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Submitted by Plymouth

Plymouth's Parents Meet the Challenge

We know that parents are a child's first teacher. Research demonstrates the importance of parent involvement in a child's education. But how do we make the leap from thinking of parents as consumers of services to viewing parents as community leaders and equal partners in the effort to improve outcomes for young children?

Plymouth's experience in parent engagement provides some key lessons for Discovery communities. Plymouth is a small town (approximately 11,000 residents), which means many people in town know each other and the system is less layered. While this has made some of the "connection building" easier than in larger, more diverse communities, Plymouth's efforts (both the successes and the challenges) are still instructive for all.

When Discovery first started, the folks in Plymouth decided to combine two existing groups -- the town's School Readiness Council and the Family Resource Center Advisory Council -- to form the Plymouth Early Childhood Council. The Early Childhood Council, which at the time of its formation included only professionals, decided to tackle parent engagement by first offering parent leadership training. The Early Childhood Council asked parents with whom they had an existing relationship -- the parents who had served on the Family Resource Center (FRC) Advisory Council's Parent Committee -- to help recruit other parents for People Empowering People (PEP) training. Sue Vivian, the Plymouth Family Resource Center Coordinator and a key community partner in the town's Discovery initiative, explained, "You have to start with building relationships. Parent engagement won't go anywhere without them."

While the recruiting efforts proved challenging, four parents enrolled in the ten-week PEP class. Rather than view the small class size as a failure, the Early Childhood Council moved ahead with the training, which they paid for using their Discovery funds. The small group of participants bonded through this experience. According to parent participant Tracy Dupont, PEP "has given me more confidence and heightened my awareness of the importance of early childhood education."

After the parents completed the PEP training, the Council invited them to join as full voting members. The group then faced another challenge: the parents were interested in participating, but they could not attend at the time the group had been meeting for the past several years (Fridays at 8 a.m.) because their children were still at home at that hour. Rather than exclude the parents, the other members of the Council agreed to change the meeting time to 9:15 a.m. so that parents could participate. This change in time had real costs for the Council: the Council now had to cover

Key Lessons from Plymouth

- Build relationships
- Provide leadership training for parents
- Allow parents to get involved in meaningful ways in meaningful projects
- Be prepared to move barriers
- Be open-ended about where the journey will ultimately take you

the cost of substitutes for the teachers on the Council who were missing class time because of the later meeting time, and the teachers had to take extra time to prepare lessons for the substitutes to use with their classes. The Council paid for substitutes out of Discovery funding; the school district has helped to offset the cost by using the school's intern whenever possible to fill-in for teachers participating in Council meetings.

In addition to serving as members of the Early Childhood Council, the PEP parents have been busy with several community-based projects. Their first project was to conduct outreach to the larger community at local fairs, sharing information about the Family Resource Center, the School Readiness program, and the Early Childhood Council.

The PEP parents soon moved from information sharing to information collection, helping the Council gather information for a

To learn more about the Discovery work in Plymouth, visit their page on the Discovery website at www.discovery.wcgmf.org

local resource guide, Opening Doors, and a compilation of data about Plymouth's children entitled Plymouth: A Place for Children. Parents helped collect information by meeting with service providers throughout the town, helping with focus groups with parents, and distributing and collecting surveys. They also assisted in the editing of the documents; through one of the parents' connections, the Opening Doors Guide was included in the free monthly town paper, which is distributed to all of the households in Plymouth. A summary of the data compilation will also be included in the local paper in January.

Not only did the parents help compile the information for these publications, but they were included in the follow-up meetings with the service providers to share the results of their research about children's needs in Plymouth and what services were available to meet those needs. The service providers appreciated the information; the visits also helped the providers recognize the parents as resources themselves. The parents continue to serve as liaisons between the broader community and the Early Childhood Council to ensure that the parent point of view is heard. They have been invited to present to civic groups and neighborhood association meetings about the Discovery process. According to Sue Vivian, "the parents have become the face of the Discovery process in town."

As a result of the PEP training and their experience with the community projects, the PEP parents also started meeting

with community leaders to ask for changes that are important to them. One success story has been the re-installation of the town's DARE program, which the police department had dropped because of a tight budget and a lack of parent input. The PEP parents collected signatures and, through persistence, were able to meet with the Police Chief to share their concerns about this cut. While traditionally community leaders may not be used to parents participating in meetings, they have proven to be good listeners and have welcomed parent input.

The Early Childhood Council is now developing strategies to address the needs identified by their data and to complete the Discovery 2004-07 application. The parents who are part of the Council are active participants in this effort. While the Plymouth group is trying to stay open-minded about where their Discovery efforts will take them in the future, one clear next step for Plymouth is to offer more PEP training to get additional parents involved. As Sue Vivian explained, the Discovery work is "partly exciting, partly scary because you don't know what's going to come up, but I think the parents are ready for whatever does." ■

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.

