

Follow our ministry's lead  
for partnering with—and blessing  
—your local schools



by  
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# PAY IT FORWARD

Back in June of last year, I was having lunch at our church in New Hope, Minnesota, with six principals from four local public schools. Three of the principals were retiring, so our ministry invited them for lunch to show appreciation for their service to our community. Two of their replacements also attended; our hope was to keep alive the very special relationship we'd developed with these schools.

Above: Greg Braly  
and Joanne Lundberg  
of New Hope Church  
Below: Monthly care  
gift from the church  
to the teachers.

After a feast of Italian food, I pushed back my plate and asked the retiring principals to share their fondest memories from their years in the schools. I was more than a little surprised when all three politely refused.

"Instead," said one principal, "let's talk about how we're going to continue the partnership between New Hope Church and our school." The other principals nodded in agreement.

I was amazed—and delighted. Over the next hour we openly discussed ways our children's ministry and our local public schools could partner—a conversation that most in ministry would probably think a rare thing.

One of the retiring principals said to me, "We need the church. Children need a moral influence." By the end of our lunch, we'd all renewed our commitment to work together.



## Friends in Need ▶

As we cleaned up afterward, I silently praised God for how he'd opened the door in just one year to this most remarkable relationship. Twelve months earlier, our ministry was pondering ways to renew our commitment to our community. God had redirected us in that direction, challenging us to focus on opportunities and needs close to home.

In June 2007 our children's ministry team drew a circle on the map around our church. We asked God where he wanted us to focus. It wasn't long before we felt called to visit the elementary school closest to our church as a starting point. So Joanne Lundberg, our elementary staff coordinator, and I made an appointment, went to the school, and met with principal Lois Nordling. This wonderful lady was in the middle of caring for a couple of students as we walked in. And though she was very busy, she gave us a few minutes. We explained that we wanted to provide tangible support to the school, though we weren't exactly certain how best to do that. Principal Nordling expressed gratitude—and then asked what social agency or club we were from. When we said, "New Hope Church, just a few blocks away," she blinked and smiled.

"Well," she said, "I've always believed that the entire community should be involved in education."

Two weeks later we took Principal Nordling and her assistant to lunch. We asked, "What do you really need at your school? What would be truly useful?"

Principal Nordling's list included things such as help putting in a playground, tutors for students, school supplies for the fall, funding, and more. We took her list and a few other ideas back to our ministry—and then the children in our ministry got busy.

## A Gift Indeed ▶

First, our kids initiated a school supply drive to raise money for supplies and backpacks. We collected milk caps and coupons—amazingly, the school earns up to \$10,000 a year to purchase supplies with these items. We recruited volunteers for the school's summer programs and committed to advertise the school's future

volunteer needs to our congregation. We recruited people to build the playground; coincidentally, one of our volunteers had noticed that the school's landscaping needed tending so we added that to our list. Even our young adults got on board and sponsored a backpack drive.

The day we were scheduled to build the playground, it rained. Even so, over 30 of our volunteers showed up and, in the rain, built the playground by noon. Half our volunteers weeded



Joanne oversees backpack delivery and fully stocked supply closets.

and worked on the planters around the school. Our team was so efficient that the school's volunteer coordinator had to call up all the school's parent volunteers scheduled to come in that afternoon and tell them to stay home. We'd accomplished everything on the agenda.

Our kids raised enough money to fill two large cabinets with school supplies and add \$500 to the field trip fund for kids who couldn't afford the fees. They also brought in enough milk caps and coupons to help the school get another \$2,000 in school equipment. When our young adults finished their backpack drive, they'd filled over 30 backpacks to overflowing—and they donated the extra supplies to the school, a gift worth another \$2,000.

After all the work was done and the cabinets stuffed with supplies, our ministry did one more thing to keep our relationship going: We adopted the teachers. Now every month our ministry

brings a gift box into the teachers' lounge—apples, muffins, granola bars, bottles of water, hot chocolate packs. We arrange this gift for the teachers and include a note to say that New Hope Church loves and appreciates them.

### Word Spreads to Speed ▶

The news about our children's ministry got out. Soon I had phone calls from three more schools. Two needed tutors and another needed volunteers for a special project with their third-graders.

