Parents as Teachers Meets Need in Southeast Idaho

The Situation
Recent research shows that the first three years of a child’s life are an especially active time of brain development, when the experiences of infants and toddlers build the necessary neuronal connections for use later in life. This understanding about the role of early experiences in the development of a child’s brain brought attention to the importance of the early years.

Parents as Teachers is one approach to respond to families with children prenatal to kindergarten entry. In 1999, the Office of the Governor contracted with the University of Idaho Extension to develop a demonstration project of local Parents as Teachers programs across the state. UI Extension was asked to assess the program and determine the program’s fit with Idaho communities and families. A group of key stakeholders and decision makers developed an evaluation plan for the Demonstration Project. One objective of the evaluation plan was to determine the goodness of fit between Idaho communities and Parents as Teachers. This objective was further clarified by asking if:
- Parents as Teachers contributes unique resources to the community.
- Parents as Teachers is well integrated into the community.

Our Response
The University of Idaho Parents as Teachers Demonstration Project developed a “community fit” assessment that surveyed program sites, interviewed parent educators, with a separate survey sent randomly to participating parents. Site surveys were completed in late 2002. Survey questions helped to describe the communities where participating families live, the services that are available to families of young children, travel distances for the parent educators, community collaborations, and success and challenges of each program.

Program Outcomes
The results from the surveys help to describe the opportunities available for families with young children in Bear Lake, Caribou, Franklin, Oneida, and Power counties. Rural Idaho offers challenges to these parents of young children that their urban counterparts do not face.

Prenatal classes often aren’t offered in their community and parenting classes are offered sporadically. While each county has a WIC (Women, Infants, Children Program) clinic that offers services and immunizations, rural families still need to travel to a larger community for some services.

Several communities within this area have Head Start programs, but services are targeted to 4 year olds with limited opportunities for 3 year olds. Head Start is an income-eligible program. This income guideline is more restrictive than WIC and other need-based organizations. Many of the Hispanic families hear about the Head Start program by word of mouth. According to the director of the American Falls
Head Start, only 40% of eligible families in the 10-county area that includes Power County are receiving services. This is partly due to the limited number of children each Head Start can serve. It is often difficult to make contact with the eligible families. Early Head Start for those 3 and under is not available in this area at all. A Migrant Head Start is located in Aberdeen and does provide services to children of migrant families, infant through 8 years old. However, this service is offered April through October only.

Public libraries offer youth programs, however mostly for the preschool age children and only in English. Libraries in Bear Lake County now offer “story time” for the 5 and under crowd once a week in Montpelier and Paris. This is a new service since Summer 2002.

Families living in rural communities and even in areas near a metro area have little access to formal parent education opportunities. The Parents as Teachers program was the only parent education program available that provides monthly home visits with a sustained relationship between parent educators and family with children newborn to three years.

The four Parents as Teachers demonstration project sites in Southeast Idaho reach 80 families in 15 different communities. Providing the program in rural areas does offer the challenge of a greater distance from office to family and greater difficulty finding a central location for monthly parent group meetings, one of the program components. Parent educators travel as few as one mile and up to 45 miles one way to visit with families.

On the positive side, parent educators reported that word of mouth advertising was their best recruitment tool. Families in the program are very likely to tell friends, relatives, and neighbors about the program. Parents and parent educators report that the Parents as Teachers program succeeds because the program is home-based, can be scheduled around the family’s activities and lifestyle, provides continuity from month to month for the children, is free, and provides parents with developmental information that is not readily available elsewhere.

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