



Programs *for* Parents

Comprehensive Services for Families and Children



COMMUNITY OF LEARNING **2017** ANNUAL REPORT

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A Message from Beverly Lynn,
Chief Executive Officer,
Programs for Parents



At Programs for Parents, we believe families are their child's first teacher and it is our job to help them be their best advocates. With the continued support from Turrell Fund, we were able to convene a second cohort of the Community of Learning, a professional development opportunity for early childhood family engagement practitioners.

We also partnered with the Newark Public Schools, Advocates for Children of New Jersey, and the Chad School Foundation to host the 3rd Annual Family Engagement Conference. This year, we focused on the importance of addressing chronic absenteeism. Together with the Chad Foundation and Newark Public Schools, we will recognize early childhood programs that are using data, putting attendance interventions in place and testing innovative ways to get children to come to school every day, on time.

The brain research is compelling: if we start early in a child's life, provide nurturing and caring relationships and expose them to positive learning experiences, we can close the achievement gap. For 2017's Community of Learning Cohort, we made a special effort to recruit family engagement staff from 0-3 programs so that we could learn about their unique challenges and connect them with peers across other programs to share best practices.



Beverly Lynn, President & CEO,
Programs for Parents

**A Message from
Twana Thompson,**
Parent Education Coordinator,
Programs for Parents



For the second cohort of the Community of Learning, I put myself in the shoes of the frontline family engagement practitioners participating in this year's program. For each session, I asked myself, "What did I need to know and be able to do to be successful in my role?" That led us to looking at the standards and expectations across early childhood program types, regardless of whether you were a community-based early childhood program, a Newark Public School Pre-K site, or Head Start and Early Head Start funded program. That matrix was eye opening, because it allowed me to see where there is synergy and where we might be sending mix messages.

Using the peer learning approach of a professional learning community provided the perfect backdrop for the participants to share ideas, resources and tools. The Strengthening Families framework became a common language we could use across the different programs, and even more so, a common tool to assess the efficacy of our efforts and plan for improvements.

The Community of Learning, and our family engagement conference, both have become annual activities that early childhood leaders have come to expect and see as a resource for building their program's quality.



**Twana Thompson, Parent Education
Coordinator, Programs for Parents**



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Programs for Parents launches its second cohort of the Community of Learning

Programs for Parents launched its second cohort for the Community of Learning with twenty-five early childhood family engagement professionals from Newark and Essex County.

The *Community of Learning* is an action-learning collaborative for family engagement practitioners designed to help programs meet state standards for family engagement. Participants engage in peer learning through monthly training sessions. The training sessions focus on engaging families in the learning and development of their children, connecting families with needed social services and developing parent leadership."

For the 2017 cohort, Programs for Parents targeted programs serving children birth to age 3. Children growing up in families experiencing multiple risk factors, such as poverty, underemployment, housing instability, and crime are more likely to struggle in school and later in life. According to the *Promote Family Engagement* report prepared by CLASP, "...almost half of children under six live in low-income families and about 11% of children live in extreme poverty. One in five children under the age of six lives in a household experiencing three or more risk factors." Leaders in the field, asked Programs for Parents, to see what could be learned from supporting 0-3 early childhood providers. For these providers, there is not the same level of staff support in family engagement, as in Pre-K programs with Family Workers. More than half of the participants for Cohort II were from programs that serve families birth to age 3.



Programs for Parents launches its second cohort of the Community of Learning

From the first cohort, we learned that it was important for participants to gain practical skills and leave each session with tools that they could take back to their programs and immediately implement. The trainers aligned the program with the everyday responsibilities of Family Workers and modeled various engagement strategies and activities that could be readily used with families.

We also incorporated several other key aspects, including:

Setting goals to drive measurable impacts. Family Workers used the Strengthening Families assessment as a tool to look at family engagement related areas of their program where they needed improvement. These growth areas were then used as the basis for ongoing learning and for identifying mini-grant projects where participants received grants up to \$750 to scale best and promising practices in their programs.

Helping families navigate complex social service systems. One of the standards for Grow NJ Kids requires programs to create a handbook that can be used to make referrals for social service supports. Throughout the monthly trainings, participants were given resources and shared key contacts with each other that helped them build their own referral guide.

Increasing Family Workers understanding of child development. Strengthening Families was used as a universal language that cut cross program types, including Head Start, Newark Public Schools and community-based providers. We modeled activities that could be used with families, such as the child development questionnaire that asks true or false statements to help families think about whether their child is achieving age appropriate milestones.



