

# Onondaga Citizens League meeting notes—July 10, 2013

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Meeting held at ProLiteracy, 104 Marcellus St., Syracuse

Co-chairs: Paul Predmore and Laurie Black

Attendees: Harold Breon, Ginny Carmody, Mark Clary, Chris Flynn, Nancy Gabriel, Maria Gill, Stan Goettel, Connie Gregory, Michelle Haas, Kathleen Harter, Holly Hastings, Melissa Hidek, Peter Knoblock, Annette Krisak, Cynda Lamb, Sarah McIlvain, Lauren Merola, Donna O'Mahony Rohde, Janet Park, Marie Perkins, Frank Ridzi, Joan Royle, Christine Scott,

Presenters: Michelle Haas - Catholic Charities - Parenting Programs  
Kathy Harter- ED of The Children's Consortium  
Christine Scott - Peace Inc., Head Start/Early Head Start  
Vanessa Garrant - Peace Inc., Head Start/Early Head Start  
Monique Wright-Williams, Parent University, Say Yes to Education

OCL: Sandra Barrett and Becky Sernett

Summary: Representing the family support subcommittee, representatives of four local organizations that work with families of young children in Onondaga County presented what programs they offer to engage and support parents.

Upcoming Meetings: All meetings will be held from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. at ProLiteracy, 104 Marcellus Street, Syracuse. The next meeting dates are as follows, with information on which subcommittees will be giving presentations:

- Tuesday, July 23—Delivery Systems
- Week of Aug. 5—TBD

Subcommittees:

Committee members are invited to participate on one (or more) of the subcommittees listed below. Subcommittee topics can be considered the main themes that have emerged so far in the Early Childhood Education discussions, and these themes need further research, development and refinement. Subcommittees meet separately from the larger committee to discuss these topics, gather research/resources and eventually present what they've learned to the main committee. To sign up for a subcommittee, contact Sandra Barrett at 315-443-4846 or [ssbarret@uc.syr.edu](mailto:ssbarret@uc.syr.edu).

- **Local Data and Funding:** 0-5 population and poverty census data; child care supply and need; local statistics on school readiness, literacy, absenteeism, graduation rates, etc.; public investments in child care in Onondaga County.
- **Family Supports:** current parenting programs and other family support programs; summer and after-school programs.

- **Delivery System:** quality and effectiveness indicators; networks and partnerships; priorities.
- **Model Programs and Practices:** summary of national research findings on early childhood education and learning; examples of effective programs from other communities; examples of local best practices (Chemung County may be a good place to start).

### **Today's Topic: Family Supports**

**Children's Consortium**—The Children's Consortium serves as a resource for parents in Onondaga County, with parenting education programs and workshops. A full listing of the consortium's resources can be found online at: [www.childrensconsortium.org](http://www.childrensconsortium.org).

Kathy Harter, executive director of The Children's Consortium, had five pieces of advice for how to engage and build relationships with parents:

1. "Go where they are," she said. This shows how much an organization is willing to help, and moves them from seeming "threatening" as outsiders to the family unit. Organizations can host events at libraries, visit church groups, meet parents at parks...there are many ways to meet parents where they are.
2. Help parents understand the message that, "Parenting is really the hardest job you'll ever love." Parenting is a job, and everyone has room to improve as a parent, and it can and will require training.
3. Teach parents that most mistakes can be corrected. For example, a parent who has exercised corporal punishment on his or her child in the past, can learn a new way of discipline.
4. Remind parents that they are their children's first and best teacher. "Preserving and strengthening a child's self esteem is very important."
5. Children's needs and challenges are constantly changing, she said, and so parents will need to learn new communication skills. Remind parents that what may have worked before with their child when he or she was eight, may not work when he or she turns 16.

Harter said she knows that many of the local parenting programs are working, because of the "concrete evidence" of progress with some children and parents who participate. It is disheartening, then, when difficult economic times mean a cut in funding for certain programs and a decrease in families' participation. Families are suffering right now.

