

SCHOOL STORIES

TYPE 6—COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Partnership With the U.S.S. *San Jacinto*

Arrowhead Elementary School

Virginia Beach, Virginia

Goal for Partnership Climate: Create productive connections with a key community partner.

Goal for Student Success: Increase students' writing skills and improve their school behavior.

Level: Elementary Grades (adaptable to other grade levels)

Arrowhead Elementary School's partnership with sailors from the U.S.S. *San Jacinto* grew into a successful pen pal relationship and then a far-reaching lunch-buddy program called the San Jac Shipmate's Club. The students—many of whom have parents serving overseas in the navy or other branches of the military—liked the attention and encouragement of the adult role models. The sailors enjoyed the students' friendship and the different perspectives they offered.

In the spring of 2005, the school established a partnership with the *San Jacinto*, a navy cruiser based in nearby Norfolk that brought sailors into the school to help teachers run copies, tutor, and read to students. When the ship was deployed to Iraq, the school wanted the partnership to continue, so it collaborated with the ship's representatives to set up the pen pal program. Teachers at Arrowhead used the project as an instructional tool, leading children through the writing process, as they eagerly corresponded with the sailors. The children also learned about the sailors' daily lives and saw PowerPoint presentations of the sailors at work. The school provided the sailors with guidelines for encouraging students with test-taking tips and words of support.

Seeing how much the students liked the pen pal program with the sailors, the school continued and expanded the program when the *San Jacinto* returned to port. Working with representatives from both NNPS and the navy, the school established a lunch buddy mentorship program called the San Jac Shipmate's Club. Sailors came to school once a week to eat lunch and talk with their student buddies. Then, they read, studied, or played games. The third graders who had been pen pals teamed up with the sailors with whom they had been corresponding, while many other students at risk of failing in all grades also were paired with mentors. The school encouraged students' parents to meet with their child and his or her mentor.

The *San Jacinto* program helped 140 participating students both academically and behaviorally. The pen pal activity allowed students to practice their writing skills in a way that connected to their real lives. Students worked hard to improve their academic performance to please their mentors. Teachers noticed improvement

in writing skills and test scores. Having a mentor also helped troubled students maintain self-control and strive to do their best in school.

The program cost approximately \$400, most of which was paid by the *San Jacinto*. Even more critical than the money, however, was the crew's unwavering dedication to the pen pal and mentoring programs. The school's contacts aboard the ship invested time and energy to establish the pen pal program and to continue it once the sailors were ashore.

The Arrowhead students were not the only people who benefited from the program. The sailors also enjoyed the partnership. As the ship's chaplain explained it: "We live in a gray world [the ship is painted gray, inside and out]. The letters from the students and their smiling faces bring color to our world."