SUPPORTING PARENT ENGAGEMENT:

Lessons from Settlement House Programs

UNITED NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSES OF NEW YORK

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United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is the membership organization of New York City settlement houses and community centers. Rooted in the history and values of the settlement house movement, UNH promotes and strengthens the neighborhood-based, multi-service approach to improving the lives of New Yorkers in need and the communities in which they live. UNH's membership comprises one of the largest human service systems in New York City, with 38 agencies working at more than 400 sites to provide high quality services and activities to a half million New Yorkers each year. UNH supports its members through policy development, advocacy and capacity-building activities.

PARENT ENGAGEMENT

- *A mother and her seven-year-old son read together during a settlement house story hour; later, the mother stays on to consult with a staff member about where to get help in looking for a job.*

- *The workshop, part of a series that a settlement house is sponsoring, started half an hour ago, but the parents who are attending are still discussing how best to discipline their preschool-aged children.*

- *A guidance counselor invited to speak at a neighborhood service agency leads a workshop that walks parents through the complicated system of choosing a high school in New York City.*

- *At a UNH member agency in their neighborhood, parents lead and participate in a meeting focused on how to secure more funding for their school district.*

To United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) and many of its member agencies, all of these diverse activities fall under the umbrella of **parent engagement programming.** This report is intended to give readers a picture of some of the challenges and best practices involved when settlement houses and other similar agencies undertake this kind of work. The report draws on the experiences of six UNH member agencies, all based in New York City, that have received grants from the MetLife Foundation to support parent engagement work.

The Parent Engagement Project

The Parent Engagement Project described in these pages had two purposes: 1.) to help the agencies that participated in the Project sustain and, in some cases, expand their parent engagement work and 2.) to allow them to take part in periodic peer-exchange discussions of their best practices.[1]

Phase 1 of the Project (March 2007 – February 2008) brought together four agencies:

- Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (Brooklyn);

- Kingsbridge Heights Community Center (Bronx);
- Sunnyside Community Services (Queens); and
- United Community Centers (Brooklyn)

For Phase 2 (March 2008 – February 2009) these four agencies were joined by two additional organizations:

- Citizens Advice Bureau[2] (Bronx); and
- Lenox Hill Neighborhood House (Manhattan)

UNH issued a Request for Proposals for the Project to its member agencies and convened a review panel to select the grantees. (For Phase 2, project directors from the first set of grantee agencies joined in the selection process.) Over the course of the initiative, UNH conducted visits to project sites and convened staff for periodic peer discussions that focused on best practices.

What is Parent Engagement?

For a service agency, the phrase "parent engagement" really has two meanings. First, there is the basic goal of *helping parents engage in the lives of their children.* Second is the organizational means of making that happen – *engaging parents in the life of the agency* – in other words, involving parents in activities that make them active partners in the agency's efforts to promote children's well-being. As indicated by the four examples that began this report, these kinds of activities include:

- *Bringing parents into the circle of activities that agencies offer to children* – both in order to make the activities more meaningful and efficacious for children and to use parent-child activities as an opening to help parents address problems that affect the whole family.

- *Offering parents services such as parenting education that can help them fortify family life.*

- *Providing parents with assistance to help navigate systems such as schools and child care that matter to the well-being of their children.*

- *Helping parents take a leadership role in trying to reform and improve these systems.*

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[1] The agencies that participated in the Project received grants in the range of $10,000 - $20,000 per year, for one to two years, to support their work.

[2] In late 2009, Citizens Advice Bureau changed its name to BronxWorks.

Parent Engagement Activities: Why They Matter

THE UNH MEMBER PERSPECTIVE

All six Executive Directors who were interviewed for this report agree that parent engagement is central to what their agencies try to do. The Executive Director of Lenox Hill Neighborhood House seems to speak for the full group when he says, "At our agency, we don't work with children – we work with children and families." The Executive Director of the Kingsbridge Heights Community Center uses somewhat different words to frame the same sentiment. "How kids function depends on parents. So we don't chop our programming up into little boxes. When we develop services for children, we always ask ourselves, 'How can we involve the parents?' "

RESEARCH

As suggested by the above comments, parent engagement activities are not only inherently appealing, they are an excellent fit with the settlement house values embraced by UNH member agencies, which typically define their services holistically and consider the people they serve as neighbors – part of an approach that UNH sometimes describes as the *settlement house advantage.*

While this synergy gives these agencies a very good reason to pursue parent engagement activities, it is also worthwhile to ask what research has to say about the value of the parent engagement approach. For example, do parent engagement activities ultimately contribute to children's positive growth and development? And as a benchmark of contributions to child well-being, can these activities result in positive changes in systems and services for children?

