
VILLAGE EMPOWERMENT SEMINAR

Howard County Public School System

Ellicott City, Maryland

The first annual Village Empowerment Seminar was designed to maximize school, family, and community partnerships in the district’s Title I elementary schools to support the education of children identified by district data as underachieving. The seminar targeted parents of these children as well as central office and school-based personnel in an effort to empower all stakeholders to develop a plan for partnerships to support families’ and schools’ educational goals for students. Specifically, the seminar strove to empower parents to support their children’s learning in new ways, develop a personal plan for accomplishing identified goals, and network with other parents. The seminar aimed to give central office and school staff new ways to develop two-way communication with families and strategies to support family involvement in all areas and classrooms. Overall, the Village Empowerment Seminar allowed stakeholders time to engage in rich discussions centered on family involvement and its connections with school improvement and school reform.

From 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. on Saturday, April 20th, fifty-five parents and grandparents and forty school staff engaged in informative activities and animated discussions at the district staff development center. The first session focused on “Empowering Families from Plans to Practice” with an emphasis on creating a school-wide vision and plan for family involvement. This session was followed by a brunch from 10:00 to 11:00 a.m. where participants visited the community resource table and networked with each other. Then the facilitator led a session, “Creating an Action Plan for Achievement,” for parents to get to know their children’s learning styles, learning preferences, and optimal learning environment. For the rest of the seminar, parents were guided in making an individual plan to support their children as well as strategies to use in communicating this information to teachers.

A planning committee of staff and parent representatives collaboratively handled preparations for the Village Empowerment Seminar. The committee created and distributed invitations for parents and memos for staff; hired an outside facilitator; secured a caterer; designed a logo for programs, notepads, and a banner; ordered tote bags, books, and local resource information; contracted two busses to pick up participants at each school and identified neighborhoods; created a database to record participant information; obtained door prizes including dictionaries

and other educational materials; and made phone calls, phone calls, and more phone calls to parents.

One challenge was knowing how many staff and parents would attend the seminar. Parent-friendly registration strategies were designed to ease this challenge. Parents could register by returning the response form to school in person or by mail, or by calling in their RSVP. Overall, personal outreach on an individual basis was the most successful strategy for the planning team to secure replies from staff and parents.

To support parent and other caregiver attendance, the team arranged childcare on site at the seminar location. There were approximately fifty children ages 2-11 registered for childcare. Ten adult school system employees with the aid of teen volunteers provided indoor and outdoor structured activities for the children. While the adults had brunch, the children ate pizza.

The event budget totaled approximately \$5500 with most of the expense allocated for the outside facilitator's fees and expenses. The seminar's strong response from participants made this money well spent. The Achievement Equity Office, the Black Student Achievement Elementary Office, and the Family and Community Outreach Office all contributed funds for the seminar.

The first annual Village Empowerment Seminar helped establish relationships between schools and families of students with promise. With continued support from the district, the information and strategies gathered from the seminar will translate into ongoing effective practices.

Jean W. Lewis, Family and Community Outreach Specialist
(410) 313-6794, ext. 353