

Whitecap Executive Management Academy

Parent Education Programs

September 24th & 25th, 2002

by Laura Campobasso and Jennifer Price Letscher

Introduction

The Whitecap Foundation Executive Management Academy convened a Parent Education Workshop with 26 parent education providers. The purpose was to review the existing parent education program models to determine:

- best practices in existing programs;
- evaluation techniques and practices;
- characteristics of an “ideal” program; and
- potential models to develop.

Due to a variety in scope and philosophical approaches, it is difficult to come up with a single definition that can be applied to all programs. However, for the purpose of this report, Whitecap has summarized participant’s descriptions into the following definition:

“Based on the premise that healthy care givers help children to grow up to be productive members of society, parent education programs focus on **family growth and development** by promoting **parenting skills, self-empowerment** and **responsible community participation.**”

In their discussions, the participants touched upon the major elements that they felt were common across successful programs. The discussion also yielded a number of core weaknesses that organizations should be aware of when starting, running or updating a parent education program. The group exchanged ideas about how to improve their programs and avoid some potential pitfalls. A description of the lessons learned is outlined in this report.

Background: The Whitecap Executive Management Academy

Leaders in the nonprofit world are charged with full-time implementation of diverse and multiple responsibilities with very different groups of people. These expectations and groups include:

1. Managing their organization, including human resource development and management (staff and volunteers), operations, finances, strategic planning, and communications;
2. Interacting closely with the board, including board member recruitment and orientation, board management, and board dedication to the organization’s success;
3. Delivering successful programs, including understanding the community needs, designing and developing programs, and managing others to deliver services; and
4. Obtaining funding for the organization, including funding design and development, generating funds through in-person and event solicitation, developing key relationships, and researching and writing proposals.

In 1997, the Whitecap Foundation launched the Executive Management Academy (EMA) to provide quality leadership training and technical assistance designed specifically to help its grantees develop the capacity to fulfill these expectations. The EMA trainings are presented in an environment where participants can exchange and examine new ideas and share professional experiences. Through the

exchange, participants enhance their own knowledge and skills in order to lead their organizations more effectively.

Most of Whitecap's grantees are smaller, community-based organizations that otherwise have minimal access to management training. Given the profile of Whitecap's grantees, the goals for the program are:

1. Provide high quality, in-depth management/executive training sessions which are designed to improve the grantees' ability to provide quality service to clients;
2. Create a "community" of nonprofits who have developed and grown together, and can continue to share ideas, best practices, and solutions to common problems; and
3. Instill in the grantees a sense of confidence about their leadership capabilities and styles.

LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons learned are identified across three major categories: core strengths, core weaknesses and ideas for improvement. The themes that emerged in each of these sections are outlined below.

CORE STRENGTHS

Three themes emerged in discussions about what core strengths are needed in order to run a successful parent education program. The first, ***respect for parents***, addresses the issue of drawing parents into a program and keeping them there. Participants felt their programs needed to offer learning environments that were safe, consistent and responsive to the "cultural" needs of parents and children in order to be effective. Parents needed to feel "respected" for taking the time to be part of the programs.

The second theme, ***empowerment to make a stand***, is key to ensuring that parents become advocates for their children and productive members of their communities. Most participants said that their parents were given goal setting, leadership and other challenging learning opportunities in order to feel empowered and self confident. Through the training program, parents were shown a new role they could fill to support their children in the schools and their neighborhoods.

And finally, the third theme is ***support of the family***. With an eye toward long-term impact, participants felt strongly that programs should be run by qualified and committed staff who focus on strengthening a family's support system. That support system was described as including a strong family network, healthy relationships with other parents, and links to schools, government agencies or other community resources.

Overall, the group identified the ten key elements in a successful education program (detailed information on these items is included in the section on workshop output):

- **Consistency and availability of programs**
- **Responsiveness to parental needs**
- **Empowerment of participants**
- **Challenging and engaging curriculum**
- **Integrated internal and external environments: link parents to community resources**
- **Qualified and committed staff**
- **Balanced funding sources to ensure stability**

CORE WEAKNESSES

Two overriding themes emerged in the discussion about core weaknesses that commonly plague parent education programs. The first, ***poor planning***, could apply to any organization regardless of focus. However, several participants felt their planning processes were ineffective in part because of the nature of their evaluation methods, which are often limited to qualitative rather than quantitative data. Many others, however, felt that their poor planning was due to the fact that they had no process for using the data collected to improve their programs. Regardless, poor planning was the culprit in many cases, including inconsistent involvement and outreach, little or no relationship among service providers, service duplication, and dissatisfied parents. The second theme, a ***lack of organizational resources***, covers a myriad of areas ranging from fundraising to human resources. Of particular note, nearly every participant said that they had an extremely difficult time with staff recruitment, retention and development. It is a common problem that parent education and other social service agencies need highly educated, bilingual and culturally sensitive staff members yet lack the financial resources to pay them. High staff burnout and turnover are in direct conflict with the program's need to create safe and consistent learning environments for families.