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Aligning Standards across Early Childhood Programs

We fundamentally believe that family engagement is everyone's responsibility, not just that of the Family Worker. For Cohort II, we tested new ways to help Family Workers build buy-in for the work to engage families with their Center Directors, teachers and other program staff. To kick off this year's cohort, we hosted a breakfast that included interested Family Workers and their Center Directors where we showcased the success of Cohort I and modeled what actually happens in a monthly CoL training session.

Over thirty programs expressed interest in participating and twenty-five completed a new program element for Cohort II that required the joint signatures of the Family Worker and Center Director for the Program Participation Agreement. The agreement outlined expectations for participants, such as sharing what was being learned back at their centers and integrating new family engagement practices into their programs.

We found early on that many Family Workers were not familiar with the Grow NJ Kids Family Engagement Standards. We also had a mix of program types – some were state Pre-K funded either as Newark Public Schools Pre-K programs or contracted with the school district as a community-based provider. To help providers connect the standards to their every day job, we created a crosswalk of their core responsibilities with the state's standards. We tried aligning the course sequence with milestones participants would need to meet over the course of the year. This became a handy reference guide for both planning the sessions for the trainers, pinpointing what Family Workers needed to know and be able to do, and also to make sense of the expectations for a program that has both state funded Pre-K and Head Start.



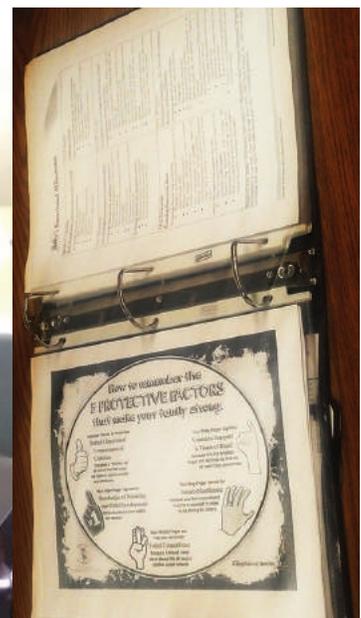
What happens in a CoL Session?

Each CoL session followed a similar format, with an emphasis on creating learning opportunities through peer exchange. We opened with a refresher on the family engagement definition, adopted by Programs for Parents, from the Harvard Family Research Project. The use of a common definition helped to reinforce key points, like thinking outside of the box on where family engagement is happening, understanding that family engagement is everyone's responsibility and the importance of seeing the need to be engaged even as your children age. This foundation was important in helping Family Workers think about what effective engagement looked like in practice.

For the third session for Cohort II, the training team used the Strengthening Families framework to explore how to help families access concrete supports in times of need. Participants explored three fundamental questions using a World Café format, including –

- What social services do your families need? And where do they go for help?
- What health services do your families ask you about? Where do they go for pediatrician? Asthma treatment? Allergist?
- What outreach strategies work for you in getting families to participate in school activities with social service providers, like the dental van?

The objective was to help participants build their Resource Referral Guide with common services and to facilitate discussions on those hard to find resources needed by families.



Reflections from the Field



John Graham, Family Worker, The Leaguers EHS at Bakery Village

John only missed one CoL session, and he would not have missed that one if he did not have the flu. For John, the CoL was a hands-on learning experience that helped to deepen his knowledge of child development and how to help families better interact with their children. The CoL was unlike previous trainings, John often commented that you could not just sit back and hide in a CoL session or zone out thinking about all the things you had to do when you got back to your program. Instead, the CoL was engaging and created opportunities to practice what you were learning. Being able to network with other programs was the most helpful part of the program for John. He picked up key contacts to include as a part of his monthly family workshops, such as a presenter that could talk about housing issues, ranging from where you can go to get rental assistance to local home buying programs. CoL participants came to each session ready to learn and share, and it is clear that they took something away each time.

Brenda Williams, Family Worker, Union Township Community Action Organization (UTCAO)

Brenda has worked in early childhood for more than twenty years. She has been a part of various trainings. For Brenda, the CoL was different because it focused on the needs of family engagement professionals and their roles in the educational process for young children. The CoL quickly became a safe space where participants could share and work through the challenges they were having in their programs, whether that be an issue with a supervisor or a family. Given the peer learning focus of the program, Brenda often found herself leading discussions on various topics with the group and quickly became a go-to resource for other Family Workers in the CoL. She commented towards the end, that the vision for the CoL is that once its over, that that cohort will continue to share resources and find time to support each other's work across their various programs.

