

# reading writing

REALTORS® Working to



# & Real Estate

## Improve Public Education

by Carol Everett



There are many practical steps a REALTOR® can take to make a difference in their communities in the education arena. Here are three case studies of successful initiatives by REALTOR® associations:

### **Providing Direct Assistance to Local Schools—Williamson County, Tennessee**

Helen Carter, a one-time special education teacher, now serves as the chief executive officer of the Williamson County Association of REALTORS® (WCAR). Since 1993, Carter has looked for every opportunity to use WCAR

resources to improve the public schools in Williamson County.

Carter says her members have been more than willing to follow her lead because they understand that one of the primary reasons corporate executives have flocked to this picturesque community, less than 20 minutes from downtown Nashville, is they want the best public school system they can find for their children. Currently, Williamson County has delivered one of the best in the state. "No matter where you live in Williamson County," says Carter, "you can find quality public schools for your children."

Williamson County also has big plans to make the region a center for science and technology, and if it wants to succeed with these ambitious plans, it will need to demonstrate that it has a superior educational system, starting with its primary and secondary schools.

Here are the major ways WCAR supports its community schools, all of which can be easily emulated by other REALTOR® associations:

#### • **Scholarships**

These \$1,000-scholarships allow one graduating senior from each of Williamson County's high schools to continue their education at either a college or a vocational school. WCAR takes applications from all of its five high schools; narrows them down to three per school based on outside activities, grades, parent's income and need; and then interviews the finalists to choose one from each school. The scholarships are financed through an annual fundraiser. "Our goal," says Carter, "is to help that one kid who might not otherwise get to further his or her education without that first leg up. This [is one of] the best things we do as an association."

#### • **Reading to children at school**

Periodically the school district contacts Carter for volunteers to read in the schools. "When a REALTOR® goes out and reads to a classroom full of kids," says Carter, "it's a way for him or her to give back to the community." It's also a good way, she says, for them to get more name recognition. "I know for a fact those children go home and tell their parents about Mrs.



Cirulli who came in and read to them today." Some REALTORS® have made even bigger commitments. One REALTOR®, for example, adopted a class for six weeks, going in once a week to explain about different aspects of buying and selling a house. "This was a really smart approach," says Carter, "because when those kids' parents decide to move, guess what REALTOR® is going to come first to their minds."

#### • **The Groundhog Job Shadowing Program**

Students spend a day "shadowing" adults to find out more about certain careers—in this case, real estate professional.



#### • **The Tenured Teacher Appreciation Event**

At the end of the school year students honor their teachers by giving them a pin for "x" number of years of service. WCAR participates in this event by asking its members to sponsor door prizes handed out at the end of the program. "The teachers love that our membership supports them in this manner," says Carter.

#### • **School Superintendent's Business Council**

The goal, says Carter, was to brainstorm about ways the business community could play a larger role in assisting the local school system. Examples of recommendations included asking businesses to donate their computer equipment instead of throwing it away when they upgrade and inviting corporate executives to headline more fundraising events.

### **Working Collaboratively to Market Local Schools and Neighborhoods—Madison, Wisconsin "At Home In Madison" Project**

Madison REALTORS® knew they had a problem when one of their affiliate members, Home Savings Bank, told them the results of a customer focus group. Despite having one of the best school districts in the nation, many families relocating to the area were not giving Madison a moment's thought as a place to live due to a commonly-held belief that all central cities have poor public schools. "This bias against the Metropolitan Madison School District was frustrating," says Kevin King, Executive Vice President of the REALTORS® Association of South Central Wisconsin (RASCW), "because on any objective measure Madison schools have an excellent record to share with prospective new students and their parents."

But Madison REALTORS® weren't the only ones who were being hurt by this misperception, so were Madison schools, which were clearly losing out on quality students. For that matter, so was the city of Madison, which was seeing strong middle class families—along with their tax dollars—bypass it for the suburbs.

Madison REALTORS® and school administrators concluded the problem was the city wasn't getting its story out. Not only has Madison been named "best place for education" by *Money Magazine*, but it has the highest ACT scores in the state; record-level SAT scores; experienced, award-winning teachers; and a record-winning number of national merit scholars.

