

RURAL COMMUNITIES EQUITY ACTION GUIDE

Based on interviews between Mónica Maria Segura-Schwartz, Growth & Justice Policy and Outreach Consultant, and Jane Ellison, THRIVE Access Project Director

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Case Study Two



THRIVE ACCESS PROJECT

Welcoming the youngest new Americans in Central Minnesota

Community Equity & Inclusion Focus

THRIVE Access Project builds a welcoming, more inclusive community environment through shared work on early childhood education and interventions. Stakeholders re-examined and rebuilt power-sharing through more inclusive ways of problem solving and relationship/trust growing. As a result, early childhood field and community members reap new, helpful insights into culturally sensitive approaches to practice and applied research.

“By creating a co-learning environment in which all voices are at the table from the start, the Access Project has had a ripple effect in both the immigrant and refugee communities and within professional communities.”

Summary

By approaching Somali community leaders and intentionally creating an environment in which White and Somali stakeholders could discuss why the Somali community wasn't taking advantage of early childhood programs, THRIVE started a process of community engagement that would turn into a nearly 5-year project involving 4 specific cultural groups: Somali, Latino, South Sudan and other African Immigrant people. The Access Project was not intended to be a welcoming community strategy or an attempt to assimilate a specific group into a community. It was about meeting a specific need. This effort to increase access to early childhood programs by Somali families, however, did produce a positive side effect of building a more welcoming community.

This is an initiative/collaboration that gathers different organizations around the topic of child development and mental health for children 0 to 5 years old.

Background

While St. Cloud's majority population is White, it has a large Somali minority plus smaller communities of Latinx, and African Americans (US Origin and Immigrant-Origin Blacks). Over 50% of all families live in poverty, although unemployment rates are low. Some immigrants state that the White community expects immigrants to conform to White norms. Problems arise when that does not happen. White individuals who are struggling economically tend not to recognize there is white privilege when they do not perceive that they have any privilege themselves.

THRIVE is a coalition of Central Minnesota community organizations invested in supporting healthy social and emotional development of young children. It includes Milestones, St. Cloud, Sauk Rapids/Rice and Sartell school district early childhood programs, Benton Stearns Education District (and Help Me Grow), Catholic Charities, Public Health, St. Cloud State Child and Family Studies Department, Reach Up Head Start, and the Initiative Foundation.

The THRIVE leadership group noticed that while Somali immigrant families were highly visible in the community in general, they were not seeking or taking advantage of the community's child development or children's mental health resources. Early childhood professionals thought it likely that Somali children and families were struggling with the same issues as everyone else in terms of mental health and Kindergarten readiness.

Process

During what they now call "the pre-planning year," THRIVE initially thought the best way to find out why Somali families were not seeking or taking advantage of child development or children's mental health services was to conduct a survey, a typical data-gathering step in project planning. They reached out to Somali leaders who said, "That is not going to work." THRIVE leaders came to understand that Somali refugees had fled an authoritarian government that ruled with violence and fear. It would be difficult for Somali residents to share personal information; surveys could be perceived as intrusive and impersonal, even if they were confidential. Thrive needed to partner with a Somali-led organization that had already built trust with their target community.

Lesson learned: Establishing trust needed to come before Somalis would agree to share personal information. Involving stakeholders early in the process is imperative.

At the suggestion of a Somali-led organization, THRIVE partnered with them to plan and implement focus groups with Somali families instead of distributing an impersonal survey.

Lesson learned: Impacted communities must be involved in the first and every stage of planning, designing, and implementing any effort.

THRIVE leaders began to seek out leaders and cultural brokers of other local ethnic groups they perceived as underusing early childhood resources (Somali, Sudanese, Vietnamese, and Latino), and to organize new focus groups.

Lesson learned: In the process, THRIVE leaders also discovered that this engaged outreach created energy and expectation within those communities that a specific problem would be identified and solved.

THRIVE realized that the scope of this effort could be even wider and the community engagement even better. They started looking for funding and received a grant from Blue Cross Blue Shield of MN (BCBS-MN) Foundation for a one-year planning process and three years of project development for what became the Access Project. All stakeholders agreed that the vision of the Access Project's was to ensure that all immigrant and refugee children in the St. Cloud area would have access to resources and support for healthy development.

