

# LE'ATELE'S SUCCESS STORY

## Parent and Community Partners Spur School Improvement

Photo: Evelyn Weilenman



► Master Carver Matila Savea shows Le'atele student Mathew Tuinei how to use a *sasau*, or small ax.

By Joan Perkins

**B**udget cuts, budget cuts. How are principals to get the money they need not only to supply the basics, but to provide student incentives and enrichment experiences? To support overworked teachers and improve deteriorating classrooms? Some principals have found that building relationships with parents, business, and community can pay off where it matters most – in students' learning performances.

Evelyn Weilenman, principal of Le'atele Elementary School in American Samoa, has been successful at building relationships to help students learn better. Le'atele, she says, was once the lowest scoring school on the island of Tutuila. The key to school improvement has been parent and community involvement. At a workshop session at the 2002 Pacific Educational Conference, Weilenman listed the many Le'atele projects funded by local businesses and explained how principals can build partnerships with family and community.

For Weilenman, "community" means "all of us." Potential partners are everywhere: in businesses, parents and other community members, federal and local agencies, and service organizations like the Rotary Club. Le'atele's 240 students have benefited from a range of learning experiences supported by these groups; for example, the Rotary Club recently donated 20 ukuleles for a school band. The key to developing successful home and

community involvement is to know who to ask, when to ask, and how to ask in the right way.

Connections between home and school can be vital to students' success. Principals can build relationships with parents by visiting with them when they bring their children to school and by providing opportunities for them to help their children succeed. Through PTA-sponsored computer workshops, principals can help ease parents' technophobia and encourage them to invest in home computers. Workshops held prior to school- or island-wide competitions in math, spelling, and science increase parents' knowledge of goals and requirements and result in a greater willingness to assist students in preparing for these events.

Parents may also be eager to participate in projects that directly benefit their children's classes. At Le'atele, parents provide relief for busy teachers by supervising classroom projects and serve on grade-level committees that target needs in specific classrooms.

Another way of boosting student learning is business- and community-funded student incentives. To motivate students to make the long trip through Fagasa Pass to use the beautiful new public library in Pago Pago, Le'atele declared WARR (We Are Readers and Researchers). Through joint efforts by teachers and library staff, students were encouraged to check out books and write book reports. Each month the student with the greatest number of credits for completing these assignments received a computer donated by the community. By the end of the first semester, 90% of Le'atele students had library cards and six homes had received computers.

One of Le'atele's most important partners is the U.S. National Park Service (NPS). Working with Invasive Plant Specialist Tavita Togia, students have studied both native and invasive plants and trees. "Our research projects also provide students with unique opportunities to study traditional Samoan culture and language," explains Togia. Students not only help create greater public awareness of invasive species, they also learn about traditional uses of native plants. In the project pictured above, a student works with Master Carver Matila Savea to carefully shape a *paopao*, or [ continued page 6 ]



▷ Le'atele dedicates the *paopao*, or canoe, students helped build.

## SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

### PARENTS AND FAMILY CAN

- Assist with or supervise classroom projects
- Visit classrooms to read favorite books aloud
- Serve on grade-level parent committees
- Learn about curriculum at Parents' Night
- Apply for small grants (see "PIRC Parental Involvement Fund," p. 7)
- Attend PTA workshops to learn:
  - computer skills
  - requirements for competitions and projects
  - how to support student study habits

### COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS CAN

- Collaborate on beach or other clean-up events
- Work with students on community service projects
- Sponsor student competitions or trips
- Provide funds to:
  - publish student writing
  - organize science fairs
  - sponsor music performances or talent shows

### GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL AGENCIES CAN

- Promote library use
- Award small grants for educational projects
- Provide informal learning opportunities
- Supervise educational hikes and field trips
- Collaborate on curriculum writing

### BUSINESSES CAN

- Sponsor competitions and trips
- Provide on-site business training
- Help students develop websites
- Offer tours of their facilities
- Donate funds for all-school projects

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[continued from page 5] traditional Samoan canoe. Students participated in every step of the process of building the canoe, from blessing the tree to launching the finished product.

The partnership also benefits the NPS, which has built a greenhouse on the school campus. The facility, which is used to propagate native plant species for reforestation projects, also provides learning opportunities for students and community members interested in studying botany, traditional uses of native plants, and environmental sciences. A planned botanical garden will similarly benefit the community while supporting NPS efforts to identify and preserve rare and endangered plant species.

How can principals persuade businesses and community organizations to fund projects like these? It's not as difficult as it might seem. Businesses and many community organizations have donor funds built into their budgets. To tap into this pool of available money, it's important that schools contact potential donors before the funds are committed to other projects. By finding out when businesses budget for the upcoming year, schools can make sure their timing works for and not against them. An appeal is more likely to succeed if it's for a project that will benefit the entire school.

For example, ASCO Motors, a Pago business, is another partner in Le'atele's projects with the NPS. ASCO sponsored newspaper articles to create greater public awareness of problems caused by invasive plant species. ASCO also funded American Samoa's 2002 spelling bee, including airfare to the national finals in Washington, D.C.

Colin Murfett, who coordinated ASCO's involvement in these projects, notes that he prefers a hands-on approach to community service, selecting projects that donors and recipients can participate in together. Murfett receives an average of 20 appeals a week, ranging from funding children's sporting events to painting local churches. How does he decide which projects he will contribute to? He looks for need, appropriateness, passion, an investment in the future, and an opportunity to build a long-term relationship. Education, he believes, is a great investment in the future.

For Murfett, an appropriate appeal is a request for funds that could not be generated through a school fundraiser. Passion means that donor recipients will have the commitment to participate in and see the project through. And long-term partnerships provide greater benefits for both recipient and donor.

Asking businesses for funds in the right way is just as important as asking for them at the right time. Attempting to intimidate potential donors or punish those who turn you down is unwise. One American Samoan school learned this lesson the hard way, losing funds committed by some local businesses after a school representative named, on local television, others who had not contributed.

Le'atele's success story is the best kind – one that can be relived by schools in every community. With teachers and principals who know who to ask, when to ask, and how to ask in the right way, schools can build partnerships with home and community that will enrich students' learning experiences in meaningful ways.

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