Saleemah Saunders, Family Worker, Vailsburg Child Development Center

Saleemah says she did not realize that working with families could actually be fun. She said, "We get so bogged down with paper work that we forget that for many families, time with us is one of the few chances they get to relax. She latched on to every icebreaker, child development activity or game to build social networks among families that was shared in the CoL. She could not wait to try them with her families. She found the CoL so helpful that she persuaded her supervisor to allow her colleague to begin attending the monthly training sessions.





Feedback from Cohort II Program Participants

- **At least half of the participants emphasized CoL as a program where family workers could gather to support, network, and learn from each other.**
- **Participants said they learned new strategies for (1) communicating and engaging with parents; (2) dealing with the social-emotional issues children may face; and (3) providing a nurturing environment for families that build positive relationships.**
- **Participants also learned about local resources and supports and how to provide them to their families and communities.**
- **Participants reported that they successfully applied new skills for reaching out to parents and building trusting relationships with them.**
- **These new approaches eased tensions and improved communication when discussing important issues about their children, as well as when gathering crucial information from parents.**
- **Ice breakers, games, and brief check-in talks were some of the new communication tools mentioned.**
- **Participants also used their new knowledge of community resources to provide assistance to families.**
- **Peers shared with each other information on (1) vendors for events; (2) experts such as nutritionists and financial counselors; and (3) resources provided by public and private agencies, companies, and universities.**



Providing Resources to Help Programs Strengthen Family Engagement

Mini-grants of up to \$750 were provided to each program participant that missed no more than two sessions, completed the Strengthening Families Assessment, as required by Grow NJ Kids, and developed a program improvement plan for their identified area for growth.

2017 Mini-Grant Family Engagement Projects

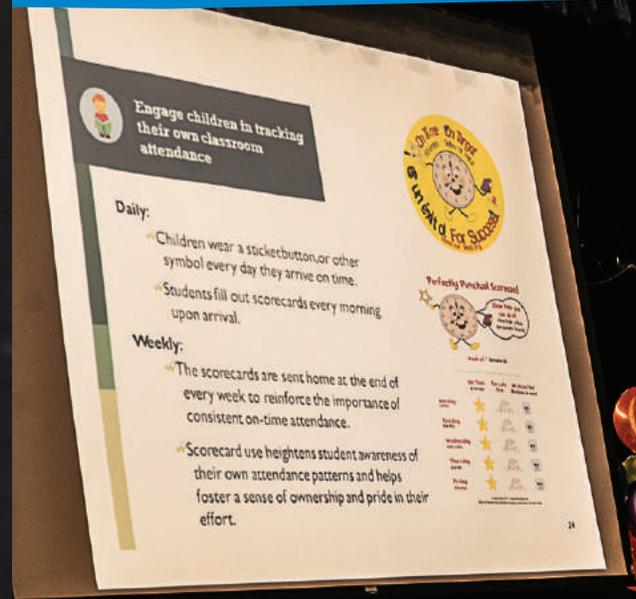
Organization	SF Protective Factor	Summary
Vailsburg Child Development Center (Smith Street)	Social Connections	The goal of the Community Health Fair and Conversations project is to bring families together for a day of healthy living, healthy eating, fitness and fun. We want the whole family to come out and enjoy the festivities including mothers, fathers, siblings and grandparents. We look forward to having 60 participants. We are bringing families together to help maintain a strong foundation and to reduce child abuse and neglect. We are also targeting isolated families that might need help in reaching out to build positive relationship with other families.
Union Township Community Action Organization Head Start Child Care Partnership (Newark Day Center, Brighter Tomorrow)	Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development Social Connections	The goal of Snuggle Up and Read is for families to understand that reading and building literacy can take place in all environments with readily accessible materials (homemade finger puppets, stuffed animals, handouts, books and community resources). Teachers will share tips, games and activities with families throughout the year of things they can do at home with their child to build literacy skills and help with kindergarten readiness.
Boys and Girls Club Newark	Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development Social Connections	The goal of Facilitating Friendships and Mutual Support Through the Family Dinner Night is to help parents/guardians build critical networks of support, develop and reinforce community norms around parenting, obtain assistance in times of need and serve as a resource for parenting information or help to solve problems. The Family Dinner Night program was first started with support from the first cohort of the Community of Learning in 2015 and has since been sustained by BGCN.
Newark Emergency Services for Families Weequahic Family Success Center	Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development	The goal of Fathers and Families BBQ and Fun Day is to kick off a series of engagement strategies to increase fathers involvement in their child's learning. We are inviting fathers, uncles, brothers and any care male role model in that child's life to cook, bake or grill their signature dish while having fun games for children to enjoy. Following the event, we will host additional workshops to promote nurturing familial relationships and bonds, which research shows benefits healthy child development.