WealthWorks Capitals

Wealth Works Framework elements at play (working towards eventual systems change towards an equitable economic ecosystem):



Individual Capital – investment in skill development, physical & mental healthiness, increasing access to early childhood programs and physical and mental healthiness



Social Capital – program organizers, community members, cultural advisors bonding & bridging, establishing and sustaining trust



Intellectual Capital – innovation, creativity, imagination, and dexterity in adapting to conditions in the target community



Political Capital – shift in how Somali and White community members work together to achieve mutual goals, shift in cultural appreciation, increasing voice, access, inclusion in decision-making of traditionally underrepresented community members



Cultural Capital – changing dynamics, knowledge of who is known and what heritages are valued, collaboration across races, ethnicities, generations

As a funding condition, BCBS asked the project director (Jane Ellison), the evaluator, and other team leaders to participate in a three-day workshop in the Art of Hosting, a non-linear meeting facilitation methodology designed to include everyone in decision-making processes by removing hierarchical boundaries. Art of Hosting allots equal time and value to Relationships, Co-Learning, and Work (the identified project).

Jane Ellison said, "I didn't think I needed this training. I felt very well trained in facilitation and group management, working with different community groups. I wanted others on our team to have the opportunity." Ellison and three other members of the team attended the training, including representatives from the immigrant and refugee community, and she and her team ended up valuing the time the training gave them to debrief, strengthen their working relationships, clarify ground rules, and develop a framework to guide the rest of their work. They used the Art of Hosting agenda structure in their project meetings for the next four years.

Lesson learned: The process of building relationships and learning from each other was harder and, ultimately, as important as achieving the group's stated goals.

With funding secured, the group spent the next three years using its new tools and new awareness to engage the Somali, Latino, and African (non-Somali) communities, and included leaders from each community on the team. All participating communities conducted focus groups and built consensus around the project's goals and expected outcomes. Every month, Ellison met with a small, rotating group to plan the next meeting.

Lesson learned: Planning the meetings inclusively proved to be as important as the meeting itself.

Every meeting agenda started with time to build personal relationships and community within the group. Co-learning – built-in teaching and learning from each other – is another regular part of the agenda. In an interpreter training meeting, for example, interpreters taught providers how to manage interpretation and providers taught interpreters to manage specific situations. This gave both friendly space and time to adjust their plans to fulfill their individual and mutual goals.

Lesson learned: Spending time on relationships and co-learning is what allowed participants to trust each other, develop shared values and definitions of success, and help this project sustain itself and grow beyond its original goals.



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"You need to come with humility about your own perspective while at the same time, maintaining forward movement. Change takes time."

The last part of the meeting agenda was when the team planned the activities to drive progress toward specific goals. Every team member had an opportunity to offer ideas and/or respectfully challenge ideas. When points of tension arose, the group spent extra time learning about each other's points of view.

The Access Project's specific objectives evolved – with collective input – into the following:

1. Continue to build relationships between and across cultures
2. Increase the number of immigrants/refugees that have licensure in early childhood special education, parent education, or speech-language pathology. (Immigrant families trust educators who reflect their native culture.)
3. Increase the variety of modes of communication and co-learning between immigrant/refugee families and professionals in early intervention, early childhood education, and health.
4. Increase the quality of services by interpreters to families and early childhood professionals.
5. Share publicly what we have learned.

Activities in support of these objectives included:

1. Developing a leadership group to discuss and agree on initial definition of goals, activities, and financial decisions.
2. Holding a monthly leadership group meeting to define further activities.
3. Divide into sub-groups to organize three conversations with targeted community groups and in targeted locations around co-learning topics of interest to families (such as child development, autism, ADHD (and other mental health and learning disability assessments provided by schools), mental health, child protection, parent roles in their child's education, and use of interpreters).
4. Provide financial and professional support to immigrant and refugee students to attain licensure in relevant fields.

