

The Village Empowerment Seminar: Be a Key-Maker

Howard County Public Schools
Columbia, Maryland

Leadership was the name of the game during Howard County Public School's Village Empowerment Seminars last year. Parents from across the county attended three sessions to learn strategies to influence student success.

Leaders from the district's Family and Community Outreach Office first envisioned the seminars seven years ago to help increase parent leaders from diverse backgrounds—a goal stated in their district objectives. They already had a framework and examples of successful activities for parents and schools to partner on small scale, but the district wanted to increase outreach and participation. District facilitators decided that a series of three seminars would be a good way to bridge the gap between schools and parents.

The district appointed parent liaisons to work with culturally diverse parents across the district. In particular, the district targeted families with children who were below grade level in reading and math, and those in special programs funded by Title I. Liaisons recruited as many of these parents as possible and then worked to arrange child care for them so they could attend the seminars. District administrators advertised the seminars in newsletters, e-mail, and colorful invitations hand delivered by staff to the selected parents.

The first session, held in October, focused on how parents could assume leadership positions in their children's schools. This workshop included a panel discussion led by veteran parent volunteers, known as Key-Makers. The second session, in February, had parents apply what they learned from the first meeting. The participants listed their leadership activities on large poster board and received feedback from the group. Key-Makers spoke about effective techniques for child advocacy in the schools, then worked in small groups to draft action plans for their individual children. At the third session, breakout groups

focused on decision making, encouraging parents to participate on school committees and to organize members of their own families to support their children's learning goals. The session ended with an open mike forum, drawing feedback from parents about the kinds of programs they'd like to see at future seminars. Parent liaisons met with participants after each session to support workshop goals and activities.

Evaluations collected at the end of the series heralded the program's success. By the end of the spring, the series had prepared 110 parents to assume advocacy roles in their children's schools.

"I wish I had known about this when my first child was in elementary school," one parent said.

"This is the way to help parents navigate the system," commented a teacher.

The event cost \$3,500, mostly for food and child care services. The district used funds from the specialist's office to cover expenses. They plan to continue the practice, scheduling the sessions closer together to strengthen continuity for information and actions. They also plan to allot more time for parents to network at the end of each seminar.

Jean West Lewis
Family Outreach Specialist
(410) 313-6794
lewis@hcpss.org