Because of the many permutations of services that fall under the umbrella of parent engagement, there is no definitive answer to this question. Nevertheless, a growing body of research confirms that these activities do have important benefits for children – and that they can result in positive systems change. For example:

- There is research showing that *parents of preschool children* who maintain direct and regular contact with the early educational setting and who experience fewer barriers to involvement have children who demonstrate positive engagement with peers, adults, and learning. In addition, teachers' perceptions of positive parental attitudes and beliefs about preschool are associated with fewer behavior problems and higher language and math skills.[3]

- A meta-analysis, covering 77 studies comprising over 300,000 children, that sought to determine the effects of parent involvement on students' academic achievement in *grades K-12*, gives substantial evidence that parent involvement is associated with higher student achievement outcomes. While the influence of overall parent involvement in schooling is stronger than it is for *programs* that focus on parent engagement, the analysis indicates that these programs also work, and recommends that schools should adopt them.[4]

- Research suggests that parent involvement in *after school programs* has positive spillover effects for how parents deal with schools. For example, when families are involved in after school programs, there is greater family involvement in school events (such as parent-teacher conferences), in school volunteering, and in helping children with homework.[5]

- A research review of findings on *community organizing involving parents* finds that the approach has yielded a range of policy and system changes to transform poorly performing schools. Changes include new school facilities, the creation of small schools, new financial resources to schools for after school services, health and safety programs, new academic programs in math and science, and increased professional development opportunities for teachers.[6]

Parent Engagement Activities in the Project

Following is a synopsis of the diverse parent engagement activities offered by the sites in the Parent Engagement Project:[7]

Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) offers a group of parents who are primarily residents of New Settlement Apartments an opportunity to participate in its *Home Instruction for Parents of Pre-School Youngsters (HIPPY)* program which works with parents of children ages 3-5. Using a highly regarded standardized curriculum that is offered to parents across the United States and in many other countries, *HIPPY* Parent Educators make home visits to parents

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[3] Weiss et al., 2006.
[4] Jeynes, 2005.
[5] Mayer and Kreider, 2006.
[6] Lopez, 2003.
[7] Since many of the activities that the six organizations undertook during the grant periods have continued, their work is mainly described in the present tense.

to teach them educationally enriching activities, which parents then offer to their children. The program also sponsors regular workshops for participating parents and refers them to services at CAB and elsewhere in the community.

Using a community-wide focus that is unique among these six sites, community organizers at the **Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation** (Cypress Hills) organize *Cypress Hills Advocates for Education (CHAFE)*, a group of neighborhood parents and residents who collectively seek to improve the public schools in Cypress Hills. The program consists of staff-led training sessions and strategy and campaign meetings led by parents with staff support. *CHAFE* was instrumental in securing the inclusion of funds in the New York City budget to build a new 700-seat K-8 public school that now operates in the neighborhood.

At the **Kingsbridge Heights Community Center** (Kingsbridge Heights), social workers help parents who use the agency's after school program gain access to key family services. Through the program's *ACCESS* project, staff members explain school options to students and parents. The program also sponsors family literacy workshops.

Lenox Hill Neighborhood House (Lenox Hill) focuses on parents who use the agency's nationally recognized early childhood center. Complementing the center's service plan for each child, staff work jointly with all parents to develop individualized parent involvement plans. These plans, which are updated as needed, specify how a parent will use the center – for example, by attending its parent workshops, working with its special needs coordinator, and/or receiving and acting on referrals to other services offered at Lenox Hill or elsewhere in the community. Throughout a child's stay in the program, staff proactively reach out to parents to help them progress toward goals that they have set for themselves.

Sunnyside Community Services' (Sunnyside) *Parent Engagement in the Options Program*, based at Intermediate School 125, helps families navigate their children's transition to high school. The program encompasses parent workshops, supplemented by phone calls to parents by staff members to ascertain how children are doing in school and to monitor the progress parents are making in planning for the next stages of their children's education. Materials for the program are translated into Bengali, Spanish, and Mandarin.

The *Parent Engagement Literacy Project* of **United Community Centers** (UCC) engages children and their parents in shared reading activities. During weekly special reading times held at UCC's popular community market, teachers from UCC's child care center lead reading sessions that incorporate the market experience into read-alouds and art projects. Other activities, which are based in the UCC child care center, include literacy workshops for parents and children, a monthly reading contest, and a lending library.

This Report

UNH and its member agencies know very well that the strong appeal of the parent engagement concept does not mean that the concept magically translates itself into good practice. Shaping events and services to genuinely respond to the needs of parents requires careful thought and planning to discover what works. This report uses the experiences of the six UNH members in the Project to describe the real-life challenges of parent engagement programming and to highlight best practices for meeting the challenges and for offering families meaningful, high-quality activities and services. The report draws on: interviews with staff, selected parents, and agency directors; site visits to observe activities that were supported by the Project grants; and the observations and insights of staff participants in the UNH-sponsored peer discussions.

Challenges and Best Practices

RECRUITMENT

Compared to many things that parents do – for example, finding child care or making sure that children see a doctor or go to school – taking part in parent engagement programs and services is less of a priority. Moreover, site managers,[8] agency directors, and parents who were interviewed for this report are nearly unanimous in noting that many of the low-income parents whom the projects try to recruit are enormously busy – frequently caring for more than one child and sometimes their own parents or other relatives, and often working at one job, if not two.

Given these pressures, programs typically must work hard to get parents in the door. "Parents will tell us they're interested in particular activities," says one site manager, "but that doesn't mean that when we offer those activities, parents show up."[9] Another site manager offers a perspective on the everyday frustrations of recruiting parents to attend events. "This is something that happens to us fairly often: A parent picking up a child tells us that she's all

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[8] The staff people who are involved with the Parent Engagement Projects, who were interviewed for this report, and who in most cases were the designated staff members to attend the project's peer discussion meetings, have a variety of titles and positions. For the sake of simplicity, this report refers to them as "site managers."