The group listed nine of the most important potential red flags to look out for when starting or running a parent education program (detailed information is provided in the section on workshop output). They are:

- **Lack of program cohesion and planning**
- **Inconsistent parental involvement**
- **Gaps in interagency approaches**
- **Outdated/irrelevant curriculum**
- **Ineffective integration of evaluation information**
- **Lack of qualified and committed staff**
- **Poor fundraising strategies**
- **Insufficient facilities**

IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Participants collaboratively came up with ideas for improvement in each of the eight “core weakness” areas. However, most of their time was spent on tackling ***inconsistent*** [parent] ***involvement***, ***ineffective integration of evaluation information***, and the ***lack of qualified and committed staff***, perhaps an indication of the ongoing tension between the need for organizational structure and shifting external environments. Whether in reference to parents, children, program providers (staff) or community agencies, responsiveness, empowerment and support remain key themes throughout the discussion. Participants identified ideas for improvement in the following areas (detailed information is in the workshop output section that follows):

- **Program Strategies for long-term growth and parent leadership roles**
- **Consistent and long-term parental involvement**
- **Interagency Partnership Approaches and coordinated outreach**
- **Curriculum in both skill-building and practical application**
- **Integration of Evaluation information into ongoing programs**
- **Qualified and Committed Staff**
- **Fundraising Strategies to increase funding**
- **Facilities enhancement by location and size**

WORKSHOP OUTPUT

The following tables reflect the information gathered over the course of the two-day parent education workshop. The data is presented in three sections:

- 1) Core Strengths**
- 2) Core Weaknesses**
- 3) Ideas for Improvement**

Within each section, responses have been organized into two major categories, *Program*, which relates to all of the substantive aspects and impacts of the programs, and *Organization*, which relates to the structure under which the program operates.

CORE STRENGTHS

Through a series of exercises designed to tease out “best practices” and strengths, the parent education program providers identified several key elements that create effective service delivery. The following is a list of core program strengths:

PROGRAM

CONSISTENCY

- Maintain consistency and accessibility in schedule and location
- Maintain consistency in quality of programs
- Persistent recruiting
- Minimize barriers to participation (cost, transportation, child care, scheduling)
- Engage in proven outreach methods (trusted referrals, word of mouth, incentives, recognition, food)

EMPOWERMENT

- Build self esteem
- Provide vehicles for input and leadership
- Draw upon and point out existing strengths
- Teach parents how to participate in child’s education and use community resources
- Make parents feel heard
- Promote parent/child bonding through structured interaction, collaborative goal-setting, reading, exercises
- Offer recognition for achievements (food, awards, leadership opportunities, etc...)

CHALLENGING/ENGAGING CURRICULUM

- Strong “skills-building” curriculum with an emphasis on communication, visualization, facilitation, goal setting
- Provide opportunities for practical application of skills learned
- Set realistic expectations, with high, yet reasonable, reachable and appropriate goals
- Provide opportunities for role-modeling
- Tailor program to constituents (cultures, languages, topics, objectives, approaches, learning levels)
- Follow up (add programs, informal exchanges, etc...)
- Integrate evaluation and program planning/improvement (modify curriculum per year-end feedback, satisfaction surveys, pre/post testing, process evaluations, Stanford 9, unintended outcomes)

RESPONSIVENESS

- Provide emotional support
- Create safe, trusted, collaborative, non-isolationist environments
- Tailor the approach (training, facilitating, coaching)
- Target outreach activities (activities at Home Depot, breakfasts, special family events, father activities, etc...)
- Create programs that meet constituent needs
- Promote cross-cultural sensitivity and exchange (multigenerational, multilingual, multireligious)
- Offer flexibility (rotating adult involvement - parent, grandparent, uncle, etc...)

INTEGRATED INTERNAL/EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENTS

- Link parents with community resources
- Teach path to success in school (K-12 and college)
- Maintain partnerships with agencies supporting same constituencies

ORGANIZATION

QUALIFIED AND COMMITTED STAFF

- Develop empowered, talented, caring, educated, dedicated and committed staff
- Maintain open communication

BALANCED FUNDING SOURCES

- Government contracts
- Foundation support
- Sliding scale fees

CORE WEAKNESSES

After assessing strengths, participants also identified several weaknesses in their parenting education programs. The following is a list of the items discussed:

PROGRAM

LACK OF PROGRAM COHESION & PLANNING

- No plan or strategies in place
- Programs lack focus or capacity for growth
- No skills-building opportunities
- No capacity for parent leadership roles or empowerment
- No plan for established programs to revisit/revise plans

