

## Engaging Parents in Project Planning and Implementation

by Belinda Basca and Esther Lucas



### CASE STUDY

Each of the 35 counties in California awarded the California Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities (SDFSC) grant was required to include a parental component within their program structure. Its focus is on increasing parental involvement by making parents aware of what is happening in children's lives and giving them the power to choose the services their children receive. The impetus is that empowered parents are more likely to feel supported by the schools and communities in which they live.

The *SDFSC Case Study Series* is intended to provide a snapshot of the programs implemented and lessons learned by SDFSC grantees as a service to other grantees and alcohol and drug prevention providers.

The *SDFSC Case Study Series* is a publication of the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Technical Assistance Project (SDFSC TA Project), funded and directed by the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs (ADP) and managed by the Center for Applied Research Solutions (CARS). The Case Study series is intended to provide a snapshot of the programs implemented and lessons learned by SDFSC grantees as a service to other grantees and alcohol and drug prevention providers.

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## INTRODUCTION

Each of the 35 counties in California awarded the California Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities (SDFSC) grant was required to include a parental component within their program structure.

The driving force behind this component inclusion is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which President Bush initiated three days after taking office in January 2001. A focus of this legislation is on increasing parental involvement by making parents aware of what is happening in children's lives and giving them the power to choose the services their children receive. The impetus is that empowered parents are more likely to feel supported by the schools and communities in which they live.

An additional driving force behind increased parental involvement was the renewed focus by the Department of Education (DOE) on ensuring quality and effective SDFSC programs. The Principles of Effectiveness (POE) served as a framework for planning, implementing, and evaluating all SDFSC programs. Established in 1998, the principles were revised after the enactment of the NCLB to include a parent involvement component. That component guides programs to: "Include meaningful and ongoing consultation with and input from parents in the development of, application and administration of the program or activity."

Research shows that when parents are involved in their children's lives, the children exhibit more positive attitudes and behavior (National PTA, 1998). In addition, problems such as alcohol use, violence, and antisocial behavior have been found to decrease as parent involvement increases. In fact, the most accurate predictor of students' achievement in school is not income or social status. Rather, it is the extent to which their family creates a home environment that encourages learning; communicates high, yet reasonable expectations for their achievement and future career; and is involved in their education at school and in the community (National PTA, 1998).

Riley (1994) also noted that successfully engaging parents entails the following program components:

#### **Successful programs are often collaborations**

Successful programs involving parents often require that community organizations and agencies move beyond their usual ways of operating. To fully engage parents, programs become partners with them in more intensive programs and community-wide events.

#### **Successful programs are long term**

Involving parents in programs can be a difficult task. In particular, for community-driven programs it can take a long time to bring about community change. Successful programs are those that keep their participants motivated through the vicissitudes as they strive to better their community.

Successful programs have specific outcomes. Programs do not try to make everything better, but they have clear goals that focus on specific topics such as stopping youth access to alcohol or getting parents to talk with their teens about sex. They may also be targeted by age, since topics of interest to parents and

teens may differ from topics of interest to parents of infants.

#### **Successful programs intervene at critical periods**

Successful programs strive to intervene to prevent problems before they are well established. They also try to intervene at family transition points when parents are most receptive to learning (e.g. the first year of life; at parental divorce; at stepfamily formation; at child's puberty).

#### **Successful programs build on parents' existing strengths**

Programs should focus on the strengths that its participants bring to it. Focusing on deficits makes people feel incapable and defensive, so that they are less likely to take the chance to experiment with new ideas or skills. All people have strengths and abilities, and effective programs recognize and build upon those abilities. Successful programs are open to all; they do not require parents to prove they are failures or "at risk" before giving them services.

These research findings provide strong evidence regarding the importance of engaging parents in the project planning and implementation of prevention services their children are receiving through the SDFSC programs. In addition, keeping parents informed and involved empowers them to provide feedback and input regarding the services their children are receiving; parental feedback can be critical to ensuring program success.

