

MEFLI Lessons Learned 2004-2010

Coordinators

- Hire your coordinator early in the planning process.
- Recruitment often takes more time and energy than you anticipate, so be careful to allocate enough time for coordination and recruitment.
- Case management for each family takes at least one hour per week and must have a staff member dedicated to it. Routine weekly contact between the case manager and the family builds a bond with the program.
- Close collaboration between the grant and adult education staff is critical, especially when dealing with ELL families.
- During the year, weekly personal contact with the parent by the case manager was necessary to continue to build families relationships with the program.
- Have a proactive program coordinator who maintains good communication among partners to provide the most effective and efficient services. Always have a staffing back-up plan in case of emergencies.

Collaboration

- True collaborations require a significant amount of time and energy to establish and maintain.
- MOU (memorandum of understanding) or similar written document is an essential tool to ensure that all partners and collaborators are clear on their responsibilities. For example, one program found that day care providers were happy to have them come read to the children, but they were unwilling to commit the time to helping recruit parents to family literacy services.
- In a large geographic area, conference calls, meetings with small groups of potential partners in different areas within the region, and/or videoconferencing, can help overcome barriers of time and distance.
- Offer food, whenever feasible, when holding meetings with collaborators or with families.

- Think about “what’s in it for them?” when talking with potential collaborators.
- Developing strong connections to elementary school guidance counselors and staff can help with recruitment of families with pre-school and school aged children, as well as promoting/sustaining family literacy throughout the district.
- Embrace the kind of program that works naturally in your individual community, rather than trying to emulate programs that happen to work in other areas.
- Head Start has a more structured schedule and we must give them more lead time in setting up activities.
- Collaborators must be viewed by families as sharing a common vision of fostering strong and successful families.
- Great care needs to be given to introducing specialists to parents and helping them build a trusting relationship.
- Keep Head Start teachers abreast of the needs of the parents enrolled so they can emphasize these in dialogues they have with parents (for example maintain your native language and speak this with your child at home)

Recruitment

- Whenever possible, recruit MEFLI families from among those already participating in a partner program e.g. Adult Ed, Head Start, or a community-based organization.
- To retain families, it’s most effective to schedule program activities at consistent days, times, and locations. Frequent changes in schedule compound the existing challenges of recruitment and retention.
- “We have learned that recruiting families has taken more time, energy and effort than we originally anticipated.”
- “The fact is, in non-immigrant families virtually all parents who meet eligibility requirements (i.e. don’t have a high school diploma or have ABE-level skills) have either major learning issues or major life issues, or both. Thus, it requires abundant attention, support, and persistence to engage them initially and to foster sustained participation.”

- Recruiting families during school open houses, kindergarten registration, and similar school events, is an effective recruitment strategy.
- Be visible – go where potential clients are: grocery store, Laundromat, WIC.
- Look to community agencies as a source of referrals. Get buy-in from the administration as well as from the front-line staff.
- “Recruitment events” frequently turn out to be fun community events but rarely attract families eligible for family literacy programs. Time and energy is better spent working with representatives of agencies who serve the same families you’re looking to recruit.
- Plan to recruit at least twice as many potential families as you plan to serve.
- Including a question on the adult education intake about whether they have children is often begins the initial recruitment for family literacy.
- Using success stories within the family literacy program provides motivation for new families.
- Holding a variety of informational sessions is beneficial to the individual and to the recruitment efforts.

Goal Setting

- Reviewing long term career goals when the going gets tough gives parents the reference point (Why am I doing this again?) and motivation to continue.
- Goals for children need to be more measureable and made in three month increments.

Persistence/Retention

- Being clear about the expectation of participating in all three components of the program is important (adult literacy, early literacy, PACT-Parents and Children Together).
- Establishing a relationship with each parent has been a crucial but very time consuming part of getting and keeping parents in the program.