[9] Some of the quotations from staff in the following sections are identified generically as pertaining to "a program" or "a project" without identifying it by name. This has been done to preserve the candor that marked the interviews and peer discussions that were important sources of information for this report.

ready to stay for a workshop and then at the last minute, she'll say, 'I'll be right back, I just have to run to my sister's.' But chances are that once she's left our building, too many other things will come up and she won't return."

Parents themselves agree that recruitment is an issue. Asked about the biggest challenge in organizing parents to address school issues, a member of the Cypress Hills-sponsored *CHAFE* group, which has a strong track record of mobilizing parents in Cypress Hills, Brooklyn, answers, "We have a very good group going. But no question our biggest challenge is getting parents involved – and once they're involved, keeping them involved." How, then, do programs encourage participation?

The Basics

According to site managers, the two fundamentals of giving busy parents the logistical space they need to attend events is arranging for *food* and *child care*. Ideally, food for evening events will be enough to serve as dinner. "We used to offer a light meal and we could tell parents, 'If you come to the meeting, you won't have to cook,'" recalls one site manager. More recently, with a tighter budget, the project can manage only snacks, and the site manager reports that without dinners, there has been a drop-off in attendance of evening events.

"When I ask someone to attend a meeting and she says she can't get out at night because there's a baby at home, I always answer, 'Why not bring the baby?'" says the Sunnyside site manager. "I tell her, 'We have child care, and everyone is welcome.'" The UCC site manager notes that child care not only allows parents to leave the house to attend, but that it makes for more meaningful meetings. "The parents don't want kids on top of each other and on top of them; it's much better if they can discuss things calmly while children are engaged in activities specifically set up for them."

Communications Strategies

One common recruitment practice is systematically *phoning* parents to remind them about an upcoming activity and personally inviting them to attend. But site managers are clear that phoning is not problem-free. To start, many parents move frequently (making it important to regularly update phone records) – and some households are without phones. Many parents are unreachable during the day, and some of those who do answer a call are put off by a stranger talking. For language, cultural, or other reasons, some parents simply feel uncomfortable talking on the phone.

Like all people who do phone banking, staff who make systematic phone calls to parents must be prepared for these kinds of difficulties. One site manager described how she coached an assistant who was regularly assigned to call a long list of parents:

She was frustrated and bored – understandably – by calling and not reaching many parents. I told her, "Think of this as all part of the process. And when you do reach someone, make a note of what time it is and try calling that person again at the same time." One day, she told me that she was distressed that a parent had hung up on her. I said, "Try to stand in the parent's shoes to see why they might not want to get the call."

Because she was having a hard time with the whole process, when she finally did reach a parent, her attitude was more or less, "I'm going to finish this call quickly so I can move on to the next one." She was speaking way too fast to parents, so I encouraged her to slow down. I said, "Try to make the most of every opportunity you have to really talk to the parent."

One obvious supplement to phoning a list of people is to *email them or to announce meetings on a website*. But not surprisingly, many parents participating in these projects do not have easy access to computers. For example, intake information on parents in the CAB *HIPPY* program suggests that only some 5 percent of the group owns computers. And regardless of access, a number of the parents lack the know-how or confidence to email and navigate to websites. ("A lot of their kids, even the very young kids, know more than they do about computers," observes one site manager.) "I routinely send out group email notices – mainly to the addresses of kids with parents in our program," reports one site manager, "but I can't rely on emailing." In response to needs identified by program staff, the Lenox Hill early childhood center began encouraging center parents to enroll in the agency's IT classes (in some cases by arranging to waive class fees) – and more generally, all site managers agree that it would be valuable for the parents whom they serve to get more help to acquire or strengthen computer skills.

A number of site managers – and some parents – think that the best strategy for recruiting parents to a project activity is *word of mouth*. A parent who is active in the *CHAFE* group says:

You give people flyers, and they think, "I'm busy, and I don't want to go. It will be boring, just talk, talk, talk." Well, I could have been one of those people. If it wasn't for my sister-in-law I never would have gone [to a *CHAFE* meeting]. If I got a flyer, I might have thrown it in the garbage. But you have to see what's going on. Once I started going, I really learned a lot. It opened my mind to new things.

According to a CAB *HIPPY* Parent Educator, *HIPPY*'s neighbor-to-neighbor reputation has been one important factor in turning the program into one that always has a waiting list. "When I started with this program years ago," she says, "we were knocking on doors to get participants. But now parents hear about the program

from other *HIPPY* members. And they find out that parents are proud to be members."

To capitalize on the word-of-mouth advantage even when phoning is used as the recruitment strategy, the Cypress Hills project encouraged parents to call other parents. "I was doing some phone banking to a list of 17 people," recalls the staff organizer, "and one of the group members asked, 'Would you like me to make those calls?' I said, 'Sure!' And now she handles 17 calls every month." The staff organizer observes that besides the outreach benefits of having a parent talk to fellow parents, the systematic calling, with its quasi-public speaking demands, can be an excellent learning experience for the person who does it.