Several SDFSC programs have successfully engaged parents in project planning and implementation. The North San Mateo County Youth Development Partnership is one such program, and is the subject of this case study.

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The North San Mateo County Youth Development Partnership provides a multi-tiered, youth development program (Stay Safe) which includes after-school, in-school, and off-campus services and groups for high school students ages 14-18 in four high schools of the Jefferson Union High School District (JUHSD): Westmoor and Jefferson in Daly City; Oceana, and Terra Nova in Pacifica.

Stay Safe programming includes an adapted Life Skills training and education component in after-school activity-based groups and in-school support-based groups, peer-to-peer Mentoring opportunities, youth-led Environmental Prevention-based leadership groups, community involvement, and a wide range of alternative/enrichment activities including field trips, outdoor education, poetry events, and guest speakers throughout the year.

These programs are part of a continuum of services and strategies provided through the collaborative efforts of Asian American Recovery Services (AARS), Youth Leadership Institute (YLI), JUHSD, San Mateo County of Alcohol and Drug Services (SMADS) and evaluator WestEd to help facilitate healthy and positive youth development and community support.

### **The Partnership for a Safe and Healthy Pacifica**

On February 4, 2005, two teenagers from Pacifica were

tragically killed in an alcohol-related vehicle accident. The vehicle was driven by a third friend. The North San Mateo County Youth Development Partnership provided support and guidance as the community responded to this tragedy.

In its early development, the Partnership for a Safe and Healthy Pacifica utilized data to support its actions. The Partnership sponsored a youth-led panel discussion on youth access to alcohol and alcohol-related problems in Pacifica and co-hosted a focus group with Terra Nova High School youth. The Partnership also made use of existing California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) data and Stay Safe Youth Access Survey data to inform their planning process. In 2004, with the assistance of YLI and utilizing the YLI Access Survey, Stay Safe youth administered nearly 1,000 surveys to students in their four high schools.

In March 2005, the Stay Safe Youth Coalition (SSYC) was formed to take on the environmental aspect of the North San Mateo County Youth Development Partnership. SSYC draws its membership from the four Stay Safe groups. SSYC staged a press conference in June 2005 to share the survey findings. The survey findings provided guidance to the Partnership in terms of the status of youth access to alcohol in Pacifica, and most particularly among youth attending Terra Nova High School in Pacifica.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

**Margaret Mead**

### Some of the Stay Safe Youth Coalition's Youth Access Survey<sup>1</sup> and CHKS<sup>2</sup> Survey Findings:

- Social sources, peers and adults are the primary way in which youth get alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.<sup>1</sup>
- Terra Nova High School ranks in the top 5% of California schools for reported binge drinking (5+ drinks in 90 minutes).<sup>2</sup>
- 36% of 11th grade youth report that they regularly engage in binge drinking. <sup>2</sup>
- 42% admit to have driven while drunk or been in a car with a drunk driver. <sup>2</sup>
- 40% of Terra Nova and Oceana High School students report that youth are able to buy their own alcohol and that less than 30% of sales clerks consistently ask for ID.<sup>1</sup>
- Factors that contribute to alcohol use among youth include: 1) weak or non-enforced policies, 2) poor adult role models, 3) easy access, 4) advertising, and 5) a tolerant community.

Today, the Partnership is a coalition with approximately 75 members, with an active core group of about 40. Participants represent student support and community groups, parents, city and county elected leaders and public officials, substance abuse prevention, treatment and recovery providers, elementary, middle and high schools and district leadership and staff, law enforcement, faith communities, local business, and more.

Some key projects they have achieved over the past two years include the following:

- RAMA (Responsible Alcohol Merchant Awards) is an awards program that recognizes local merchants that meet a set of criteria with regard to alcohol sales

practices. Adult/youth teams interview the merchants. Those who meet the criteria receive the RAMA. Awardees are publicly recognized at the Chamber of Commerce luncheon, City Council meeting, and in the local press.

