South Carolina State Council Tackles Budget Problems by Listening to Members

by Katie Branca

For many state councils, the balance between money and membership is a difficult one to find, especially with the challenges of an economic downturn. But for South Carolina, listening to the needs of the membership has pointed council leadership in the right direction.

From February 23 through February 25, the South Carolina State Council of the International Reading Association (SCIRA) will be holding its annual conference in Myrtle Beach, where convention-goers will experience a series of changes that have been in the works for the past five years. Many of these changes were made in response to membership requests. Immediate Past President Jean Brewington says they will also help balance the budget.

Meet Jean Brewington

Brewington, a member of the executive team that decided on and implemented these changes, has been a member of IRA for over 25 years and a member of SCIRA for over 20. With a master’s degree in Education in Reading from the University of South Carolina, and experience in the elementary classroom as well as in district administration, Brewington views literacy education from a few different perspectives. However, her goals and motivations have always remained the same.

“Our mission is to promote literacy through the improvement of reading instruction,” she said, adding the importance of fostering reading as a habit so that readers can use it as a lifetime tool for learning.

But, on a more simple level, Brewington said she has always focused on making people aware of all the opportunities to promote literacy. “Oftentimes educators will ask me to suggest a good book for a child to read or use in a study group,” Brewington explains, recalling how frequently she mentions the Dolly Parton Imagination Library in conversation. In fact, Brewington said she strives to promote literacy in every venue possible, whether it is face to face, in a newsletter, on facebook or at the council’s annual conference.

Listening to Membership and Making Changes

Last year, Brewington and other SCIRA officers noticed that attendance on the Thursday night general session had declined significantly. SCIRA officials began to realize that teachers and school administrators simply could not leave their classrooms before the weekend. “The speaker was phenomenal but we realized we weren’t getting the bang for our buck,” Brewington said. “We knew we needed to make changes.”

After looking at membership data, brainstorming, and talking with other state leaders and conference planners, SCIRA chose to rework their conference schedule with teachers and school administrators in mind. Now, there are still general speakers on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, but the conference opens with a banquet on Friday night, featuring Jerry Pallota as the guest speaker, and members can choose to purchase

Jean Brewington; Tommy Preston, former President of the Student Body of the University of South Carolina (USC); Ellen Henricks, Executive Director of the South Carolina Center for Children’s Books and Literacy; and Linda Grant, Chair of the Literacy Award Committee, celebrate a successful statewide literacy initiative featuring USC’s mascot “Cocky”
tickets for the banquet alone. Saturday-only tickets are also available, and the awards ceremony has been moved to Saturday so that all recipients can be present. In addition, SCIRA is offering Child Development Credit to college students studying education in the area.

“The motivation was to be more receptive to the participants’ needs,” Brewington said. “We knew that we were going to have to give up the Thursday night opening because of attendance and budget, but we knew we could redirect that to Friday night.”

For those literacy educators who can’t make it to the convention, SCIRA is also offering a one-day fall literacy workshop in Columbia, South Carolina. Members can purchase a ticket for $35 to attend breakout sessions, shop with book vendors, and create valuable local literacy connections. And for $50, non-members can attend as well, and $10 of that fee will give them an SCIRA membership.

“We wanted to offer more choices to better meet the needs of our attendees,” Brewington said. “There will be more options to choose from so that attendees can attend more events, be more involved, and get the resources that help them become literacy leaders.”

### Beyond the Conference

SCIRA has also begun to make some behind-the-scenes changes that will balance the budget. Rather than holding their board meetings at Embassy Suites, a rental cost of $3,000 plus catering, they have found a local school that will rent space for only $100 and board members have agreed to provide food for the event.

Board members, who once had separate rooms for every meeting, will also be rooming together, saving $400 per night, and $1,600 each year. And finally, with the changes in the convention schedule, the executive board will now arrive at convention on Wednesday afternoon.