If she had extra money to spend on family support activities, Harter would spend it on literacy and home visits. “Parents don’t understand the value of having books in the home,” she said. And bringing more support directly to children’s home would extend the reach of care.

“There’s a big stigma in getting help,” she said. And this does prevent parents from asking for what they need to help their children. Part of the problem is how “reactionary” and “critical” our society is. Many of us fear getting our hands slapped.

“The biggest challenge we face is financial,” she said. “Are you going to pay me now to make sure [a problem] doesn’t happen, or are you going to pay me later to clean up the mess?”

Another “huge” challenge is reaching families before there’s a problem. “Let’s start working with moms before a baby crawls,” she said. The consortium recently was awarded an \$82,000 grant to expand the “Baby Beginnings” programs it runs in partnership with Crouse Hospital to St. Joseph’s and Upstate Hospitals as well. The program includes an in-room visit with a parent educator, a newborn class for parents, and a community parenting class, and tries to target these areas: parenting skills, health and wellness, and literacy/language development.

Harter said the consortium serves about 1,000 families each year. In its school district programs, the consortium serves nearly 80 parents each year, and this next year, it will be 100 to 120 parents.

When asked if transportation is an issue for parents, Harter said: “Transportation is a huge issue.” They try to build in transportation funding in their grant proposals (bus tokens and coordinating with P.E.A.C.E., Inc.’s Friends In Service Here volunteer bus service), but families in more rural areas still have difficulty.

**P.E.A.C.E., Inc. Head Start and Early Head Start**— Onondaga County’s Head Start (HS, 3-5 year olds) and Early Head Start (EHS, birth to age 3) programs for children in low-income families are administered by P.E.A.C.E., Inc. The programs assist a total of 1,077 children in Onondaga County, and 97 of those children are in home-based programs (75 in EHS and 22 in HS).

Vanessa Garrant oversees the home-based programs for P.E.A.C.E., Inc. She said the mission is to help parents find “teachable moments.” An educator will visit a family for 90 minutes each week. Visits take the “whole child” approach, encompassing such areas as: health, nutrition, social and emotional well being, physical and cognitive development and more. Twice a month, children and parents come together in small groups for field trips and group learning opportunities. Garrant said the group meetings offer a “rich observation time for home visitors.”

HS/EHS connects families to local resources they may need. Garrant said one of the weaknesses of early childhood education programs in this area is that “they aren’t tapping into all of the resources we have in Onondaga County, or we’re tapping into the same resources and exhausting them.” She hopes the study committee can help brainstorm ways to expand programs’ knowledge of resources and/or create ways to make more efficient use of them.

The home-based programs also help expecting parents. Families are visited by a registered nurse, and may include information about pre- and post-natal care, breastfeeding, and childbirth and newborn education, as well as many other topics to help families prepare for the arrival of their baby.

The HS home-based program helps prepare kids for school by making the twice-monthly socialization programs like a “preschool.” For many rural families, there is no preschool for their children, and so these group meetings provide children with an introduction to a school environment.

HS/EHS intake workers try to pair families with the best program options for them, Garrant said. This may be a home-based or center-based program, or a program run through one of the affiliated day care centers.

“Child development isn’t always the most pressing issue,” Garrant said. “A lot of times there’s way more baggage than we’re equipped for.” Home visitors focus on helping parents learn the life skills they need to become better parents.

“Parent involvement and parent engagement is the cornerstone of Head Start,” said Christine Scott, HS/EHS family and community services manager. “Every person with Head Start has ‘parent involvement’ in their job description.”

Each family enrolled in the HS/EHS center-based programs is assigned a family worker. Family workers visit the homes and try to individualize services as much as they can. Scott said that the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement charges HS/EHS programs with seven family engagement outcomes:

- Family Well-being
- Positive Parent-Child Relationships
- Families as Lifelong Educators
- Families as Learners
- Family Engagement in Transitions
- Family Connections to Peers and Community
- Families as Advocates and Leaders

More than 50 percent of the HS/EHS Policy Council members must be parents. Scott said parents feel engaged when they can help set the goals for their children.