- Presentations and outreach to community groups, organizations and professionals, including school administrators, law enforcement, County Health and Human Services managers, and the County Driving Under the Influence (DUI) program providers.
- Implementation of a youth-led Community Mapping project to support local assets, promote existing programs and opportunities, talk about the community's needs and do a preliminary assessment of Pacifica.

- The Partnership has successfully maintained a monthly Parent Discussion Group, free of charge, at the Pacifica Community Center. A local marriage and family therapist, who is also an active Pacifica parent, facilitates the group.
- The Partnership is embarking on a social marketing campaign to create messaging for target populations and have youth lead the process and distribution of the message they create. The San Mateo County Health Department is taking the lead for this process.

Currently there are approximately 20 parents actively involved in the Partnership (approximately 50% of the total core group). Parental involvement in the Partnership takes many forms. Some ways that parents are involved include the following:

- Two parents are co-chairs of the RAMA/Social Access workgroups
- Three parents sit on the Steering Committee
- One parent is the facilitator for the Parent Discussion groups

Four parents are active action group members conducting surveys to local merchants as part of adult/youth teams, assist at teen nights, participate in research, and help to guide and mentor the youth members

Parents have been active in the Partnership since its inception, and it is actively working to outreach and engage more parents in the Partnership.

## BEST STRATEGIES

There are several key strategies that the Partnership for a Safe and Healthy Pacifica has utilized as they strive to engage parents. They include the following:

### 1. Meetings are held in locations and at times when parents are likely to attend.

Successful programs that engage parents are delivered in a variety of settings, including homes, schools, or community institutions, with transportation or childcare provided when needed. When meetings are held in locations and at times that meet parents' needs, they are more likely to attend and participate.

Within the Partnership for a Safe and Healthy Pacifica, the Partnership Steering Committee develops an agenda for the general meetings with a focus on topics that are relevant to the lives of parents and families. General meetings and work groups have a clear purpose and do not meet just to meet. Typically,

general meetings include dinner; while workgroup meetings are usually "pot-luck" style and held at central locations; usually in local homes of workgroup members.

### 2. Help parents feel a sense of belonging to the school and the larger community.

Parents who are engaged in a collaborative process will feel a greater sense of "ownership" of the prevention plan and belonging to the school and larger community. They will also be more invested in obtaining positive outcomes. By fostering an environment in which parents feel like they belong, they will be motivated and better prepared to make decisions about which prevention strategies or programs should be selected to meet the identified needs of the community.

The North San Mateo County Youth Development Partnership noted that the formation of the

Partnership for a Safe and Healthy Pacifica fostered an atmosphere of teamwork among the members. This sense of teamwork continues today with the workgroup process in which responsibility is shared by all to promote the health and well-being of the Pacifica community. This creates an atmosphere in which Partnership members, including parents, feel a sense of trust, attachment, and a sense of belonging to the school and community. When families feel support and encouragement from the school and larger community, they will most likely feel attached to that community, practice the values it promotes, and their children will succeed academically and socially.

### **3. Acknowledge that community change takes time**

Community-driven community change takes time. Unless it is a specific topic of interest to parents, they rarely have the time or energy to devote to such issues. The tragic events in Pacifica were a “call to action” for many parents in the community.

Fortunately, in this example, capacity within the community was already present, which facilitated the formation of the Partnership. When the County initially got its SDFSC grant, it made a strong effort to bring its partners together. AARS staff, which came from a support background, was trained and mentored in environmental prevention by YLI. In addition, the JUHSD was a collaborative partner in implementing the grant-funded services, and the relationships between all the partners were strengthened over time. Each high school has a Special Services Counselor who provided liaison to the Stay Safe staff and services. The JUHSD’s participation was also evidenced by its support of the youth-led data collection efforts and other

environmental activities. Successful collaboration and capacity building upstream and the data collection from the Youth Access Surveys provided a strong foundation to provide leadership and maintain momentum and focus for the community when the tragedy happened.

