



PARTNER'S FOCUS GROUP: REACHING OUT TO FAMILIES: *Lessons Learned from a Multi-Agency Perspective*

Introduction to the Grant

Kids First Alliance is a unique partnership between local schools, the Division of Health & Human Services, and the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office. Funded by a Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant, this 3-year collaborative effort seeks to enhance school and community-based services and promote safe and healthy environments in which Montgomery County students can learn and develop. The grant encourages agencies to work together with families to evaluate what programs and services were already in place, develop new partnerships, and create programs to fill the gap. The grant serves 10 schools that make up the feeder pattern for the MCPS Gaithersburg cluster. This cluster of schools mirrors Gaithersburg city's diverse population with 32% of students Hispanic, 32% of students White, 25% of students African American, and 11% Asian.

Family Involvement Committee

The Kids First Alliance Family Involvement Committee (FIC) was created to increase family and caregiver participation in the 10 grant schools in the Gaithersburg cluster. A subgroup of the grant's Leadership Council, the committee consists of the following: a family member, a Kids First Alliance Coach, the Executive Director from Montgomery County Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, Inc. (a family-driven advocacy group), the KFA communications consultant, and the KFA evaluator.

The committee began meeting in summer 2005 to draft goals and action items for increasing parent involvement. The committee's main goal was to create mechanisms to increase family participation at all levels. We decided to consult those who know best about how to do this, our partner agencies. The FIC held a partner focus group in February 2006 to gather ideas about outreach strategies and how other agencies maintain relationships with parents. Led by a facilitator, this discussion enabled our partners to share strategies and explain roadblocks to family involvement. A list of participating agencies is included in Appendix A.

Main Themes

Ranging from outreach to the organization's view of family involvement, several themes emerged as impacting family involvement,

Themes included:

- Finding ways to reduce the stigma related to mental health/academic/behavioral problems
- The perception of schools as unwelcoming to parents/families, which includes: includes how schools greet parents, how schools are operated, and how staff members are empowered to work with families
- The struggle to reach *all* families, across all demographic groups and societal boundaries
- Utilizing parents in ways they are most comfortable
- Deciding what parent involvement should look like for a particular organization, realizing this may vary by organization
- Increasing parent awareness of services available
- Bridging the gap between asking parents for input and involving them in an on-going, long-term relationship.



What We Learned

The ideas that emerged from this dialogue run the gamut from implementing strategies to changing organizational structure and service delivery. These ideas are illustrated in the table below. The table shows the strategy or activity each organization/agency used to accomplish their goal and what the organization learned during their implementation process.

PARTNER	GOAL	ACTIVITY	LESSON LEARNED
<u>Linkages to Learning</u>	Increase parent capacity; Build reciprocal relationships	Each site has a parent empowerment group; activities vary by school	*Think outside the box – have parents contribute and plan ideas for their school community *Have activities in which parents help other parents
<u>Identity, Inc.</u>	Cultivate parent awareness of school resources	Parents dialogue with principals and other parents	*Remove hierarchy from seating arrangement *Have translators familiar with topic or people to appropriately convey nuances and messages
<u>Mont. Co Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, Inc.</u>	Share information; support parents of children with mental health concerns	Parents are service providers and are reimbursed for their time and contributions to the agency	*Parents are a resource to reduce isolation and convey support for each other *Recognize the financial impact for some parents who may have to take time from work to attend events for their child
<u>Families Foremost</u>	Promote self-sufficiency for parents	Parents act as consultants to design programs and participate on an advisory council	*Typical parent satisfaction surveys weren't obtaining needed feedback
<u>ESOL Parent Center - MCPS</u>	Foster parent involvement in school functions	Partner with agencies to encourage parent involvement	*Expand definition of family to include: aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc. *Utilize a phone tree among parents to communicate about school activities

On-Going Challenges & Next Steps

Montgomery County is a resource-rich county with a variety of programs and services to meet the needs of a diverse community. Our partners voiced two concerns: 1) the lack of a quality mechanism to communicate between agencies about service availability; and 2) the struggle to balance a high quality family involvement effort with other demands of the organization.

The Family Involvement Committee will use this information in planning the grant's Parent Professional Partnership training. Modeled after "Moving Forward Together" (a curriculum developed by National Peer Technical Assistance Network's Partnership for Children's Mental Health), the training hopes to convene the grant staff and parents from the grant schools to begin working together on projects for their school community (<http://www.ffcmh.org/movingforwardtog.pdf>).

Appendix A: Participating Partners



Organization	Representative	CONTACT INFO
ESOL Parent Center Montgomery County Public Schools	Teresa Wright, Parent Outreach	Teresa_Wright@mcpsmd.org
Families Foremost, Mental Health Assoc.	Sherri Waddy, Program Director	swaddy@mhamc.org
George B. Thomas Learning Academy	Michael Thomas, Executive Director	Michael_A_Thomas@mcpsmd.org
Guide Youth Services	Karla Hoffman, Executive Director	Karah@guideprogram.org
Identity, Inc.	Gabiella Fernandez-Coffey Maritza Rivera-Cohen, Middle School Programs	gfernandezcoffey@identify.ws mcohen@identify.ws
Kids First Alliance, Montgomery County Public Schools	Matthew Kamins, Project Director Mindy Schuman, Project Manager	Matthew_Kamins@mcpsmd.org Mindy_Schuman@mcpsmd.org
Linkages to Learning	Ilene Sparber, DHHS, Manager	Ilene.Sparber@montgomerycountymd.gov
Montgomery County Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, Inc.	Celia Serkin, Executive Director	cserkin@aol.com
Montgomery County Police Department	Sgt. James Stirkens, Community Services	James.Stirkens@montgomerycountymd.gov