

Summary of Community Conversation: Family Learning and Literacy April 2007

On April 11, 2007, a Community Conversation provided community leaders, public officials, educators, childcare professionals, and parents with the opportunity to convene over dinner and discuss the issues surrounding Family Learning and Literacy. Sixty-four (64) people attended. The event was sponsored by the Vernon School Readiness Council, Vernon Board of Education, and Vernon Education Foundation.

The primary consideration of the evening was, “What is the best way to promote family learning in Vernon?” Participants discussed the important role of families in making the home a learning place where everyone builds skills needed for success in school and life. The Vernon School Readiness Council felt that this topic is critical for several reasons:

- Parents are a child’s first teachers; the home is the center of learning.
- Family learning is everybody’s business; it happens in everyday activities.
- The whole community benefits when families are learning together because strong families create strong communities.

BACKGROUND

As discussed during the slideshow presentation, family literacy is a community affair. Communities can offer a variety of reading materials. They can also create public places that invite and encourage reading. Research has shown that in such communities, children and adults read more, and reading is valued. Literacy programs in the community should be creative and culturally respectful since we have a wonderfully diverse community. We can build upon family strengths when promoting and developing literacy programs. Also, early childhood educators might partner with adult education programs to form family literacy initiatives.

It is important to provide support for those families who face the most challenges. The home-based learning environment can often be enriched by offering specific services for families, expanding and enhancing successful programs, and utilizing a variety of media outlets to publicize issues and available resources. Such a support network might include adult education and ESL programs, Literacy Volunteer programs, family resource centers, training for childcare providers, public agencies, libraries, religious groups, and other interested organizations. If information is made available to families, they can decide which services would be most useful to them.

Individuals and families might promote family learning and literacy in the following ways:

- Spending time with children in activities at home and in the community
- Participating in cultural activities like library programs, community concerts and school events

- Organizing volunteers to share talents or to provide tutoring for children who need extra help
- Monitoring their child's progress at school and communicating regularly with teachers to find out how to help their child at home
- Becoming informed about resources in the community and using them

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

The following questions were discussed in four groups of participants:

1. How would you define “family learning and literacy?”

Participants discussed the importance of getting the whole family involved in learning, as well as enabling children to have a variety of experiences. After an event, families may help children process the experiences so the learning can continue. Groups felt that family learning and literacy include families using everyday items and activities to promote learning, reading, signing, supporting children through school, modeling behavior, and having routine/structured sharing time. Family learning and literacy is a group effort, in which experience and sharing result in education.

2. In what ways does your family promote learning and literacy in your home for adults and children? What are some barriers to these efforts?

Many activities in which learning and literacy are promoted at home were discussed in the small groups. Games, music, dinner conversation, competition, visiting the library, educational toys, cooking, trips, going to museums, using internet resources, reading at home, and asking children questions were activities identified. It was felt that there are many ways to promote learning and literacy in everyday interactions.

The barriers identified included limited time (listed by all groups), financial pressures, lack of interest, feelings of disconnection from the community, lack of resources, lack of education, language and cultural differences, limited child development knowledge, expectations that schools/church will provide education instead of parents/families, societal changes, and limited interaction among family members.

3. How does family learning and improved literacy make families stronger and help them succeed in the world/benefit the community?

The groups discussed the correlation between literacy and student achievement, closer family relationships, greater confidence and self esteem, positive perception of education, community involvement, self control, increased opportunity, ability to function in a diverse world, and development of strong values. The participants felt that family learning improves literacy, prevents future problems, reduces costs to society in the long run, attracts more people to the community, and motivates people to “give back.” Other positive outcomes mentioned were respect for others, reduced crime, and reduced stress.

4. How could the community assist your family's efforts to learn and improve literacy?

Participants discussed many ideas for assisting family efforts to learn and improve literacy. These included increasing networking opportunities among local organizations to promote the availability of community services, publicizing available services, reaching out to new families, increasing school district communication with parents, and providing more family activities. Specific recommendations that were developed at the Community Conversation included:

- ❑ Raise knowledge among organizations about services available (interconnection)
- ❑ Organize a Welcome Wagon and reach out to new families
- ❑ Publish a website directory of available services
- ❑ Survey parents about their needs and offer workshops
- ❑ Provide forums for parents to share experiences and ideas
- ❑ Distribute lists of books appropriate for different ages
- ❑ Publicize skills needed for school readiness prior to kindergarten (make available at library, pediatrician offices, clinics, pharmacies, etc.)
- ❑ Increase school district communication with parents and follow through (birth – 3)
- ❑ Provide additional free family activities (recruit volunteers)
- ❑ Increase availability of preschool (universal preschool)
- ❑ Promote adult education
- ❑ Support/expand Family Resource Center(s)
- ❑ Provide early childhood resource kits
- ❑ Support/expand library programs and free passes
- ❑ Expand availability of library literacy kits (now available only to day care providers)
- ❑ Provide more weekend and evening literacy programs
- ❑ Promote community support of education and associated funding

The discussions and ideas generated at the Community Conversation demonstrated that there is interest in promoting literacy and family learning in the Vernon community. Future plans should be considered to continue the conversation and further discuss the ideas for increased community assistance, involvement and support.