

Education

Focus Group Discussion Notes

February 26, 2009

The United Way of Monmouth County (UWMC) Education Focus Group Discussion was held on February 26, 2009 from 9:30 to 11:30 AM at the New Jersey Natural Gas Building, Conference Rooms C, D & E, 1415 Wyckoff Road, Wall, New Jersey.

Facilitator

Thomas Hayes, New Jersey Natural Gas Company, and
Chairperson, UWMC Education Impact Subcommittee

Participants

Jennie Blakney, Regional Perinatal Consortium
Patti Carlesimo, Ladacin
Peggy Comfort, Manna House
Carol Conk, UWMC Board Member
Donna Coulson, Consultant
Joan Desmarais, Child Care Resources
Dean-na DiCorcia, Acelero Learning Monmouth County Head Start
Laurie Duhovny, Monmouth County Human Services Advisory Council
Douglas Eagles, Aslan Youth Ministries
Rose Mary Gerdes, Community Outreach Group
Alison Glaser, Planned Parenthood of Central Jersey
Denise Goldstein, Central Jersey Bank, NA
Avery Grant, Long Branch Board of Education
Andrea Harbison, Acelero Learning Monmouth County Head Start
Patty Kameen, Acelero Learning Monmouth County Head Start
Margaret Krebs, Acelero Learning Monmouth County Head Start
Sara Kreidberg, Acelero Learning Monmouth County Head Start
Rebecca Lucas, Literacy Volunteers of Monmouth County
Robin Martin, 'Our State of Mind' Consciousness of the African-American Diaspora
Maureen Mulligan, Coastal Habitat for Humanity
Ginger Mulligan, Collier Youth Services
Lisa Nathari, 180 Turning Lives Around
Judi Pack, Child Care Resources
Sue Ralph, Manna House
Jeff Schwartz, Monmouth County Human Services Advisory Council
Linda Sweet Marks, Ocean Monmouth Legal Services
Marge Wagenvoord, Calico Cat Food Pantry
Pat Walsh, Girl Scouts of the Jersey Shore
Samantha White, Family & Children's Services

UWMC Staff

Kathy Bibby, Administrative Assistant

Christine Jagerburger, Community Impact Director

Overview/Background

UWMC is hosting seven facilitated focus group discussions in support of our Community Impact Transformation process. The Education focus group is the second in the series. This focus group specifically examines:

- Data from the Education section of the Social and Demographic Report
- Responses to the Community Leaders Survey questions concerning Early Childhood Education, Academic Achievement, Student Environment, Barriers to Service and Additional Information

Please refer to the attached PowerPoint presentation for an overview of Community Impact and for the Education focus group's agenda & outline.

Discussion Topics

- The most critical issues in Monmouth County regarding Education
- The underlying root causes of those critical issues
- The "best practices" in terms of addressing the issues

Early Childhood Education

- Increased challenges presented by preschool students
 - Mental Health issues
 - Emotional and behavioral challenges
 - Family issues
 - Health concerns
 - Need for play therapy
 - Need for early intervention services
- Availability of affordable childcare and aftercare
- Availability of child care for children with multiple disabilities
 - Ladacin program-has open child care slots for children with disabilities. Issue regarding inclusion of private schools in Department of Education database, issue working to be resolved but impacts families' knowledge and therefore access to all available programs. Ladacin has seen declined Pre-K enrollment attributable to this issue.
- Lack of consistent preschool and Kindergarten programs offered by different towns
 - Some are full day, some are half day
 - Availability of free and low-cost programs
 - Impacts working families
- Lack of transportation to and from child care
- Need to expand quality preschool programs
 - Provide opportunities for socialization
 - Ensure children enter Kindergarten ready to learn
- Issues around Abbot vs. non Abbott districts
- Differences between day care vs. child care focused on early learning
- Need to educate/empower parents to make informed decisions

- Need to utilize curriculum that includes social and emotional components
- Child care issues impact all socio-economic levels across the county