ENCOURAGING SUSTAINED INVOLVEMENT

Closely intertwined with the work of recruiting parents is the effort to encourage them to return to future events and/or become consistent participants in ongoing groups. According to site managers and staff, best practices that support that effort include:

Sociability

A Kingsbridge Heights *Family Literacy Night* illustrates some of the *intangible, personalized aspects of programming* that sites use to engage parents. For example, a meal is served graciously to parents by teens and pre-teens involved in the after school program. During the dinner, which takes place at carefully set round tables, staff circulate to chat with parents and children, and families are given ample time to socialize with one another before a post-dinner read-aloud session led by the local librarian.

Like some of the other programs, the UCC family literacy program sponsors raffles with modest prizes – for example, a gift certificate to a Borders book store or a children's book -- to encourage parents to attend events. The site manager says she has mixed feelings about using these kinds of incentives. But the raffle held at one of the UCC group workshops suggests that once it has been decided to make prizes part of the recruitment effort, staff make the most of the strategy. Rather than drawing the winning numbers mechanistically, the site manager does so with maximum drama and humor, and parents' responses suggest that the odds of whether they win the gift may be less important to them than the fun spirit of the activity.

Making Room for the Group Experience

Bonding between parents can help keep parents engaged. Besides home visits, the CAB *HIPPY* program also sponsors regular group discussions of *HIPPY* participants, and while attendance in this part of the program is usually robust – typically 25-30 out of the some 80 *HIPPY* parents – encouraging participation is more of a challenge than it is for the home visits. But parents who do attend the groups seem to build a collective spirit. At a recent meeting, some 25 mothers listened to a presentation on the proper use of condoms to prevent the spread of HIV infection. Notwithstanding any discomfort they might have brought to a public discussion of the topic, their rapport with the group leader and with one another seemed to give them the ease needed to ask questions and discuss their own knowledge of condom use. According to the site manager, regular participants in the groups see each other as "family." Similarly, a Cypress Hills *CHAFE* member uses the word "family" to describe the group of regulars. "Nobody feels intimidated here," she says. "Everybody's invited to the table."

Several site managers note that no matter how much a program can accomplish through one-on-one staff/ parent counseling or advice sessions and no matter how much effort it takes to attract parents to meetings, it is extremely worthwhile to try to establish ongoing forums where parents can interact as peers. Convinced that parents need support and guidance from other parents, not just staff, the CAB *HIPPY* program shifted its practice of holding monthly group meetings to twice-monthly sessions. The Cypress Hills community organizer says that there is no exact substitute for the peer group experience. "As a staff member," she says, "I have a close relationship with many parents, but that's different from the relationship our members have with one another."

Knowing What's Out There

Persistence in keeping on top of parents' requests for information and help is important in building rapport with them. The Sunnyside site manager, whose project for parents is linked to an after school program, says that she regularly receives calls from parents about the program and the agency's summer camp:

> I answer all the questions I can on the spot, but if I don't know the answer I immediately write the question down on a post-it and keep it above my desk. It can take even up to a month before I get the right information – for instance, details about summer camp that aren't known when the parent calls – but no post-it goes down until I've answered the question.

To dispense as much useful information as possible, site managers agree that it is important for their projects to take a good inventory of what resources in their own project are readily available to support families. Besides resources in the community at large, the larger agency in which a parent engagement program is embedded may offer many services to which parents can be referred.

Allowing Relationships to Develop at Their Own Pace

Pointing to another strategy for engaging parents, the Lenox Hill site manager explains how her project uses every opportunity to develop an *incremental approach* to parent engagement. As noted, parent engagement activities are part of the programming of the agency's early childhood center. "We take little steps to develop an intimate relationship with the parents," says the site manager. When a child is accepted into the center, the parent and child visit the center for an intake interview that lasts an hour and a half – an unusually extended period of time for a child care center to devote to this kind of session. Families also receive home visits. Over the summer, before most children begin attending the center, the program invites the participating families to an outdoor event held on its playground where parents can mingle easily with staff and children can play and meet their peers.

As the year unfolds, parents are invited to attend staff-led parent discussion groups, which are organized around a variety of topics, some focused on day-to-day parenting tasks such as managing behavior problems or raising twins, but others centering on serious family problems. The center does not ask parents to address the hard problems at the start of the school year. "We begin forming our groups around November," says the site manager. "We wouldn't organize, say, a group for battered women right off the bat. We have to lay the groundwork for women becoming comfortable with discussing this kind of problem with others. So we start with more casual activities." According to the site manager, the program's patience is rewarded. Eventually, many parents feel enough trust in the program to disclose serious concerns to their family worker and in some instances, to the center's staff-led parent peer groups. In return, the family worker and the peer group are able to give these parents support in solving problems.

The same one-step-at-a-time approach to engaging parents that is used in the Lenox Hill center can be seen in microcosm at one session of the Cypress Hills *CHAFE* parents' group. The community organizer, who, as will be discussed later, supports parents to lead *CHAFE* meetings, asks how many parents would like to attend a rally on school issues to be held on the following weekend. Two hands are raised and the names of the volunteers are posted on a large sheet of paper taped to the wall. There is a silence, which manages to be relaxed, not tense. "Anybody else?" asks the organizer quietly. Someone else volunteers and her name is added to the list. "That's great that you can join us," says the organizer. But she is still not ready for the meeting to move on to another topic. At the end of another few minutes, two more people have volunteered.

