program took place, so the parents and family members were left to work, learn, and share within the safety of an adult only learning group.

to the children at night, identifying words and symbols to read with their children at the grocery store or while driving down the road; learning to play letter matching games; or inviting the children to read or to be read to and then to talk about or draw a picture about what they had read. Parents learned to celebrate and acknowledge the successes, both large and small, with their children. The children delighted in having the increased time and attention from their parents. The parents were happy that many of the activities were simple and uncomplicated and yet indicated they had not thought of doing many of these engaging activities.

The program was initially designed for a short, six month period of time. Some of the early comments by teachers indicated that the children were "choosing to read," they were "enjoying reading-time more," and the feeling of struggle, disinterest, and disruptions were substantially diminished. Notably, some comments by the young children included that they didn't mind the extra work and they were happy to read at night with their moms or dads and that they were smart because they could read.

### The return on the investment

Program evaluations were completed and they support and substantiate the overall value of the initiative. In many ways, the parents spoke and wrote that they appreciated the school and its staff more, parents reported having an increased comfort level

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within the school environment, and they indicated that they no longer felt alone or helpless in helping their child. Families joyfully shared how they learned to help their child with their homework and that it had also helped them to learn skills that they didn't have either. At the end of the sixth month, most of the families indicated and perhaps even insisted that the project should continue the following year. In addition to wanting the program to continue, the families urged the school staff to expand the program to and for other children and their families within the school.

Perhaps even more surprisingly than all the other reported program benefits, the parents and families indicated that the program impacted them in two major areas. The first area was that the gratitude they had for the immediate advantages the program provided their children and that they, as parents, learned important life-long skills that would help not only their children but also would help their children's younger siblings, or their nieces and nephews. The other area that the families frequently highlighted was the ability to share with one another their frequently overwhelming concerns about their children's academic success or the lack thereof, the ability to convey their vulnerability and limitations, and to address or overcome their fear in not being heard, acknowledged, or recognized within the school setting.

David frequently conveyed that these results should be viewed as huge successes, as many times this group

of parents and families did not interact regularly with the school and its staff as much as they were doing now. It was recognized, further, that when parents have positive feelings toward school and the school environment, then children, too, become genuinely excited about school, which has an overwhelmingly positive impact on their behavior and school performance.

### What makes this program a Project of Excellence?

A Project of Excellence is more than just another program or a new, glamorized initiative with a set of goals and objectives that have to be accomplished. A Project of Excellence requires a call to action that goes beyond the everyday rigueur of the commitment, dedication, and high-performance that leaders are required to produce daily. Excellence demands, actually stretches, the seemingly impossible into the possible. Once David accepted the charge of doing a Project of Excellence, he radically moved beyond any



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real or imagined fears and concerns and he stimulated, provoked, and engaged the participation and collaboration of so many others who initially may have appeared as unlikely candidates, partners, or guides. Just imagine, the likelihood of a party of one, being able to secure space, get some initial seed money, encourage staff to join as partners, stay late, candidly share from a personal experience, and to invite seemingly disenfranchised families to reconnect to the school experience and environment.

A Project of Excellence starts with the challenge put forward by a coach or a colleague that becomes a call to achievement. The five key elements required within a Project of Excellence include:

- **Leadership** — Going beyond the “no,” to overcome the doubts and fears, and even the resistance to false beliefs of “not being good enough” or the breakdown and/or whining that the project cannot be achieved due to time, money, or lack of support. A Project of Excellence helps one to find the leader within and to recognize that the Project can be even bigger than what one thinks one person can accomplish.
- **Passion** — The driving force for a Project of Excellence must be something that inspires you from within, something that stirs a level of passion within you, to accomplish more. It is the tease, it is the opportunity, it is the challenge, it is the accomplishment that motivates, stimulates, inspires you — the individual, the leader — to say “why not?”, and if so, “why not me?”.
- **Being of service** — The Project of Excellence does not have to be big but the concept must be broad and far-reaching. When you embark into

a Project of Excellence there is no need to get hung up on the numbers or how large the project must become. Many times people think that the Project has to be large in size but it does not. Also, when one is in service to others, then the opportunity for everyone to learn from one another is a valuable and an added benefit, becoming a real cross-pollination of ideas, sharing, and learning.

- **Create a space for allowing** — Leave space for the creative to emerge from within your Project of Excellence; this includes creating space for attracting all of the money needed for the project (understanding that it may not be as much as you once thought was needed). Create an opening and belief that the right people and partners will come forward and step up into helpful and supportive roles. We invite you to leave space for the unknown to emerge — in other words, be prepared to be planfully unplanful. Know from the outset that the Project of Excellence more than likely will become bigger than even what was originally planned. The seed that gets germinated following the vocal “no” will more than likely take on a life of its own.
- **Excellence** — Excellence doesn’t come with a goal. When you begin your Project of Excellence, it may feel like a small grassroots project or an incubator program and yet it will virtually expand to multi-dimensional, even multi-tiered levels. Once again, excellence doesn’t emerge from a single goal or set of objectives; it comes from a deep-seated response to a challenge that emerges from within.

Today becomes a great day for you and your coach or colleague to respond to the question, “What will be your Project of Excellence?” in your life or within your career.

Families joyfully shared how they learned to help their child with their homework and that it had also helped them to learn skills that they didn’t have either.

**Shifting the thinking:** The “Oh, no” response described in the article may feel familiar to you as a leader. Look for the details in this article that moved the co-author from “Oh, no” to stretch to “Oh, yes!”

**Create your own Project of Excellence:** Parker gives us a blueprint for creating our own Projects of Excellence. Work through the key elements with your staff to answer the question: “What will be your Project of Excellence?”

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers  
by Kay Albrecht