Elementary School and High School Achievement

- Difficulty engaging parents
 - Time constraints
 - Transportation issues
- Disparity between supportive services offered by different school districts
 - Dependent on funding
- Impact of pay scales, especially to attract and retain math and science teachers
- Lack of continuity of services provided from Pre-K to kindergarten
- “Teaching to the test” attitudes/policies by teachers and school districts
 - Impacts student dropout rates
 - Not engaging students
 - Language and processing skills not focused on
 - Test scores are only one measure of academic success, they do not tell the whole story
- Lack of consistent curriculum from Pre-k through college, not standardized
 - Pre-K-process based
 - K thru 12-outcomes based
 - College-process based
- Impact of length of school day and year on learning
 - Charter school examples-increased school day and year
- Impact of teaching at prime learning/attention times for students
- Issues around placement of students in out-of-district schools
 - Various by town/school district

Transition from School to Work

- Lack of basic skills training
- Need to provide job skills training for students
- Need to provide alternative track for children not going to college after high school
- Need to expose children to work environment/models of success
- GED not an end to itself, need to attend a minimum at a 2-year trade school or junior college to earn enough income to be self-sufficient

Student Environment

- Lack of consistent sexual education curriculum in middle and high schools
- School facilities that resemble prisons
 - Language of suspension and detention relate to penal language, derogatory to students
- Lack of recess, physical and outside activities for students
- Increase in substance abuse, violence and gang involvement
- Increase in bullying
 - Impacts self-esteem/mental health of students
- Lack of training/support to address homophobia
- Lack of resources to address social service needs of student

Overall Education Issues/ Barriers

- Need to address basic needs of children and family for children to be able to learn
- Domestic/family violence impacts all socio-economic levels across the county and impacts students ability to perform in school
- Lack of comprehensive/wrap around services to children and families
 - Need to address gaps in service
 - Lack of continuum of services as children progress through educational system
- Differences in available services for documented vs. documented children and families
- Language issues
 - Availability of bi-/multi-lingual staff
- Lack of parental involvement/engagement
- Lack of parent/teacher engagement and communication
- Need to provide/expand training and support for teachers & child care providers
 - Reimbursement for faculty
 - No incentives for creativity/lack of merit system
- Lack of diversity in school staff/administration/teachers
- Need to promote literacy
- Need for training/support for teachers
- Availability of transportation for students to and from programs
- Lack of coordination between funders of services, working in silos
- Communication between providers of services
- Need to engage public and school officials in dialogue
- Underutilization of after school and summer programs
 - Lack of community support/awareness of program
 - Lack of parent trust and engagement
- These are historic issues that have had a large amount of resources invested in to them, how do we address these issues and become successful

Best Practices/Overcoming Barriers

- Parent engagement/family involvement
 - Increase the family's value of education
 - Address parenting skills
 - Foster a home environment the encourages learning
 - Engage entire family unit-parent, grandparents, siblings and child
- Providing services in the home
 - Parents develop sense of trust with provider
 - Long-term relationship
- Providing high quality after school and summer recreation programs
 - Engage youth in process/development of programs
- Viewing families/students as customers not clients
- Implementing school uniforms/dress codes
- Promoting literacy
 - "Teach the parent, Reach the child"
 - Foster/encourage literacy in the home
 - Funding needed to purchase books for children to encourage reading
 - Expanded access to local libraries for children
- Need to provide a holistic approach

- Child Care Resources –RIF program
 - Successfully engaged parents
- Child Care Resources-Strengthening Families program
 - Nationally and internationally recognized parenting and family strengthening program for high-risk families
 - An evidence-based family skills training program found to significantly reduce problem behaviors, delinquency, and alcohol and drug abuse in children and to improve social competencies and school performance
 - Began as a mechanism to prevent child abuse by improving relationships between parents and child care providers
 - <http://www.strengtheningfamiliesprogram.org>
- Regional Perinatal Consortium-Body & Soul program
 - Successful parent engagement
 - Engage families during pregnancy
- Second Step Program
 - Research-based violence prevention program integrates academics with social and emotional learning
 - Kids from preschool through Grade 8 learn and practice vital social skills, such as empathy, emotion management, problem solving, and cooperation.
 - <http://www.cfchildren.org/programs/ssp/overview>
- Born Learning Program
 - United Way public engagement campaign that helps parent, grandparents, and caregivers explore ways to turn everyday moments into fun learning opportunities
 - www.bornlearning.org

- Need a paradigm shift in how we view/deliver services
- Need to truly collaborate not just cooperate
- Need changes in public policy
- Needs to address the “big picture” and develop a comprehensive focus

Additional Comments

- Need increased access to affordable dental care
- Language barriers when accessing medical/healthcare
- Affordable housing/rent control issues causes families to move/transient student population