Without having badgered parents to attend, the organizer

has given them ample room to decide to be part of the group. She is well aware of the realities involved in engaging busy parents in public events. "We call it the mathematics of outreach," she says. "If 20 people say they'll definitely come, I expect 10." Still, use of the give-it-time approach that was used at the *CHAFE* meeting suggests that there are techniques to try to increase parent turnout.

Acknowledging Languages Other Than English

As indicated by the experience of one UNH staff member in visiting a workshop of the CAB *HIPPY* project, whose enrollees are primarily Spanish speakers, *addressing parents in their own language* can make a powerful difference in whether or not parents feel included. As the staff member describes the beginning of the visit:

> I wanted to ask them how they viewed their *HIPPY* experience, and at first the leader was translating my English remarks into Spanish, and the parents seemed reticent. Then I started speaking to parents directly in Spanish and suddenly everyone looked at me and started to smile. The mothers began talking about what they liked about the program with much more animation.

Of course, not all projects can communicate with parents in only one native language; in many cases translation is a necessity. While projects sometimes use the practice of having a set of remarks followed by translation, in general the site managers think that *near-simultaneous translation* more closely approximates the directness of hearing what is said in one's native language. At a meeting of the Sunnyside *Options Program*, parents sit in three groups. The presentation is in English, but at two tables native speakers of Mandarin and of Spanish quietly interpret the speaker's remarks into those two languages moments after the speaker has made a point.

EMPOWERING PARENTS

Because parent engagement programming tries to make parents partners in an agency's work on behalf of children, one theme that runs through site managers' discussions is how to help parents take a *leadership role* in promoting children's learning and development. Several site managers note that the key to working toward this goal is *to start from the assumption that the parents who are involved in the project want the best for their children*. "Unfortunately, we sometimes hear it from the schools," says one site manager. "Teachers say, 'These parents just don't care.' But almost always parents *do* care. In many cases, it's that they don't know where to go, or sometimes what exactly to do, and we can help them with that." Another site manager echoes this theme, "Let's think about where many of these parents are coming from.

Many times they are not used to hearing that they have a say – for instance, in their workplaces or communities. But if we establish trusting relationships with them and assess their strengths as well as their problems, they will be able to do what some of them haven't had much opportunity to do so far – to set their own goals and work toward them."

Most of the sites' efforts to empower parents focus on encouraging parents to proactively take steps to *improve the developmental and learning outlooks of their own children*. Pursuing a somewhat different but related goal, the Cypress Hills *CHAFE* program seeks to empower parents to become local leaders in *reforming the local educational system for all children in the community*. Work on both of these goals is discussed in the following sections.

Empowering Parents to Become Partners in Children's Learning

PROJECT-WIDE APPROACHES

In a sense, the entire substance of the two projects that are described next – the *Options Program* operated by Sunnyside and the CAB *HIPPY* program – illustrate the approach of trying to empower parents to promote their children's learning.

The Sunnyside Options Program. Based in a Sunnyside after school program, this program operates against the backdrop of New York City public school procedures that govern students' transition from the earlier grades to high school – procedures that are as hugely complicated as they are rich in the choices families can make about what kind of schools students will apply to. As recognized in the *Options Program*, matching a child with the right high school in New York City takes the same kind of careful preparation and research as guiding a high school junior or senior through the process of applying to college.

Through services like tutoring to prepare students for the standardized admissions tests that are required by some schools, the *Options Program* helps children directly. The project also reaches out to parents, inviting them to field trips that give them a sense of the choices that are available to their children. Parents and their children are also encouraged to attend workshops that walk them through the process of choosing and applying to schools.

At one *Options* workshop, an intermediate school guidance counselor offers down-to-earth advice: "There are lots of amazing high schools in New York City," she tells the audience, "but starting to look for them when your child is in eighth grade is really way too late." She tells the group that parents should begin their research at least a year earlier than that. They should, for example, consult the guidebook that she recommends and find out the exact

admissions criteria for the schools they are interested in. ("If your child doesn't meet all the criteria, don't consider the school. You're just wasting one of the choices you can make.") And parents should plan their own field trips to schools to supplement the ones that are available through the *Options Program*.

Because *Options* staff think that not only eighth grade but even seventh grade is "too late," the project has recently begun offering workshops for parents of fifth and sixth graders. So far, these sessions have been very small – five to seven parents – but the size helped staff shift from a speaker/Q & A format to one that gave parents more room to talk informally with staff about their children's particular needs and situations – and even to start the process of consulting guidebooks, with staff walking them through the exercise. The site manager says that parents who took the trouble to attend the workshop welcomed the chance of having in-depth conversations about the system. She describes one workshop participant, who arrived last year in the United States from Bangladesh with two daughters, one of whom is a fifth grader:

> He asked lots of questions, and overall, I'd say his reaction was, "I'm so glad I found you. This is so complicated!" I myself have emigrated to the United States from Taiwan, and I know how he feels. Immigrant parents are hungry for information. Whenever we finish a workshop, no matter how much information we have given out, part of me thinks, "It hasn't been enough."

In fact, *Options* may always find itself challenged by the informational needs of the immigrant parents who seek out its help. But the program's recent experience with the workshops for parents of fifth and sixth graders suggests that small, informal workshops are a good addition to the mix of its strategies.

