

SUSTAINING FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Many community collaborations set a goal of involving parents (and youth) on boards and committees - insuring that the collaborations involve those most affected by services and aware of family needs. Community collaboratives often find this to be one of their most challenging efforts. They may find it hard to recruit parents initially, and to sustain the involvement of those that are recruited. The parents that do remain involved are asked to be involved in everything, and risk being burned out.

Still, some collaboratives have found that they can successfully recruit and retain parent members and even expand the breadth and depth of parent involvement. While there are no magic bullets to achieving strong parent involvement, there are some general principles that can help collaboratives toward success. The following are some of those principles:

1. Provide opportunities for multiple types of parent involvement.

Different people have different ways of contributing. Some will volunteer themselves to do a specific piece of work. Others will help contact and inform others. Some may donate goods or provide in kind contributions. Some will want to participate in planning sessions and on committees; others will not.

One key to building strong parent involvement is to offer multiple ways for people to become involved. Everyone has some talent to share, and drawing on these talents allows people to feel good about their involvement and, at the same time, meet others and gain trust and confidence. Often, people who donate their time for a specific task will later agree to serve on a committee or board, but they will only serve *after* they have done something they feel comfortable doing, feel appreciated for their skills, and feel they have a stake in the overall process.

If the only option for parent involvement is to serve on a board or committee, there will be a much smaller pool of people to draw from and many talents will not be realized.

2. Make sure that the collaborative is parent friendly.

Many professionals spend a lot of time in meetings and working on committees. They are comfortable sitting down to review agendas, engage in discussions, and engage in group decision-making according to the procedures adopted by the group. They are used to discussing issues in groups where they do not know many of the other group participants. It is part of their jobs and their responsibilities.

Such meetings can be intimidating to those who do not often participate in such processes. Parents can easily feel overwhelmed, and hesitant to ask questions or stop the process to clarify something that is unfamiliar to them. There may be no space available to tell their stories, express their views, or get to know other members as people before they share their views.

Meetings may be scheduled during business hours and in agency offices, convenient to the professionals for whom it represents paid work. Parents, however, may have a difficult time taking that time out of their day and going to an unfamiliar building to meet.

Meetings can be made more family friendly by scheduling them at times and locations convenient to parents, providing food and opportunities for informal discussions, and for assuring that parents have their own questions answered. Contact prior to meetings can help assure that issues parents want addressed get a place on the agenda and in the discussion.

In addition, parents with disabilities and/or parents who are not fluent in English can easily be excluded from participation altogether. It is essential that collaboratives insure that a person's disability or language does not exclude them from full participation.

3. Identify and cover the costs of parent participation.

When parents participate, they are volunteering their time and effort, often at some cost to themselves and their families. Sometimes the out-of-pocket costs – particularly related to child care and to transportation – can make participation problematic. In addition, while professionals generally are compensated for their time through their employment, parents generally are not.

It is important for collaboratives to identify and to address the costs of participation. This may involve providing child care during meeting times and providing transportation assistance. In some instances, it may involve directly compensating parents for the time they spend, particularly if they are required to take time off work. Working with parents, it usually is possible to come up with realistic ways to cover these costs of participation, but it requires specific time and attention. It must be focused upon the needs of parents who have not been able to participate, not those who have been able to come.

4. Recognize the contributions parents make.

People participate when they feel their participation makes a difference. They stop participating when they feel that it doesn't. It is important to recognize the contributions that all members make to collaborative work, but it is especially important to recognize the contribution that those volunteering their time make.

This means valuing and using the talents that parents bring to the table, ensuring that they see their participation matters. It is important to publicly recognize parents, but this recognition must be genuine. The greatest recognition is in building on and using the ideas and talents parents bring to the table. When parents see that what they say and do makes a difference, they will continue to be involved. When what they offer is not used in any meaningful way, they will cease to be involved.

5. Facilitate networking.

It is easy for a parent to feel like a fish out of water in a committee setting. Even when there are a number of parents on collaboratives, it can be difficult to feel truly comfortable and in control. Parents can be sustained and grow in their work when they have opportunities to meet and work with other parents doing the same thing. Often, there are a number of committees and collaboratives in a community, each involving different parents. Providing an opportunity for parents from different committees and collaboratives to meet together can create a support system and also help build ideas and share leadership skills.

Formal leadership programs can be valuable as well, particularly when they include parents who can collectively make an impact. Further, the stronger the networks parents have, the more they are capable of representing broad parent views, and not simply sharing their own personal experiences.

6. Create leadership ladders.

Ultimately, the goal is to broaden and deepen parent leadership. If the only possible position for parents to have in a collaborative is one or two seats at the table on various committees, there will be limited opportunities for growth or expansion of parent leadership and involvement. Those parents who get seats at the table will tend to stay there, which will not provide openings for new parents. With their increased experiences, those parents at the table may be able to make even greater contributions and take on greater responsibility, but they cannot do so if there are no positions they can move into to make those contributions.

In some instances, these new positions may need to be paid staff positions, particularly around further parent organizing and leadership development. If parent involvement truly is considered essential to designing, implementing, and monitoring effective new strategies, a strategy for sustaining and building that involvement needs to be developed.