

## PARTNERING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

**PALS (Partners Assisting Local Schools)** is a program that facilitates mutually beneficial partnerships between a school and local businesses, service agencies and/or community groups. The founding partners of PALS were Mr. James K. Irving, Chairman of J.D. Irving, Limited (a local business) and Prince Charles School in the Saint John Education Centre of the Anglophone School District - South, New Brunswick.

Established to help break the cycle of poverty for students living in identified priority neighbourhoods in Saint John, New Brunswick, PALS combines initiatives that focus on academic achievement and a positive school environment. By working together, the school and its partners make a positive impact on the life of a child and the future of the community.

***Priority neighbourhoods are identified by high poverty rates, high percentage of single parents, and low levels of education and labour force participation. These areas benefit from additional social and community services.***

Although poverty reduction remains the central focus of the PALS initiative in Saint John, partnerships are developed for a variety of reasons, a testament to its adoptability and adaptability as a model in the province and beyond.

School staff and administration, along with community partners, develop strategies to meet the identified needs of students living in poverty. On a continual basis the partnerships' strategies are developed, implemented and evaluated for their effectiveness in meeting these needs. It has been important from the beginning that the initiatives and goals of each PALS partnership align with school, district and provincial education plans.



Contributions of partners take the form of **time** - for the employee volunteers involved in the endeavour; **financial support** - with respect to things such as uniforms, band instruments, transportation, books, etc.; and **exposure to new experiences** - in the opportunities that have been arranged to broaden the general knowledge base and outlook for the students who have very limited exposure to the world outside of their neighbourhood.

PALS partnerships have opened new doors for students, helped support the school staff as they work with students to shape new standards of behaviour and encouraged students to think and explore the broad spectrum of possibilities available upon completion of high school.

Many students from this population had not contemplated completing high school just a few short years ago, much less continuing their education at the post-secondary level. This has changed.

***"If I graduate." has been replaced with "When I graduate!" - a small but significant change.***

## **Where it Began - An Idea, Commitment and Caring People!**

*For many children attending the schools serving priority neighbourhoods in Saint John, poverty is a way life. Without intervention, they will have a lower standard of living, poorer health, and live with higher rates of crime than the average Canadian.*

*Poverty remains one of society's greatest costs, dramatically increasing government health and social expenditures. It will continue to remove almost all of those without a high school education from any workplace requiring skilled employees.*

*For most, these conditions will not change unless something intervenes to help break the cycle of poverty. This is the backdrop for the beginning of the PALS program.*

The first PALS partnership began at Prince Charles School. Before classes began in September 2001, all employees at the school (teachers, office staff, maintenance people, education assistants and support staff, and administration) with some District personnel and two people from J.D. Irving, Limited went on a day-long planning session..

The group discussed the students' needs, their concerns for the students, and their experiences with the students at the school. As they began their search for change they developed a vision defined through consensus.

The vision has a simple rationale. If students want to be at Prince Charles, they will come to school, stay in school and learn. If teachers and staff want to be at Prince Charles, they will commit to the school as they help students build self-esteem, learn and thrive. If community members help at the school, a sense of community pride will develop and grow.

With students, staff and teachers wanting to be at Prince Charles, the school staff was confident they could create the positive school environment essential for learning. Academic success would follow.

This partnership continued quietly for five years. The hope was to develop a plan, a blue-print for further partnerships that then spread to six other schools serving priority neighbourhoods in Saint John. It also became the model for the establishment of the Community Schools program in New Brunswick.

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*PALS does not work in isolation. It is one of many initiatives in Greater Saint John, New Brunswick that work together to address poverty by helping to close the achievement gap for children living in poverty.*

*The Anglophone South School District is a crucial partner and stakeholder in these initiatives. PALS works closely to support its Community Schools program.*

*From the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI) to Community Schools, Living Saint John, Achieve Literacy Greater Saint John, the Promise Partnership and so many more, Greater Saint John has mobilized to change the future not only for our most vulnerable citizens, but for us all.*

*"In fact, more than a decade of concentrated community effort has reaped many successes. The poverty level in the City of Saint John has dropped from 27% to 20.8% and child poverty has been reduced from 35% to 28.3%. These levels are still higher than provincial and national levels so this good work must continue." BCIPI*

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## People Support

Employees of the various businesses and community groups are the volunteer PALS who help make the school environment a warm and caring community. Employers free up employee time to volunteer in a variety of ways at their partner school. Their activities, one-on-one or in groups, contribute to significant changes in the lives of the students.