The CAB HIPPY Project. This project deploys home visitors – called Parent Educators – who guide parents to follow the *HIPPY* week-by-week curriculum of developmentally enriching activities. The curriculum offers parents clear and understandable ways of helping children learn. For example, one activity for four-year-olds methodically takes a parent through ideas for reading a child a book called *Sounds I Hear*. The reader is encouraged to ask the child questions about the text and then to draw the child further into the story by inviting him/her to color a page that illustrates the book. Parent educators review and practice these and other activities with parents before the parents try them out with their children.

According to staff, if questions about the activity occur to parents after the practice session, almost all of them feel comfortable contacting the parent educator or the *HIPPY* office to ask for clarification. Perhaps just as important, staff say that parents who attend the *HIPPY* group meetings give each other advice on using the curriculum.

Quite often, for example, one parent who finds that her child is not taking to a certain lesson gets tips from another parent on how to work with the child.

Staff also note that providing information on CAB services and other community resources to *HIPPY* parents can be vital to the parents' efforts to help their children. "If a child isn't picking up on the home lessons," says one staff member, "we may suspect that there's a hearing or speech problem. And it's very, very important that we are there to give the parent information about specialists who can address that kind of problem."

Speaking in Spanish, one *HIPPY* parent explains what the program has meant for her relationship with her five year old. "I read books to her. I never used to do that." Another parent proudly describes how she and her daughter recently acted out a role play from the *HIPPY* curriculum.

These responses are typical, according to the project's two parent educators, who are bilingual and from the same community as participating parents: Most parents they visit love the experience. "Very few parents are not home for the scheduled visit," says one of the educators. Her message to those parents who do miss an appointment reflects her own ability to serve as a role model for the parents, many of whom are immigrants with low levels of education:

> I tell them, "You've got to keep to the schedule; I'm busy myself. Besides this job, I go to school and have a child, so I have a lot of stuff to do."

APPROACHES USED
WITHIN LARGER PROGRAMS

In a group interview held after a monthly meeting of the Parents Policy Council of the *Lenox Hill Early Childhood Center*, three parents discuss how the center has helped them in their parenting roles. "I know some things about parenting," says the young father who serves as treasurer of the Policy Council, "but ... [this program] ... has taught me that there's always more to learn." One mother recalls how she felt at a loss in confronting her son's acting-out-behavior. "I was afraid that if I tried too much to change him, he wouldn't be himself anymore – he'd be a robot." But sessions with the psychologist who is a consultant to the program and who is available to meet with parents guided this mother to discover how she could intervene with her son in ways that would help him without depriving him of his autonomy.

When parents first enroll their children in the center, the program loses no time in reminding them of the importance of playing a lead role in their children's learning. The site manager reports on what she says at initial parent orientations:

> I tell parents, "Parent involvement is important! We are going to encourage you to participate in school activities and ask you to be involved in your child's

education and learning." I also tell them, "Children of this age don't have homework, but *you* do! Your homework is to support your children's learning at the center."

Throughout the year, the center tries to turn that expectation into steps that parents can and want to take. Along with the psychologist, the program's family workers are available to consult with parents to help them address child rearing issues. Parents can also meet monthly with teachers to discuss that month's curriculum (according to the site manager, participation in these sessions is strong) and they consult with the program's transition coordinator about how to prepare children for kindergarten. The program's teaching staff have plans for using a new database that will help them track children's growth and development. With the help of this tool, teachers will be able to meet individually with parents to review narratives from parent-teacher conferences and parents will have access to calendars, lesson plans, and newsletters. These innovations will help parents get a clear picture of both skills that are introduced in the classroom and what their children have learned.

One of the enduring challenges of encouraging parents to become their children's teachers is finding ways to convey information and advice that are engaging and that connect to parents' real-life situations. One vignette from the *Kingsbridge Heights Project* illustrates how the sites try hard to meet parents' needs. The site manager describes a recent workshop for families led by the manager of the local Foodtown:

> He talked about nutrition – good snacks and bad snacks, and about how the grocery store is set up ... [with a layout that forces families to go through every aisle and be tempted to buy more]. He also discussed the lottery. When we first heard he was going to do that, we were sort of surprised, but it really worked out well. He told the group about the big odds against winning, and the parents loved it.

A parent recalls another part of the workshop:

> He brought along a visual illustration of how much sugar there is in one can of soda. Everyone was shocked. Seeing it, the kids took it in more than they do when we just tell them how much sugar there is in soda.

A parent workshop sponsored by the *UCC Project* also uses an experiential approach to involving parents in children's learning. In explaining to parents how they can transform an ordinary household chore like cooking into a learning experience, a UCC preschool teacher asks parents to leave their seats and go into the center's kitchen where material for fruit kabobs is laid out on big trays. Leavening her presentation with humor, she talks to parents about how they, in turn, can talk to their

children about the various kinds of fruit, their shapes, and their colors. Then everyone is invited to thread the fruit onto skewers and to eat a healthy snack. The learning activity is obviously enjoyable to parents. "I was rushing and rushing to get here," says one mother. "But this has cooled me out."

In this lesson and two others that are offered at the work-shop – going to the laundromat and walking in the neighborhood – the project offers learning opportunities that recognize parents' circumstances. Staff say that some parents tell them that they simply feel too busy to read to their children every night. While other activities – like inviting parents to read books to classes in the child care center and sponsoring read-alouds at the UCC farmer's market – show that UCC energetically encourages book reading, the workshops also let parents know that even if they don't always read to their children, they can still use everyday experiences as opportunities to talk to children in ways that teach them new words and concepts. As one teacher explains it to the parents:

> When we walk with children, we can be saying things like, "What color is that stoplight?" Or, "Let's count how many sides that sign has."