- Personality and ability of staff to relate to families is a key to success. Building relationships is critical to retention and persistence in the program.
- Providing childcare and transportation are often critical factors in determining the success or failure of a program.
- Ask families what kinds of incentives would encourage regular participation and attendance. Short term incentives such as a meal and a book for attending often work much better than long term incentives such as a gas card for attending 10 sessions.
- Offer childcare during daytime and evening classes to accommodate varying work schedules.
- Family literacy programs must be flexible enough to deal with the rapid changes that happen in the lives of the target population.
- Offering sessions for teen parents at mid-day tends to be more successful. They also prefer to attend with their own peer group.
- Actively address obstacles to attendance such as transportation, childcare and food is critical to the success of the program.
- Weekly check in sessions with parents that actively address “what’s working and what isn’t” in their progress toward educational and parenting goals is critical to staying ahead of potential obstacles.
- Hosting regular story hours and intergenerational community events not only boosted families’ literacy awareness and practice at home, but also dramatically increased attendance in the adult education portion of the program.
- It is critical to keep in constant contact with families, but it is also important to realize that the parents of teen parents sometimes contribute to the problems and inhibit involvement.
- Following up with parents when they cancel or postpone their visits with adult education or literacy volunteers helps them talk about their anxieties and challenges. Once they have been able to talk about it and see that they have support they are more willing to follow through.
- Offering a rewards-based program was an effective tool to increase overall attendance and participation in literacy activities
- The community that is established in the classroom early on is responsible for the retention of individuals and for the recruitment of new families.

- Outreach and assistance with transportation are critical to engaging teen parents.
- Teens are more interested in attending midday activities and groups, especially with other teen mothers

Instruction/Adult Literacy

- New Books, New Readers, a program of the Maine Humanities Council, provides many MEFLI programs with a popular, as well as effective, piece of their adult education component.
- A strong connection to and affiliation with an adult education provider is critical to establishing a solid adult literacy component.
- If you want to know what interests parents, ask them!
- Time of day for meetings is crucial to the success of teen parents. Mornings do not work.
- Teen parents need to feel ownership in the planned activities. Setting goals and planning activities gives the activities to have more meaning for them.
- Home visits work. Teen parents are more likely to participate consistently when involvement includes home visits.
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- Many families needed repeated modeling and practice before trying techniques on their own.
- Asking parents to commit to shorter term modules helps them make a commitment to the program. Once relationships have developed with the teachers, it is much easier for them to continue.
- Adult Education teachers need to be flexible and base teaching on what the adult needs to know at that stage in their development. This does not mean working out of workbooks,

but does mean using authentic materials that have meaning to the learner.

- Bring volunteers into the ESL classroom to provide one-on-one support and instruction.
- Rule of thumb: have as many volunteers available as family members you plan to serve.
- The ESL teacher must be relentless about student participation in the class. Make students responsible for calling in to leave a message when they cannot attend. If they don't call in, follow up with a call to them to find out what is keeping them from classes. Be persistent.
- Care should be given to the hiring of adult education teachers who have the ability to build rapport with adult learners. The relationship between teacher and learner is critical to persistence.
- Use of Literacy Volunteers and in-house tutors to support and expand classroom instruction works well. Individuals that are matched with tutors early on tend to sustain in classes.
- A separate family literacy tutor training session of two hours was delivered for literacy volunteers who wished to work with families. This type of training session should be mandatory for tutors who wish to be part of the program.
- Quite often tutor/learner teams tend to pull away from group activities
- Adult learners want curriculum that is central to their lives and must be given the responsibility to assess their own progress and set new goals as they become necessary.

Instruction/ General

- Emphasize the importance of engaged reading with parents AND staff. In order for parents to feel successful in their role as their child's first and most important teacher, we need to show them how engaging the family in books is a simple and powerful way to prepare children for literacy success in school.
- Exposure to many different types of books for young children is important and contributes greatly to home literacy practices and interaction of parents and their young children. A lending library is very helpful in bridging the home school connection.
- Remember to invite relevant others, including stakeholders to intergenerational events to make family literacy visible to them.

The design and on-going development of intergenerational events can be far reaching when experienced people pool their ideas and knowledge.

- Parents and children enjoyed receiving weekly literacy ideas to try at home. They especially liked “Cook with Me!” activities that presented fun recipes for parents to prepare for their children.
- Just because you are serving teen parents, do not assume that the only children in the household are infants. Provide materials and activities for parents/step-parents to do with older children as well.

Evaluation

- Decide what data you want to collect **BEFORE** you bring families into the program. It is difficult to collect the data after they have left the program.
- Bring the evaluator into the program very early on to plan for data collection and informal and formal assessment.
- It is important for local programs to provide training in all of the appropriate assessments for the family literacy coordinator before the program begins.