### Faye and Kaye Johnston: The Perfect Double-Act

South Carolina sisters Faye and Kaye Johnston have been involved with IRA and SCIRA a total of 58 years between them, and with one look at their resumes, it becomes clear that they have not had a moment’s rest. The sisters have each held offices on the local and state level of SCIRA, and, when Kaye’s term as SCIRA President ended, Faye quickly filled the position behind her. Their dedication to SCIRA can be measured in the numerous projects they have undertaken and the positions they have held, but their inspiration remains simple: a love for reading and a desire to improve literacy in South Carolina.

**What changes have you witnessed in your time at SCIRA?**

Our organization has taken a stand to provide quality staff development opportunities to meet the needs of classroom teachers, i.e. Common Core Standards. Our conference grew to one of the largest in the Southeast and with budget cuts and economic difficulties we have seen a decline in membership and conference attendance. The decline in conference attendance is a result of school districts not allowing teachers leave and/or providing funding for attending.

**How has the organization moved forward?**

To meet the needs of our membership, we have begun to provide Fall Literacy Workshops for a nominal fee for teachers unable to attend our February conference.

**What obstacles has it faced recently and in the past?**

Budget cuts.

**What has your focus been as an officer and a leader of SCIRA?**

We want to provide quality staff development opportunities for teachers.

**What projects have you created, led, or become involved in?**

Fall Literacy Workshops and The Ghana Project – our International Project

**How did those projects impact the organization?**

The Fall Literacy Workshop offered a professional opportunity for members not afforded to attend the state conference. This workshop is well attended – approximately 200 participants. We charge a nominal fee and provide attendees with a continental breakfast and lunch. Exhibitors are invited to sell books. The Ghana Project gives funds and/or books to a library in a small village. Dr. Don Clerico from Charleston Southern University oversees this project. He provides workshops and updates for local councils. He goes to Ghana every other year with students from CSU who work with the children with the books we send. SCIRA also offers a Leadership Workshop in May for new officers. This overnight workshop is for about 120 participants. The focus of this workshop is to build leadership among our local leaders and involve them in planning and decision making.

**Where do you see SCIRA moving in the future?**

SCIRA will continue to sponsor a state conference and continue to offer a Fall Literacy Workshop. We will continue to support literacy through our international project.

**Do you have ideas or plans to reach this goal?**

We are fortunate to have officers with the same vision for our organization. We want to continue the projects we are currently involved with and as more funding becomes available expand these projects.
instead of Tuesday, saving SCIRA even more on hotel expenses.

SCIRA has also moved their newsletter online instead of having it published four times a year, a change that Brewington says has already saved a tremendous amount of money. “We do a journal once a year, too,” Brewington added, “and that’s about $20,000, but we still have people who want to hold something in their hands.”

Changes to Come
For the future, SCIRA has a few more changes in the works. To make the conference even more accessible to teachers, SCIRA hopes to coordinate the weekend of the conference with South Carolina’s professional staff development day, which will hopefully increase attendance and state-wide awareness of SCIRA as a resource. The executive board has also considered the possibility of changing the days of the conference altogether, so that the event would fall Friday through Sunday or Saturday through Monday.

Brewington was careful to emphasize SCIRA’s commitment to listen to the membership and respond to its requests as a first priority. At first, when asked by members what changes she would like to see in the future, she replied, “What changes would you like to see?”

But, despite SCIRA’s willingness to react to the needs of the membership, there are a few central aspects of convention that Brewington thinks should stay awhile. “We know that teachers want to hear keynote speakers,” she said. “They need to hear the literacy leaders and they need breakout sessions to see what other teachers are doing.” And, perhaps most importantly, Brewington said attendees always need the opportunity to network. “[They like] networking, sharing, hearing ideas and beginning relationships.”

To register for SCIRA’s conference on February 23 to 25 at the Myrtle Beach Convention Center, visit http://scira.org/conference/. Or contact your local district coordinator for a paper registration form.