Empowering Parents to Become Local Leaders in Educational Reform Efforts

The style of one of the twice-monthly meetings of *Cypress Hills CHAFE* group illustrates the project's nuanced efforts to be certain that parents control what happens but that the group's leaders – especially parents who are just growing into their leadership roles – have the support they need to ensure that *CHAFE* moves ahead on its agenda. An articulate parent chairs this particular meeting, introducing each segment of the discussion, calling on fellow parents for comments, and moving through a variety of topics. From time to time, the two Cypress Hills community organizers step in to clarify points or make announcements, but the discussion always returns to the parents. The same approach is used in the numerous meetings that *CHAFE* holds with local school personnel and elected officials and their aides: Parents take the lead; staff are there for back-up and support.

In working with *CHAFE*'s core members, "We spend lots and lots of time on *preparation* for meetings and on debriefings," says the staff organizer. And, she adds, in helping parents feel empowered, the behind-the-scenes coaching and strategizing are "at least as important as the meetings themselves."

When asked about their regular activities with *CHAFE*,

several parents cite "research." For *CHAFE* parents, that term encompasses learning about where officials stand on certain issues or about how those issues will be decided – and it may also mean making visits to schools in and around the neighborhood to learn about problems and about good educational practices. One parent recalls an extended series of research visits that *CHAFE* made to schools in the neighborhood to find out the state of their science labs. "We didn't stop until we got the job done," she says. "We did our homework."

CHAFE parents point out that the whole process of meeting with officials builds assertiveness. "I never would have known how to speak to politicians," says one parent. "Now I'm not afraid to talk to them." And while *CHAFE* focuses on community-wide issues rather than coaching individual parents to advocate for their children, some parents say that their participation in the group has had spillover effects when they try to address the individual educational needs of their children. As one parent describes the experience:

> Being in *CHAFE* has made me more confident about going into my daughter's school. I can communicate with the principal. I always am telling … [a relative whose child is having educational difficulties] … "Sit down with the teacher and find out what's going on. That's the only way you can communicate."

Parent Engagement in an Agency-wide Context: More from the Executive Directors

Because the Executive Directors who were interviewed for this report have agency-wide views of parent engagement programming, their perspectives can add to the insights of the site managers, other staff, and parents that have been the main source of information for the previous sections.[10]

OVERALL PERSPECTIVES

As noted at the outset of this report, all of the Executive Directors voice strong commitment to parent engagement programming. "When parents are active, children's services are much richer," says the Cypress Hills Director. "If you work with children," observes the CAB Director, "you must involve parents."

But however strongly the Executive Directors believe in the parent engagement concept, they do not have an idealized view of what has to happen for staff to make it to work;

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10 All of the interviewees whose observations are cited in this section are executive directors, except for the Sunnyside Director of Youth and Family Services, who spoke on behalf of the Sunnyside Executive Director.

instead, they are realistic about how much persistence and ingenuity it takes to turn the concept into viable programming. The CAB Director says that the *HIPPY* home-visiting strategy has proved to be popular (and as noted, *HIPPY* group workshops are generally well attended). She adds that in many other CAB programs, parents welcome opportunities to talk to staff about their children and that parents love attending children's performances. "But it's also valuable for parents to participate in group learning and discussions," the Director adds, "and in some of our programs it is tougher to build momentum for these kinds of activities."

"Life has become more complicated for today's parents," says the UCC Director. She notes that some parental roles have increasingly been replaced by the work of institutions like child care and after school programs. Agencies like UCC, she says, must convince some parents that the change does not mean that the programs have totally taken over, leaving them with no part to play in their children's experiences outside the home. "We've had some parents tell us, '*My* mom was not behind me in that way, and look, I turned out all right.' But our job is to persuade these parents that the relatively hands-off style vis-à-vis the schools or child care programs wasn't ideal – and that there are good reasons for today's parents to be more a part of the picture with activities outside the home during their children's growing-up years."

This discussion now turns to an aspect of parent engagement programming that is an important concern of the Executive Directors – how this kind of work is funded.

THE FUNDING PICTURE FOR PARENT ENGAGEMENT SERVICES

"Every year Sunnyside Community Services serves some 3,000 children and youth in after school and other activities," says the agency's Director of Youth and Family Services. "For an agency of our size to try to reach the parents of all those children would take an enormous amount of resources. For instance, to successfully engage one-half of the parents would probably require one-quarter of the amount in our budget for children and youth services." The observation underscores the opinion voiced by several Executive Directors that good parent engagement programming depends on having the resources, especially enough staffing, to ensure that reaching out to parents is not an extra – but an integral part of the approach.

The Directors tell a mixed story about the current funding environment. No one suggests that the search for resources is easy. "Given the many needs of the families we serve," observes the Kingsbridge Heights Director, "there used to be the presumption that there were all kinds of things that we could do to help them. Now there's more of a call for proof. And showing that someone has gained parenting

skills isn't as simple as demonstrating that academic test scores have gone up."

