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## Windham Parent Network: Giving Parents a Voice

“**T**o support, educate and involve parents as active participants in improving the quality of life for the children of Windham” is not only the mission of the Windham Parent Network (WPN); it is a community way of life. Founded in 1997 by local parents, the WPN is supported by the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund (the Memorial Fund).

From its inception, the network has worked tirelessly to meet the social, emotional and educational needs of Windham’s culturally diverse community. Despite the economic challenges of 2008, the WPN achieved a remarkable level of success, bringing its community to a whole other level.

### No Stone Unturned in This Grassroots Effort

Identified by the state Department of Education as a Priority School District in 2008, Windham faced a critical need to improve student achievement and enhance educational opportunities.

According to Patricia Calvo, director, WPN, “In 2008 we were recognized as an exemplary parent network. One way that we continued to be a positive resource in the community was by being agile. For instance, as the economic tide turned, we shifted our focus from activities to initiatives that would influence lasting system change.”

Elizabeth Espitia, WPN board member, adds, “A lot happened in 2008, and we had to respond to the changes, making smart decisions to ensure that the WPN remained effective in the community.”

Susan Collins, chairman of the SRC and a longtime Windham Board of Education member says, “WPN has gotten their name out there, and their name is well respected. ‘We need to talk to the WPN’ is a customary refrain. They’re a real asset to the community.”



*A mother and her daughter listen to a story read to them by Patricia Calvo, director, WPN, at the 6th Annual Stories-in-the-Park.*

### Listen While You Work

WPN gives parents a voice – with an audience that’s listening. From preschool registration to health issues, WPN exemplifies the concept of opening the lines of communication among parents, schools and the community. And in more languages than English, if that will reach more families.

Back in 2004, a Single Point of Entry for preschool registration became a reality, helping to eliminate the difficulties that parents faced when trying to enroll their children into the right preschool programs. Prior to the system’s inception, parents were visiting multiple sites, placed on multiple waiting lists and had little say in the process.

“However due to budget issues in 2008,” says Calvo, “Windham lost 60 early education slots at a time when we were so close

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to universal preschool education after four years of hard work. We will not give up on making this a reality in the future.”

In April 2008, a third Padres en Accion class, or Fathers in Action, was attended by 11 Spanish-speaking parents. The group expressed a greater awareness of parental rights and responsibilities in the education of children from this engaging initiative.

Finally, providing dental services to eligible children became a reality in 2008. “The WPN and SRC took on dental in 2008,” says Collins, “and we couldn’t wait to move forward on it.”

## Play Safe, Live Safe

In its early years, the WPN focused on providing a safe place for children to play. The universally accessible Memorial Park Playground is a tribute to this initiative.

“In 2008, we broadened our scope of the word ‘safe’ as we worked to implement an anti-bullying program in the middle school,” says Barbara Kaczowski, WPN community organizer who worked on the program.

“Addressing concerns within our community, such as bullying in our schools, is the job of the WPN – a job that we do well,” says Suzanne Kelly, WPN president. “The network is a phenomenal resource to the community.”

“We work closely with the schools to implement initiatives that simply may not be put into play due to a lack of staff or funding,” continues Kaczowski.

Also in 2008, the WPN approached the town about its concern with smoking at public events for families. “Though a full ban did not come to pass,” says Calvo, “signs were created asking people if they were going to light up, to take into consideration the health of families and children at these events.”

## Mom, Dad, Me — and the Neighbors

Bringing families together helps build community. A bilingual family literacy event, Stories-in-the-Park, continued to be a

shining success in 2008 as it promoted reading as a fun activity. Storytelling and interactive arts and crafts were used to excite and engage the children.

“In the fall of 2008, 150 young children and families attended Stories-in-the-Park,” says Calvo, “and every child left with a new book. Despite the economy,” Calvo continues, “we actually did more community events in 2008, such as the health fair, chocolate festival, winter carnival, to name a few.”

“We did this by piggybacking on already occurring community events,” adds Kelly. “By doing this, we could apply funds and resources to other initiatives that became more pressing as the year went on.”

## The Change They Need

In 2009, the WPN identifies universal health care, access to early childhood education and support for education in the budget as programs they’ll be working on. Certainly, the economic climate may affect what is achieved this year.

“When a parent has lost a job or is having other challenges at home, it is difficult if not impossible for him or her to be involved with school or community issues,” says Espitia. “Before 2008’s economic crisis, nearly 80 percent of our students were already on reduced or free lunch. Clearly at this time, the WPN needs to continue its work in this community.”

“The support of the The Memorial Fund has been instrumental through the years and is essential to the sustainability of this initiative during these trying economic times,” says Calvo. “We accomplished a great deal in 2008 despite many challenges; we are hopeful we can do the same this year.”

For more information, please visit the WPN website at <http://windhamparentnetwork.org> ■

*The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund works collaboratively to improve education for Connecticut’s children by supporting school change, informing the public debate on educational issues, and strengthening the involvement of parents and the community in education.*