We recruited volunteer tutors. Then we discovered that the third-graders journaled every week, but there were too many kids for one teacher to read and comment on every journal. So we paired the third-graders with our senior adults class. Our ministry picked up the journals and distributed them to our seniors. They read the journals and wrote encouraging notes back to the kids, and then our ministry returned them to the school. This correspondence went on for a couple of months and concluded with the third-graders coming to our church to put on a concert for the senior adults lunch. And we adopted the teachers at all four schools, so now they all get our monthly teacher care packages with a note of appreciation from our children's ministry.

Within months of the start of our efforts, an invitation to the school board meeting surprised us. There, Principal Nordling shared how we'd been a great help to their school. The superintendent even gave me an opportunity to address the board. I used it to thank the board for their hard work and for the privilege

Above: Greg speaks with a school administrator.  
Below: Water delivery to the school office.



of partnering with them for our children's education. I made the comment that our ministry views supporting the schools as part of being an active participant in our community. Little did I know, but two different newspapers quoted my comments, as well as the district website. In the parking lot that evening, someone stopped me and said something I won't forget: "It's great seeing the church being the church!"

Not long after the school board meeting, the district sent photographers to our ministry, and the next thing we knew, we were on the front page of the Robbinsdale District 281 Newsletter—which goes to every home in the school district! The newsletter kindly acknowledged our support for the schools and our partnership with the community.

### A Partnership in Deed ▶

Our ministry's goal has been to offer sustained support for the schools. We manage that by staying in regular contact with the school principals. We check in to see what needs have come up and then get creative with our help.

Recently Principal Nordling expressed her concern for kids who go home each summer and have nothing to read. They come back in the fall lagging behind in reading skills. In our district, families speak more than 50 different languages in the home, and two-thirds of our kids need financial help from the state. Many don't get reading support from home for a variety of reasons. Principal Nordling desired to help these kids by giving them a book to read during the summer. Our ministry organized a "gently used" book drive and collected more than 1,200 books. All the children at the school got at least one book they could call their own—and they sent back homemade thank-



you cards that our kids treasured.

We partnered with another school on a coat drive to provide coats for immigrant families. Last Christmas we collected socks for kids at school. Recently a gym teacher at one of the elementary schools asked for sneakers for kids who didn't have any. Our church delivered.

Our ministry's goal is to *be* the gift, not just to give gifts. As a result, we enjoy a strong relationship with each of the schools we work

Joanne speaks with a school administrator about upcoming needs.



with. For example, we're the evacuation site for our local high school. We host events such as "Science of the Mind" competitions, teacher seminars, and concerts. We provide overflow parking for the high school during special events. Our preschool is the learning lab for both local high schools, where the schools send their teenagers to observe how we run our program—and consequently hear the gospel. We've even provided school space at no cost when one school's classrooms flooded.

When the schools have a need, they call us.

And the result has been incredible. We've had various officials from the district office stop by and tell us how much they love what our church is doing. We hear a chorus of thank yous from the school administration and the students. But for me, the very best response to our efforts was when a member of our congregation visited one of the schools. The school official introduced the person as, "One of our friends from New Hope Church." **cm**

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To learn ways other churches are making an impact in schools, go to Web Exclusives at [childrensministry.com](http://childrensministry.com).

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## ▶ THINGS WE LEARNED ALONG THE WAY ▶

If you're considering reaching out to local schools in your area, follow these tips.

- **Truly listen.** The schools aren't afraid of separation of church and state issues. They're afraid that you won't listen and instead will come in with your own agenda. Really listen to determine the best way you can serve them.
- **Come with the heart of a servant.** School administrators will know it if you're simply trying to manipulate them for your church's interest. You'll truly serve them if you have the heart of a servant—no strings attached.
- **Start small.** Do only what you can do.
- **Deliver on what you promise.** If you agree to do something, do it.
- **Build relationships.** The relationships you create are key for the long-term ministry.
- **Allow schools to serve you, too.** This partnership is a two-way street. Let students come over and sing or do a project for you. Be willing to receive.
- **Truly love your school.** Love is the language that opens doors and causes the gospel to flourish.

*Deb Laws  
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