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Organization	SF Protective Factor	Summary
Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN)	Social Connections	The goal of DadLine and Autism Support Group project will focus on providing father-to-father support for fathers who have children with special needs, specifically Autism. Fathers who have children with special needs and are seeking support, assistance, and information on parenting/fathering, child development, self-care and other issues/concerns father's face will be connected to experienced fathers who also have raised, or are raising a child(ren) with special needs and who have themselves received supportive services through SPAN and other community based services. Through this support network fathers will receive skills and opportunities to build and strengthen their confidence in parenting, and reduce isolation and stress.
The Leaguers, Inc (177 Central Ave)	Concrete Support in Times of Need	The goal of Dad's Recruitment Day is to have fathers with children enrolled in the center come out and help with recruitment efforts to fill seats for the coming school year. We will have fathers go out to different businesses, canvass the neighborhood and hand out flyers in the community. We will work with the participating fathers to plan a Community Resource Fair with fun family centered activities and resources, including the Jewish Renaissance Medical Van for vision, dental and health screenings.
United Vailsburg Service Organization Early Head Start	Concrete Support in Times of Need	The goal of Health & Community Resource Fair is to establish an ongoing partnership with parents of our infant and toddler program and a variety of health and community agencies. We will involve parents in helping to plan the resource fair and ongoing workshops to ensure the information speaks directly to parent needs.
The Leaguers @ Bakery Village	Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development	The goal of Music Literacy is to engage parents, grandparents and caregivers in an evidence-based music therapy program designed to support child development. We will do activities that look at fine and gross motor skills helping parents understand how children move, as well as, activities on child social interactions.
Boys and Girls Club Newark	Social Emotional Competency of Children	The goal of Girl Talk is to promote social emotional competency of girls that participate in the Boys and Girls Club's after school program. The program will target thirty girls. They will participate in a series of workshops designed to help them learn how to interact positively with their peers, family and other adults, while learning healthy ways to express their emotions and practice self-regulation skills.



**Family Engagement Conference 2017:
Everyday Counts...Especially in Pre-K**



This year's conference focused on addressing chronic absenteeism in Pre-K. Programs for Parents planned the conference in partnership with Newark Public Schools, Office of Early Childhood, Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ), and The Chad School Foundation. ACNJ's report on Newark's preschool attendance found that more than 40% of children are missing more than 10 days of school each year.

Rosie Grant, Executive Director of the Paterson Education Fund, shared the "Paterson Story" and how the school district reduced absenteeism by 76% in the 2014 school year. Rosie highlighted strategies they employed, including forming "attendance teams" and partnering with community-based organizations to connect families with social services. Their strategy relied heavily on data, promoting good attendance for all students and targeted interventions for those chronically absent from school. One such program, "Success Mentors," engaged school staff, teachers and administrators to support 40 first and second graders. They checked in with those students daily, rewarding them when they came to school and followed up with families when they were absent. Rosie's efforts have been recognized nationally, most notably by Attendance Works, a resource organization supporting states across the country working to promote the impacts of attendance on students' academic success.

This year's conference goers learned a new song, written by Kaleena Berryman, a local education advocate, called "My Presence Matters." Family Workers planned to use the song as a daily motivation to remind students about the importance of coming to school every day.

The Chad School Foundation also announced \$3,000 in attendance innovation awards for early childhood programs and family engagement professionals who show positive trends in addressing chronic absenteeism.





Programs for Parents would like to thank the Turrell Fund for investing in helping parents be their child's first teacher and best advocate through their support of the Community of Learning. We would also like to thank our 2017 partners for the Every Day Counts...Especially in Pre-K Family Engagement Conference, including the Newark Public Schools Office of Early Childhood, Advocates for Children of New Jersey and The Chad School Foundation. The success of this initiative would not be possible without the hard work and dedication of the early childhood Family Workers who commit themselves to professional development and applying what they learn.



Dr. Beverly Lynn, Chief Executive Officer
Twana Thompson, Parent Education Coordinator
Khaatim Sherrer El, Facilitator