

Program Leadership and Family Engagement
Head Start Family Engagement Week 2011 – Day 3

Kiersten Beigel: Hello. Welcome to Day 3 of Head Start Family Engagement Week. My name is Kiersten Beigel and I am the Family and Community Partnership Specialist in the Office of Head Start. This week, we are launching the Office of Head Start's Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework. You can find it here on the ECLKC. The framework is a technical assistance resource for programs; it's a road map for progress in achieving parent and family engagement outcomes. Starting this fall, the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement will offer a parent, family, and community engagement readiness guide that will assist programs with their self-assessment and their strategic planning. This week, we are also launching a series of online events to spotlight family engagement.

In our first video on family engagement, Director Yvette Sanchez Fuentes spoke about the importance of supporting family well-being, engaging families around their children's learning and development, and supporting and strengthening relationships between parents and their children. In the second video, she talked with parents about how their programs welcome them and engage them as equal partners in supporting their children's learning and development.

Today we're focusing on how program leadership can drive systemic and integrated efforts around parent and family engagement. Program leadership – and here, we refer to directors, governing boards, policy councils, parent committees, and management teams – really sets the tone in the commitment to the broad set of family engagement practices that are central to quality Early Head Start and Head Start programs. Program leadership establishes the systems and the processes that allow for good family engagement practice to flourish. And ultimately, this makes a difference in children's readiness for school, as well as children's later academic success. We'll also talk about how these leaders implement professional development and continuous program improvement related to family engagement. I'm excited to be joined by two program directors, Joy Trejo and Loudell Robb. Thank you both for joining us. Could you please introduce yourselves?

Joy Trejo: Thank you, Kiersten. My name is Joy Trejo. I'm the Senior Director of Early Childhood Programs and Family Services for the Campagna Center in Alexandria, Virginia. I've been with the Center for four and a half years.

Loudell Robb: Thanks for having me, Kiersten. My name is Loudell Robb. I'm the Program Director at the Rosemount Center here in Washington, D.C. and I've been in Head Start leadership for quite some time now. I'm so happy to be here.

Kiersten: Welcome. It's great to have so much experience in the room today. So let's start with program leadership. When leadership has a clear vision and sets ambitious goals for parent and family engagement, programs can really strive to implement best practices and achieve outcomes. Can you share some of your program's strategies for setting that kind of broad and meaningful vision?

Loudell: We identify what the needs are in the community. We also meet with our board and Policy Council and draft our strategic plan and we also use self-assessment to identify strengths and weaknesses within our programs. Within our program, once those are identified, we draft a corrective action plan and meet the – to meet the goals of our program. We also use our service areas plan as a working document which is changeable as the needs arise.

Kiersten: So you're both using different data sources to really kind of ground your visions and your goal-setting, and it's a constant process of evaluating and planning at the program level. Can you talk about how this process plays out at the family level? So we know families are going through all different kinds of things and how do you stay in tune with, sort of, some of their personal visions and interests?

Joy: I think the most important piece is to meet parents where they're at. One parent, or maybe all parents have a similar vision. The individual parents always have individualized needs. We keep in touch with those needs by keeping in contact with our families on a daily and a weekly basis. Our family service specialists and teachers help them revisit their goals on a regular basis and really see whether or not their – that goal is still important to them. For instance, we may have family that's – or a parent that's finished with their GED thinking about becoming a CDA, or getting a CDA and becoming an assistant teacher and then their family circumstances change. If midyear, the dad in the family leaves, they may have to reset their goals and look at their hierarchy of needs. We really focus on our Men About Head Start program where we engage our fathers and engage them in a way that's meaningful to them and their culture. For instance, some years they may want more hands-on training or hands-on projects. Other years, they may really want to become involved in leadership roles in our Policy Council. It really depends on what fathers want on any given year.

Kiersten: So, the message that you're, sort of, sending is that you start with what parents want and then you have sort of systems in place to support that.

Joy: Absolutely. It's imperative that we have good internal communications systems in place. Leadership must make it clear that we have a team approach. Our program utilizes curriculum specialists, cluster directors, nutritionists, teachers, family service specialists, each having a different role of ensuring families' needs are met. We have biweekly meetings with our family service specialists and our home visitor teachers and our teachers, as well. We always discuss what's going on with families, individually and as a whole, and what we need to do to support families. Do we need – do they need more training? Do we need more training? Do we need to go to the board and ask for more program options for them? Cluster directors have site meetings every week with their teachers that involves the whole what we call "treatment team." And that's an important piece to ensuring that we continue to keep our finger on the pulse of our families.

Kiersten: So, let's talk a little bit more about continuous program improvement. It's really an essential ingredient for achieving parent and family engagement outcomes in our programs. Can you talk about

what kinds of systems or processes that you have in place that support your programs doing better at setting and achieving engagement goals.

Loudell: An important system that we have is our family survey. This is done on a quarterly basis where we continuously examine what the needs of our families are. We figure out how many parents are interested in going back to school? How many would like to learn English? How many have passed that and would like to enroll in college but they need that extra support from us? We run a report to see if these goals are being achieved during their family partnership agreement reviews and also we try to find the resources to support our parents.