Marketing

- Developing a logo that is used on all promotional material can help with the visibility and identity of a program.
- Consider developing two different types of promotional brochures; one for potential families that is simple and clear and another as an information tool for providers serving the population you’re trying to recruit.
- Marti Stevens Interactive Improvisational Theatre is an effective tool to convey concepts of family literacy and issues pertinent to the implementation of family literacy programs.
- Including families in PACT activities, who are from the community, but not enrolled in the MEFLI program, can increase the visibility, support, and acceptance of family literacy.
- If families who are ineligible for the family literacy program want to be involved, encourage them to volunteer for your program.

Promising Practices

- Utilize the mode of communication that best fits the population involved: cell phones, texting, e-mailing and social networking sites like Facebook work well for teens.
- Volunteer at your local food pantry to develop a relationship with families who are in need before recruiting them into the program.
- Engaging the adult educators in the home visits and early childhood classrooms helped them develop relationships with the parents, which helped with retention.
- Volunteers from the high school were invaluable. They are working to provide more structure for the volunteers and possibly give them high school credit for service
- Use of Literacy Volunteer tutors to support and expand classroom instruction works well. The individual relationships between learner and volunteer help with retention in classes and enables parents to attain personal literacy goals. Family Reading Coaches were trained by Literacy Volunteers. These coaches attended the initial literacy tutor training and were asked if they wanted to work with a whole family.
- Whole group literacy events were scheduled early so that children could be home and in bed by 7 p.m. This often meant including dinner to accommodate the time frame, which was greatly appreciated by parents.
- Students –peers in learning, can assist in helping to encourage those they might already know to come to class. The adult ESL learners are the best at promoting and talking about the class to others who might be reticent to attend.
- One program also worked with the food pantry to get food for Meal Packs. The adult educator would “shop” at the food pantry and then work with the early childhood to come up with engaging literacy activities for parent and child to do together while the meal was prepared. Parents loved the free food and the fact that the meal was nutritious and already planned. Children enjoyed the activities and the attention from their parents. Meal time was less stressful. Parents got a meal pack every time they attended class.

- Parent Teacher Organizations are a great group to partner with and a great way to ensure co-generational activities beyond the lifetime of the grant.
- Engage the parents in designing/planning playgroup activities to give them practice as well as ownership.
- New Books New Readers is an effective way to get adult learners to read and discuss books and develop skills that will help them read and discuss stories with their children.
- Borders' "Books and Beyond" is a program in which all family literacy programs can participate. It takes one person to request a book drive for the benefit of the local family literacy program. In Bangor hundreds of books were collected for the areas low income families.
- Offering free books and a free bookshelf at home visits to those families who are struggling to make it to class provided an excellent incentive for scheduling the first home visit, future participation in the class and recruitment of new families.
- In a small community, it is important to get the "favorite" elementary teachers involved in the program. Young parents were more willing to participate when they knew and liked the teacher working with their child.
- Opening up play groups to families not enrolled in family literacy allowed FL parents to observe other parents interacting with their children. These observations were discussed during parenting sessions.
- Music Together playgroups were a huge draw for families, opening up new possibilities for the association of music, rhythm, beat and play in literacy.
- Communication is key to recruiting and retaining ELL families. Use of the home school coordinator who speaks the language and understands the culture is critical.
- Asking parents to volunteer twice a month in their child's Head Start program helps parents feel a connection to their child's education and keeps them engaged in their child's continued growth.
- Allowing parents to plan and provide literacy activities is beneficial to the parent and the program.
- Encouraging seniors and other volunteers from the community to "adopt" a family literacy family is an effective way to connect

families to their community and create caring relationships in their lives.

- Encouraging parents to develop literacy projects at home and present them to their peers in class encouraged more hesitant parents to try new activities.
- Having parents engage in a “buddy system” encouraged them to check in regularly with their chosen buddy and brainstorm obstacles to class attendance, share ideas for improvement and build relationships.
- Pre-teaching the Fun Family Friday activities to the parents increased their confidence as their child’s first teacher.
- Asking for three “references” before enrolling them in class gave the program enough contact to be able to reach the student should cell service be discontinued.
- Providing child care during class time gives teen parents a break from their children and they report having more patience once they return home.