OUTDATED/IRRELEVANT CURRICULUM

- Lackluster/outdated curriculum that doesn't challenge parents, or keep them coming
- More parent/child interaction needed
- Creative skills-building programs needed

INCONSISTENT INVOLVEMENT

- Parents do not attend on an ongoing basis
- Regular or long-term attendance by transient populations is difficult
- Changing populations impede progress toward safe, trusting learning environments
- More flexibility is required to accommodate parent work schedules and transportation needs
- Not enough father/positive male role model involvement No childcare during parenting classes
- Insufficient recruitment

INEFFECTIVE INTEGRATION OF EVALUATION INFORMATION

- Difficult to gather correct data, or know what/how to measure (quantity vs. quality)
- Staff not reflecting/incorporating parent goals due to lack of education, skill, language/communications abilities
- Nearly impossible to gather quantitative data
- Language, literacy and confidentiality issues hinder data gathering processes
- No method for integrating feedback and making program improvements
- No understanding of long-term impacts
- Difficult to foster staff/parent buy-in for evaluation (no understanding of the value)
- Little financial/technical support for evaluation
- Unrealistic, negative or overwhelming parent expectations challenge the process

GAPS IN INTERAGENCY APPROACHES

- Lack of interagency consistency/partnership is confusing to constituents
- Families need connections to community resources/allies in order to succeed
- Agencies have a responsibility to constituents
- Duplication of services and lack of communication among agencies are counterproductive
- No communication or consensus on long-term impact, which impedes progress

ORGANIZATION

BUILDING/MAINTAINING QUALIFIED AND COMMITTED STAFF

- Recruitment is challenging
- Staff need multicultural/language understanding and communication skills
- Staff with advanced degrees needed

POOR FUNDRAISING STRATEGIES

- Lack of consistent/reliable funding

CORE WEAKNESSES (CON'T)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retention is challenging Staff burnout is high (heavy workload, limited time) More staff time and resources required to meet community needs Ongoing professional development needed 	
INSUFFICIENT FACILITIES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Insufficient class space, facilities or informal gathering spaces, which enhance community 	

IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

As noted, participants identified several core weaknesses to be aware of when running a parent education program. The following data was gathered from the group's discussion about how to confront those core weaknesses:

PROGRAM

CORE WEAKNESSES	IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT
LACK OF PROGRAM COHESION & PLANNING <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No plan or strategies in place Programs lack focus or capacity for growth No skills-building opportunities No capacity for parent leadership roles or empowerment No plan for established programs to revisit/revise plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create program vision/mission statement Solicit advisory board/committee input Have parents identify goals/feed into plan (solicit buy-in) Create partnerships with providers Establish real needs (parents, advisors, field specialists, community partners) Follow up (ensure feedback is incorporated, realistic expectations are set/met)
INCONSISTENT INVOLVEMENT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents do not come on an ongoing basis Regular or long-term attendance by transient populations is difficult Changing populations impede progress toward safe, trusting learning environments More flexibility is required to accommodate parent work schedules and transportation needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create ownership (provide feedback cards, program development opportunities) Create incentives Offer discount for extra involvement, penalty for lack of participation Initiate parent sign-in sheets (in addition to kids') Establish/communicate policies, rules, agreements Communicate parent participation requirements Tighten schedule to meet parent needs Enhance enrichment opportunities (e.g. speakers, networking, workshops – with new topics generated by parents) Create community resource referral service, educate parents about negotiating the system (healthcare, schools, immigration, etc...) Provide easy vehicle for addressing concerns Increase opportunities for parent involvement (eg: parent volunteer requirement could be met by 'giving' volunteer hours to another organization)

IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT (CONT'D)	
PROGRAM	
CORE WEAKNESSES	IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT
INCONSISTENT INVOLVEMENT (Cont'd)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not enough father/positive male role model involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage dads/males (e.g. celebrate their involvement) • Enlist women/families • Enlist active men to address issue (e.g., create clubs, committees, start family communication program component) • Give leadership roles to male “animators” • Build a balanced staff (gender, culture) • Require both parents to volunteer • Host men’s activities (e.g. quarterly men’s breakfast) • Enlist outreach support from higher education/community partners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No childcare during parenting classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner with childcare providers (who already have licensing and insurance) • Create classes with child involvement • Offer child and parent classes simultaneously • Focus resources on parent/child events • Network
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient recruitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore partnerships with other providers • Collaborate (e.g. provide educators in exchange for space/participants) • Research after-school initiative • Hire community liaison for recruitment and collaboration
GAPS IN INTERAGENCY APPROACHES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duplication of services and lack of communication among agencies are counterproductive • Lack of interagency consistency/partnership is confusing to constituents • Families need connections to community resources/allies in order to succeed • Agencies have a responsibility to constituents • No communication or consensus on long-term impact, which impedes progress for all 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop relationships and coordinate more effectively with partners • Address issue with school principals/program partners • Create projects that promote partnership • Stay involved in community • Incorporate service delivery expectations component • Ask parents what other services they use • Train other organizations how to sustain long-term parenting program impact • Gain consensus from other organizations through meetings, project partnership, etc...

IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT (CONT'D)	
PROGRAM	
CORE WEAKNESSES	IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT
OUTDATED/IRRELEVANT CURRICULUM	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lackluster/outdated curriculum that doesn't challenge parents, or keep them coming • More parent/child interaction needed • Creative skills-building programs needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance programs • Examine current program, look for gaps to ensure needs are met • Ask parents what they need • Research curriculum possibilities (draw upon web research, other programs/agencies, staff expertise, etc...) • Increase funding • Develop parenting "kits" to encourage work at home (solicit in-kind/reduced rate items, conduct individual evaluations) • Conduct research • Find other agencies who do it well • Stay on top of current trends in the field
INEFFECTIVE INTEGRATION OF EVALUATION INFORMATION	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to gather correct data, or know what/how to measure (quantity vs. quality) • Nearly impossible to gather quantitative data • Staff not reflecting/incorporating parent goals due to lack of education, skill, language/communications abilities • Language, literacy and confidentiality issues hinder data gathering processes • No method for integrating feedback and making program improvements • No understanding of long-term impacts • Difficult to foster staff/parent buy-in for evaluation (no understanding of the value) • Little financial/technical support for evaluation • Unrealistic, negative or overwhelming parent expectations challenge the process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get better feedback to fewer questions • Share evaluation tools with other organizations • Track parent contact with children's teachers • Report card for parents (done by children) • Hire a bilingual "disinterested" (non-staff) evaluator • Integrate evaluation with program design • Review evaluations with staff, implement change • Provide feedback cards • Share resources • Limit scope of evaluations • Set time-limits on feedback • Start a "suggestions" voice-mailbox • Develop healthy involvement (ask for suggestions/improvements, rather than complaints) • Offer volunteer opportunities • Communicate clearly about realistic expectations for program changes

IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT (CONT'D)

ORGANIZATION

CORE WEAKNESSES

IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

BUILDING/MAINTAINING QUALIFIED AND COMMITTED STAFF

- Recruitment is challenging
- Staff need multicultural/language understanding and communication skills
- Staff with advanced degrees needed

- Hire headhunters
- Ask peers for contacts
- Recruit from graduate programs
- Offer incentives (in lieu of high salary)
- Articulate the non-financial benefits of working in a nonprofit
- Offer flex-time
- Raise salaries (through fundraising)

- Retention is challenging
- Staff burnout is high (heavy workload, limited time)
- More staff time and resources required to meet community needs

- Hire consultants to handle work load/streamline processes
- Incorporate ongoing team meetings
- Host off-site training day to revisit values, strengths, obstacles, needs, goals, etc...
- Increase efficiency, streamline processes, reduce service duplication
- Clarify roles and responsibilities (e.g.: what staff are doing and how they're doing it)
- Set benchmarks with deadlines
- Animate staff spirits, create shared vision
- Develop parent leadership component/get parents alleviate workload pressures
- Ask parents to set meeting agendas
- Include staff in parent meetings
- Have parents list skills and time availability on intake forms
- Create staff incentives
- Discuss ways to build energy (e.g. "What do you need?" or "Am I giving you too much work?")

- Ongoing professional development needed

- Make it a known priority
- Hire experts/lecturers (partner with organizations to add volume, share expenses, lend expertise or "prophets")
- Send one staff member, 'train the trainer' and pass information to staff
- Provide new facilitator training
- Invite organizations to lead trainings (e.g. how to write action plans)
- Invest in strong facilitators/staff, strengthen leaders

- Staff not giving up ownership to reflecting/incorporate parent goals

- Honor/endorse program staff
- Engage staff in planning processes with parents
- Help program staff better meet parent needs (e.g. ask for surveys, help with interpretation, etc...)

POOR FUNDRAISING STRATEGIES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of consistent/reliable funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have parents pay on a sliding scale (earns unrestricted \$ without cutting low income clients) Increase funding sources, develop broader base Educate funders Share funding information/resources with colleagues
INSUFFICIENT FACILITIES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Insufficient class space, facilities or informal gathering spaces, which enhance community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Search for new spaces Meet with real estate agent Share a space with organization who operates during different hours Collaborate with childcare and parent education division within LAUSD to use school facilities