In addition, although SDFSC funding provided this initial capacity and support for the Partnership, the infrastructure of the collaborative partners in the project allowed the Pacifica community to continue addressing alcohol problems in their community with the technical assistance and commitment from partnership agencies and young people participating in Stay Safe groups. Because the groundwork was there when a Drug Free Communities grant opportunity presented itself, the Partnership was able to successfully apply. This will provide important funding to sustain the Partnership over time as they continue to enact community change in Pacifica.

### **4. Engage parents in specific tasks and activities that are relevant to them**

Parents, and adults in general, have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. They need to connect what they do in the collaboration to this knowledge/experience base. To help them do so, prevention providers should draw out members’ experience and knowledge which is relevant to the specific task or activity. By doing so, parents can engage in activities that are most relevant to them, and their previous knowledge can provide valuable input during the planning and implementation of the project.

The Partnership for a Safe and Healthy Pacifica utilizes the skill sets that parents bring to the Partnership

**“While participation is greatly valued, we absolutely need more parent participation and support. I know that the Steering Committee is always searching for new approaches to reach the parents who need it to the most.”**

Mary Bier, Coordinator,  
Partnership for a Safe  
and Healthy Pacifica

in a variety of ways. For example, two parents developed and produced a short impactful and educational documentary video about the crash and its aftermath, featuring youth and parents as the cast and crew. This video is utilized by the Community Education work group in their presentations. Another parent with experience in interviewing and public speaking, partnered with a youth to moderate a panel discussion addressing social host issues at a recent general partnership meeting. Parents also contribute their perspectives, concerns, and talents through hosting, facilitating and contributing to work group meetings and projects, attending the general partnership meetings, and supporting their teens who participate.

## TIPS FOR REPLICATING SUCCESS

San Mateo County also shared with us some tips on replicating success for other SDFSC programs who are trying to engage parents in program planning and implementation.

### To help parents feel a sense of belonging to the school and the larger community

- Encourage parent ownership of the group through joint responsibility and decision-making
- Utilize a variety of strategies (not everything appeals to everyone); acknowledge that there is something for everyone to contribute; and emphasize inclusion, acknowledgement and appreciation
- Provide guidance around evidence-based strategies while keeping focused on gaining members' perspectives and learning from parents and youth
- Use group processes that help parents and other partnership members work together
- Share leadership roles with parents. Build on their strengths and commitment, give them opportunities for growth and learning, encourage them to take a leadership role in the workgroups
- Have group-centered, rather than leader-centered, discussions
- Work with conflict openly and respectfully
- Provide opportunities for parents to give feedback regarding the group, its mission, and the activities it is promoting

### To acknowledge that community change takes time

- Share with parents the efforts in other counties in which community change was achieved...in particular those that were long-term processes
- Coordinate with other counties to share their stories... in particular ways in which parents worked to bring about community change
- Have patience, build collaboration and leadership skills, do research (gather data and share it!), and celebrate each incremental step. The process, and the community involvement in the process, is a big part of the change

### To engage parents in specific tasks and activities that are relevant to them

- When a parent joins the program, take some time to talk with them one-on-one to assess their interests, strengths, and needs
- Gather and maintain contact information through sign-in sheets, listserves, and phone trees so that when opportunities arise or events are planned, parents know about them

- Link to/invite community organizations to join the program, particularly organizations that serve parents, youth and families. When these organizations are represented, they will bring their members

### To outreach and engage parents

- Highlight program activities in the local media
- Facilitate community presentations of program achievements
- Outreach to parents at local farmers markets, festivals, and through the word of other parents
- Set up a “buddy system” in which experienced parents support new parents
- Encourage teachers and staff members at local schools to encourage parent participation
- Have program presentations be part of mandatory school meetings such as freshman orientation or back to school nights
- Promote program through athletics programs and booster meetings

#### Additional Resources

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