Joy: We do a family survey three times a year. We try to ask strategic questions about whether they're getting the info that they need at the meetings that they attend – parent meetings, parent committee meetings – what may we need to change in the program to meet their immediate or long-term needs. We also get feedback from our home visitor teachers and our family service specialists who really see our families on a day-to-day basis. I believe that family engagement is working when relationships between staff and parents are working. Meaning that families feel comfortable coming to their family service specialists and their teachers for help or guidance or anything they may need and staff feel empowered to be able to give them the information they need, as well.

Kiersten: A system-wide family engagement approach really does need to also involve professional development, which you're talking about, essentially. What are your professional development plans like? How do they enhance the capacity of your staff to support programs' family engagement vision and goals?

Loudell: We provide training and diversity for home visitors, teachers, and family service workers so that they can focus on how to be culturally and linguistically responsive to our parents. Even if families speak Spanish, not, they might not be from identical culture but there's one underlying factor is that their goal is to have education success for them and their – their children. Also, we focus on how to engage fathers and work with them in an effective manner. All staff come together and provide activities for fathers where they can be involved. For example, par – fathers love to keep the grounds, and so we have a big activity for them and they come out in masses. We take opportunity during that time to identify some of their needs and goals and they'll tell us what they want, why they cannot do something. So we accommodate our schedule to meet the needs of the fathers.

Joy: We look at our professional development plan in several ways. Number one, we look at what families want – what are they interested in learning about. Secondly, what do staff want? What do they feel that they need to learn about, according to a survey that we give them in our individual conversations with them and supervision. We look at areas from prior years because the needs of the families change. For example, this year family service specialists and teachers thought families wanted more information about the immigration process and procedures. So we brought in attorneys, organizations, and folks that know about this information to come help them learn about it. Questions

come from parents. When they tell us what they need, that's what we focus on. Right now, in our program, it's affordable housing, it's immigration issues, it's English as a Second Language classes.

Kiersten: Community partnerships are really an essential organizational impact area for achieving parent and family engagement outcomes, along with program environment – tending to the program environment – teaching, and learning, and family partnerships, of course. You both are leaders committed to a strong parent-family engagement vision and I can tell that you work really hard to implement it across your service and system areas and that you have achieved a lot. What advice would you give to other program leaders about how to engage families and achieve parent and family engagement outcomes?

Joy: First thing – whenever possible, hire staff from the culture of the families that you serve. Make sure you have the diversity across the board because that creates a welcoming program environment, and use the staff that you've hired for internal training. The staff that we've hired, many of whom are past Head Start parents, help us do better, working with our diverse families, make us feel more comfortable talking with our families, teach us culturally appropriate ways to show respect. In terms of overall program policy, in line with Performance Standards, we make sure that we affirm the importance of family engagement in all that we do. We set goals with parents from the very beginning and emphasize this is a focus for us and for them throughout the program year.

Loudell: Meet parents where they are and build on their strengths. We need to assess their needs, but we also must assess their strengths, give them a sense of security – "I can do this and I can do it." When someone tells you, "you can do it," you feel empowered, and that's what Head Start is all about – empowering parents and families.

Joy: And I agree with you, with Loudell. Staff also have to feel empowered. They have to feel like they have the information to give back to parents and then parents can gain their confidence from us when we have confidence in them. And what it comes down to, truly, is the quality of the program staff that you hire.

Kiersten: So, you're saying that it's important to create a climate of mutual learning. So, taking off on one of your points, how can a program help staff feel confident as they relate to parents?

Joy: First, it's about framing it, reminding staff what our core mission, principles, and values are – why we're here. It's about having an ongoing conversation every week with teachers, with service managers. Where are they at? What are they doing to work with families? What are we seeing in the field that's changing with our families? We use this ongoing conversation to continue to guide us and then continue to implement our family surveys to tell us whether or not the conversations we're having are to the point of what the families are really trying to tell us. Also, we've added some staff positions this year – a lead family service specialist and a curriculum specialist – and we did this because our staff were asking for more support within the classroom, within the work they were doing, and we took that information from our staff and also the information from our self-assessment, our monthly monitoring of our

program and our families, and what – and feedback from our educational staff to determine what would really help enhance the quality of the work we were doing on a day-to-day basis.

Loudell: We also do the same. We have service integration meetings once a week and where we identify and we talk about changing circumstances, challenges, and success program-wide with our staff, and with our families, and the children. At this time, we monitor compliance with the Program Performance Standards and we gather information that is offered to us by our Policy Council leaders, who take information from parents and pass them on to us. And this helps us also to build upon our strengths and also our continuous improvement plan.

Kiersten: Thank you both, Joy and Loudell. This has been a really fascinating and rich discussion about the role of leadership in promoting a program-wide family engagement agenda. And, though there are some differences between your programs, we've also heard about a lot of similarities. And, importantly, we've also heard that your programs are not perfect. These leaders are working hard to improve their services and their staff expertise and their work with families. They're committed to professional development and continuous program improvement.

Please join us tomorrow as we continue with our fourth video spot for Family Engagement Week. I'll be speaking with two program staff: one, a curriculum specialist; the other, a family services manager. We'll focus on teaching and learning and family partnerships. On Friday, for our final event this week, staff from the National Center and staff from the Office of Head Start will be answering your questions so don't forget to send those in. Again, I urge you to take a look at the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework and think about how you might begin to use it to inform program-wide strategic planning, program design and management, professional development strategies, and different activities across your program.

Thanks for being with us.