The CAB Director also notes that parent engagement programming can get overshadowed in the increasingly outcome-driven world in which social service agencies now operate. For after school programs, she says, academic performance and even attendance rates are sometimes the main outcomes of interest to funders, and whenever there is less interest in the numbers of parents reached by a program, parent engagement can become a more secondary goal.

The Sunnyside Director of Youth and Family Services echoes this view. "Mandates drive services. And many government Requests for Proposals for after school programs have had no mandate – which essentially means no funding – for serving parents." He adds, however, that in a recent Sunnyside application for a New York State grant that helps to support the agency's after school services, Sunnyside included serving a set number of parents in the list of desired outcomes. Meanwhile, he notes, there are some signs that the funding atmosphere is changing for the better, with more emphasis being placed on parent outcomes in new public-sector Requests for Proposals.

On the private-funding side, the support of the MetLife Foundation for the project that is described in this report reflects the Foundation's substantial interest in parent engagement programming – and there are indications that this kind of programming also appeals to other private grantmakers. Touching on one facet of parent engagement programming that seems to resonate with some private funders, the Kingsbridge Heights Director notes that these grantmakers are glad to see that the agency works with whole families starting in their children's preschool years and extending through the college application process. "They understand that this style is very different," he notes, "than what happens in an agency that offers, say, a gang outreach program but no services for children or the family."

The Cypress Hills Director notes that it is possible for an agency like hers to show funders that parent engagement work pays off. "There's a misconception that these services are soft services," she says. "But really, what we do with parents has solid outcomes. Of course, with community organizing there are the concrete campaign wins – like getting a school funded. But we also see parents' individual growth. For instance, one day someone who started in *CHAFE* as a fairly retiring person is able to say, 'I feel like a leader.' Or parents tell us they are more comfortable in mediating conflicts or speaking in public, or in other areas of their lives that reflect goals that they've set for themselves as *CHAFE* members. But we do need to keep working on strategies that will help us document this kind of personal progress."

Beginning or Intensifying Parent Engagement Programming: Some Practical Questions

With its focus on a half-dozen projects, this report is not a definitive picture of parent engagement programming among UNH member agencies. Still, the experiences that have been highlighted by the staff of this diverse group of programs can be a source of help to other agencies as they map out their own parent engagement strategies. The discussions and descriptions in the preceding pages suggest that agencies that are either starting a parent engagement initiative or are planning to ramp up their efforts may wish to ask themselves some or all of the following questions:

- Can we find the staff resources needed to make sure that parent engagement is more than an afterthought?

- As we plan events, are we making sure to offer the basics – child care, food (ideally full dinners for early-evening events), and a welcoming, friendly, non-bureaucratic atmosphere?

- Can we do more than distribute flyers to publicize our events? Do we have ideas about how to add to the momentum that builds when parents themselves spread the word about the value of our activities to other parents?

- How can we best reach out to parents with limited English proficiency?

- If one of our goals is to engage parents in their children's learning, what, besides recommending that they read to children or help them with their homework, can we do to help make that happen? And to pursue this goal, are we doing as much as we can to acclimate immigrant parents to the systems that serve their children?

- Are we on top of current information on resources in the community and in our own agencies that promote family well-being? Are we persistent in making sure parents get their questions answered?

- What can we do to avoid parents being a silent or passive audience for our efforts to educate them about particular topics?

- Especially in our work with parents who are facing tough problems, are there ways to let our relation-ships with them unfold naturally so that we give room for trust building?

- How do we strike the right balance between letting parents take the lead and giving them the coaching and support they need to strengthen their leader-ship skills and move an agenda?

- How do we document any growth in parents' self-confidence and willingness to speak up on behalf of children – whether their own children or more broadly, children in their community – that comes about as a result of their involvement in our projects?

- In all of our work, are we clearly conveying the message that we respect parents and start from the assumption that they care deeply about their children's well-being?

Conclusion

Our society is filled with diverse institutions, governmental and private, that provide help and support to low- and moderate-income people, immigrants, and other groups who are struggling to ensure the best opportunities for themselves and their families. Among those institutions, settlement houses have always been marked by their emphasis on neighborliness and holistic service provision. Settlement houses seek to establish a shared sense of community between their staff members and the people who participate in their programs, and settlement houses are committed to reaching not just children, or young people, or adults, or seniors – but all generations.

The families that settlement houses work with have always been under stress, but the convergence of many contemporary trends confronts them with challenges that are in some way unprecedented. As one family policy expert described it:

> Industrialization, urbanization, poverty, increasing population growth and density, and especially wide-spread dual parental employment constitute cen-trifugal forces on parenting and the family. Society at large is also witnessing the emergence of strik-ing permutations in parenthood and the constella-tion of the family structure, notably in the rise of single-parent headed households, divorced and blended families, and teenage first-time moms and dads.[11]

At the same time, as families participate in and are shaped by these trends, consensus is growing that good parenting plays a critical role in children's ability to become productive

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[11] Bornstein, 1998.

members of our complex society. Clearly, however, there is a role for helping institutions to play in supporting parents' efforts to ensure that their children are happy, healthy, secure, and ready to meet the demands of living in a global society. While many kinds of institutions can take on that supportive role, settlement houses, which are naturally oriented to intergenerational programming and to treating clients as neighbors, are particularly well suited to this work. UNH will continue to work with its members to maximize this settlement house advantage.

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