Results

Over several years, the Access Project succeeded in increasing the number of St. Cloud immigrant and refugee families participating in the city's early childhood resources. Specifically:

Relationships improved:

- The project's public health nurse reported an increase in her case load of Somali and Latino families. She attributes this to the opportunity to meet, follow up, and build trust with the families at co-learning events. She also started incorporating interpreters more intentionally into her home visits.
- The project evaluator, a professor at St. Cloud State University (SCSU) in Speech Development, developed a practicum for Spanish-speaking graduate students to do learning assessments for Spanish-speaking children in collaboration with community leaders in Cold Spring and St. Cloud. A child experiencing language delays with school interventions alone received this Spanish language intervention as well. As a result, the child achieved grade level work in one year.
- Early childhood professionals and immigrant and refugee community members in the greater St. Cloud area have built trust and advanced shared goals. For example, immigrant and refugee community leaders helped develop and participate in Art of Hosting leadership training. As a result, further grants and projects have been funded. One group even received an award for work that started with the leadership training. Faculty members at SCSU have had students attend the Access events, enriching their learning experience and, in some cases, sparking an interest in pursuing related work.

Recruitment and licensure among refugee and immigrant individuals increased:

- St. Cloud State University developed recruitment materials for potential immigrant and refugee students for parent education, early childhood special education and speech and language licensure.
- Two immigrant/refugee community members enrolled in the Parent Education licensure program at SCSU. District 742 is providing practicum experiences for them.
- Two SCSU departments have reserved new scholarship and graduate assistant resources to support diverse student applicants.
- Two workers from culturally specific communities completed their licensure in parent education and one completed a Masters in family studies and currently work in St. Cloud.



Communication and co-learning increased:

- Messaging and communications tactics focused on spreading the word among a narrow audience: early childhood practitioners and the diverse communities they served.
- Ten co-learning opportunities were conducted between early childhood professionals and immigrant and refugee community members, including Latino, Somali, Sudanese, and other African community members. These events were designed by teams of immigrant and refugee community leaders along with early childhood professionals and were tailored to each community. Topics included Child Protection, Child Development and the Ages and Stages Questionnaire, and Discipline.
- Participants in the Access Project developed a video of stories of immigrant and refugee families with young children with special needs, a video of a conversation between a Somali parent and an early childhood specialist about child protection issues. A discipline game was translated into Spanish, and a song book of lullabies was recorded in various immigrant and refugee languages.
- Participants in the Access Project developed a manual on the design and lessons from the co-learning events along with handouts.
- The Access Project led to two related projects. One is the Lullaby Project that brings lullabies from various countries into childcare environments. The second is the Fathers and Literacy project that supports immigrant and refugee fathers to write children's books about their growing up experience for their own children.

The use of language interpreters is increasing in early childhood settings:

- Training and co-learning opportunities have been provided to address issues around the use of interpreters in the early childhood fields.

The Access Project is sharing what it has learned from its peers in this process:

- Several presentations have been developed by the Access Team, including "Diverse Voices: Cross Cultural Collaboration in Early Intervention," which was presented at the National Zero to Three conference; the MN Association of Children's Mental Health conference, and the SCSU diversity conference.

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"The African Women's Alliance and their leadership has been strengthened, and the immigrant and refugee community leaders helped develop and participate in Art of Hosting leadership training," says Ellison. "From that training, further grants and projects have been funded within the immigrant and refugee communities. One group even received an award for work that started with the leadership training."

Reflections

"This project changed my life!" says Ellison. She reports having to learn how to modify her own value-judgements and figure out what was most important (for example, being efficient vs. being flexible and open to learning). It was about keeping her eye on the ball; reaching long-term goals were more important than worrying about little things that were not working in the moment. She emphasizes now that it was not a matter of dropping values and expectations, it was more about adjusting them, recognizing that "values" were different for different people or groups of people.

"You need to come with humility about your own perspective while at the same time, maintaining forward movement. Change takes time."

"In other groups you can assume a certain existing relationship," says Ellison. "But this group didn't have that. And keeping it was work that needed to be valued as part of the project, part of the work. We had to be willing to give the resources, time, and treasure necessary for this to happen."

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