Understanding they had a marketing problem, the RASCW joined with the Madison Metropolitan School District, the city of Madison, and Home Savings Bank to launch a two-school pilot to demonstrate a mechanism for getting timely information into the hands of homebuyers about Madison's award-winning schools and vibrant neighborhoods. The benefits of the program were so obvious, that after the first year, it was expanded to include all Madison elementary, middle and high schools.

At first the data was available only in paper form, but quickly it was shifted to a public website ([athomein.com](http://athomein.com)), which was much less expensive to maintain and easier to keep current. Now on the "At Home In Madison" website, REALTORS® and their clients can find detailed information about every public school in the city, including performance data such as average SAT and ACT scores. Also provided is a "principal/parent contact" roster so potential homebuyers can arrange for a school tour or talk to another family who has children at a particular school. "What's great about At Home In Madison," says King, "is you get this same set of data for every

one of the schools in the whole city, and it's organized so you see a high school and all the feeder schools going into it."

A clear win-win for everyone, the metropolitan school district loves the program because it acts as a frontline advertiser for the public schools. The REALTORS® love it because it provides answers to the question uppermost on the minds of most homebuyers: what's the quality of the local schools? The program has been extremely successful. In fact, the statewide teachers union and state department of public instruction are now interested in taking the model to other major metropolitan areas in Wisconsin.

### **Working Collaboratively to Ensure Local Schools Are Adequately Financed—Palm Beach County, Florida**

In Palm Beach County the REALTORS® and the school district worked together to get a referendum passed that will increase the local sales tax by one-half penny in order to raise \$560 million for school construction and modernization starting in 2005.

REALTOR® Association of Palm Beach (RAPB) didn't question whether more money was needed for school construction in Palm Beach County. What RAPB was questioning, however, was whether the one-third mill property tax increase proposed by the school board was the most efficient way to finance more schools. The question seemed reasonable because neighboring Orange County had finally passed a school construction referendum just two years earlier after two decades of failed attempts. The difference this time around was the school board had come up with a plan—a one-half cent sales tax increase paired with a half-mill property tax rollback—the business community could get solidly behind. The business community's active involvement in the referendum's campaign helped allay voter's concerns about financial accountability.

RAPB contracted with an economic consulting firm to do a comparative study of a one-third mill versus a one-half cent sales tax increase. The study concluded that the one-half cent sales tax increase was the sounder funding alternative because it was capable of generating significantly more revenue per year than a one-third mill property tax (\$93 million compared to only \$23 million in year 1 alone). This meant that the \$560 million capital needs program could be funded in six years under the sales tax alternative versus 14 years for the property tax option, avoiding millions of dollars in administrative and finance charges. Another benefit of a sales tax increase was that it would broaden the base on which the tax was being applied to include seasonal visitors.

Armed with its study results, RAPB lobbied hard to persuade the school board to support a



Never underestimate  
the leverage  
REALTORS® can have.

one-half cent sales tax increase instead of a one-third mill property tax increase. RAPB overcame the opposition by aligning itself with other business entities and by committing to take responsibility for getting the school referendum passed if it was based on a sales tax increase.

To fulfill its pledge to the school board, RAPB subsequently formed a coalition of public and private leaders to run the referendum campaign, raising close to half a million dollars to cover the campaign's costs. It also created a 25-member advisory committee made up of the county's most powerful CEOs and CFOs to certify that the school board did in fact need \$560 million, and commissioned polling to develop effective messages. Finally, it mobilized its members to undertake grassroots efforts, such as letters to the editor, putting out signs, and going door-to-door to talk to voters. Says RAPB government affairs director Jennifer Butler, "This was basically a political campaign except instead of running an elected official we were running an issue."

The lesson from these stories: Never underestimate the leverage REALTORS® can have.

*Carol T. Everett is the owner of Everett Consulting Services based in Washington, D.C. Everett Consulting Services specializes in writing and advising on livable communities and related issues.*