These activities include but are not limited to:

- literacy support
- breakfast and lunch programs
- numeracy support
- mentoring
- coaching
- enrichment activities
- in-class support
- work placement mentoring
- extra-curricular activities (chess, music, clubs, etc.)
- supervision of field trips, school-based events, etc.



## Financial Support

Some partners are not able to spare employee time during the work week, but still want to be involved. Assisting a school financially is sometimes an option, as, due to a variety of factors, many schools do not have the means to provide for additional enriching educational experiences for their students. Any financial assistance from partners does not in any way replace the public funding for schools.

**In response to a needs assessment undertaken by the school staff, partners may choose to help by providing funds to:**

- support initiatives in the following areas: academics, physical space improvements, extra-curricular enrichment, and basic necessities such as food, clothing etc.

*PALS partnerships are true partnerships. Schools have traditionally received sponsorships from various sources, and this is very important support for a school.*

*PALS partnerships take it a step further – they are all about relationship-building. Partnerships are still in place that started 15 years ago.*

- augment or create opportunities to ensure all children are able to access events or activities associated with going to school.
- assist school parent groups in their efforts to provide such extras as library enhancements, development of playgrounds, team uniforms, etc.
- create opportunities for schools to provide field trip experiences beyond what the school budget accommodates.

## The PALS Success

What began 15 years ago with one school and one business partner has grown to more than 30 schools and over 140 partners and continues to expand! Hundreds of volunteers are now working with students and schools to make a positive impact in their lives.



The schools and communities where many of our educators work present challenges. However these challenges also provide opportunities to look at new ways for the community to help. Students often come to school without their basic needs being met. In addition to the host of challenges present when a lack of finances does not permit adequate shelter, clothing or food, these students live in areas where the intergenerational nature of this strife impedes their ability to see life beyond the streets in which they live.

This contributes to many obstacles in an educational setting.

Teachers and support staff work very hard to give students the necessary skills to become:

- *Self-sufficient* – capable of securing not only their own personal needs but also able to contribute to the sustainability of the province.
- *Innovative* - pioneering with creative ideas to move forward in new directions.
- *Critical thinkers* - able to use strategies and processes to solve problems, be creative, understand deeply and conduct meaningful reflection.
- *Global citizens* - able to assess social cultural economic and environmental interdependence locally, nationally and globally.

## Our schools cannot do it alone.

This is where our community comes in.

Partnerships (the schools working with their partners) are having a positive impact on virtually every facet of school life for our children – academic achievement, school spirit, student behaviour and social skills, student motivation, sports activity, cultural awareness, and pride in being part of the school and community.

For our community and business leaders, partnering with a neighbourhood school is one of the most efficient and effective ways to contribute to real community change - making a significant and direct impact on inner city poverty.

The PALS initiative proves that a dedicated school staff and parent group, together



with community partners, volunteers and financial support, can make a positive change in the lives of children.

Have we reached them all? Not yet! But we are making significant gains in so many respects. It takes us all, and in New Brunswick, we are having fun in the process!

*“Making a difference in the life of a child can have a powerful impact, not only on that young person, but also on the future of our community. If our work together for young people serves as a model to make a difference in other schools in our community - that would be the best reward of all.”*

*James K. Irving*

## HOW PARTNERSHIPS BENEFIT:

### Students:

- Improved literacy rates
- Improved attendance
- Overall rise in academic achievement
- Students being exposed to possibilities beyond what they knew pre-partnership
- Increased pride in school, school spirit
- Sense of ownership and involvement
- Increase in feelings of self-esteem
- Sense of belonging in the community

### Staff:

- Access to more resources – people, volunteers, materials,
- Sense of team – they don't feel they are in it alone
- Trust – it took time to build trust and really believe that the community cared and cared enough to stick around – they couldn't quit and it meant so much when partners and volunteers decided they wouldn't quit!

### Community:

- Parents more involved in their child's education
- Decrease in community problems : Example - calls re family disputes, vandalism, etc.
- Pride in their community school
- Improved attitudes of both children and their families

### Business:

- For business leaders, a PALS partnership is one of the most efficient and effective ways to contribute to real community change. These partnerships are making a significant and direct impact on the inner city poverty around them, and they have engaged the community to be part of that change.
- Employees return to work feeling positive and satisfied with their contribution.
- Employees enjoy sharing in the children's lives and appreciate the children's successes.
- Contributes to a sense of pride in the workplace.
- Aligns with corporate philanthropic mandates.

### For more information please contact:

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