If she had extra money to spend on family support activities, Scott would spend it on restoring funding to the programs that were cut because of the sequester. She would also spend more money on transportation. P.E.A.C.E., Inc., offers some transportation services, but she says it's "not enough," especially for families in rural areas.

Some of the challenges are parents' lack of transportation and other issues that may lead to a child's poor attendance in HS/EHS programs. For example, if a home's lights have been shut off and there's no food, getting a child to school is that parent's "last priority," she said. This is why the programs aim to support the parents as best they can.

**Catholic Charities Parenting Programs**—Catholic Charities offers several programs for parents, including:

- **Healthy Start** serves 100 teen parents (in the city of Syracuse) annually, said Michelle Haas, **director of Catholic Charities parenting programs. [is this the correct title?]** The program matches case managers with pregnant or parenting women (with children under the age of 2). Most of the parents have dropped out of high school, and the youngest parent this past year was 14 years old, Haas said, and her 14-year-old partner attended the meetings. Case managers have seen a rise in post-partum and maternal depression. **(I think I've confused two programs here, so I'm emailing Michelle.)**
- **Better Beginnings For Parents & Children** offers home-based, intensive, comprehensive, and flexible clinical therapeutic services for families through individual, family, and group sessions. To qualify for this program, one or both parents must have a history of chronic mental illness.
- The **Parent Aide Program** is more than 40 years old, Haas said. Through intensive home visits, professional parent aides work with families whose children are at risk of being placed in foster care. Some families are mandated to participate in the program and others volunteer, Haas said. To help develop trust, the parent aide will find something positive to compliment the parent on, and work on developing that relationship. Many parents have not had a high school education, Haas said. "They're the most vulnerable and disenfranchised group in the community," she said. "So developing a relationship is key." Around 200 families with 1,200 kids participate in the program each year.
- In the **Incredible Years Parenting Classes** parent mentors spend time with families in their homes, and parents also attend daily or evening classes. Classes focus on these years: birth to age 2, ages 3 to 5, and ages 6 to 12. An

average of 12 parents attend the evening classes each week, and an average of 18 parents attend the day classes. It is an Onondaga County-wide program, but most of the parents are city residents, Haas said.

- The **Parent Education Center (Lullaby League)** offers free infant care classes to pregnant women and their partners and families in Onondaga County.

Haas said Catholic Charities also offers a school-age program funded through OnCare to help parents whose child has an identified emotional disturbance. **(I'm hoping Michelle can provide the name of the program for us.)** Every Wednesday evenings, the group meets to have dinner, and four therapists (two from Catholic Charities and two from ARISE Child & Family Service, Inc.) play with the children as the parents attend class.

Why is parent engagement so important? “We only reach kids through parents,” Haas said.

**Parent University Say Yes to Education**—Parent University offers free workshops for parents and family members of children in the Syracuse City School District (SCSD). Its objectives are to:

1. Provide parents and families with the necessary resources to support their children's educational growth and development;
2. Provide opportunities and support for families to achieve their personal, academic, and non-academic goals;
3. Increase access to and understanding of SCSD core values, policies, and practices;
4. Increase the number of parents who feel positively connected to their child's school;
5. Support and strengthen families by engaging and empowering them through education; and
6. Foster networking and improve collaboration among families, schools, community and faith-based organizations.

Monique Wright-Williams, executive director of parent and family engagement, said the programs are about “giving the parents the strengths and supports so they can feel empowered.” Class topics range from cooking to finances. A program on how to stop living from paycheck to paycheck was particularly popular, she said.

To help with transportation, the program provides bus vouchers. On-site childcare also helps, and the program reimburses parents for childcare as well. They also try to prevent absenteeism by reminding parents of their classes the day before. “If we did not call the families before that class,” Wright-Williams said, “they did not come.”

Classes are offered in the evenings and during lunch hours (called “lunch and learns”). The attendance rate for the mid-day classes is around 75 percent to 100 percent, she said.

“You need to stay in constant communication with parents,” she said. She continually surveys participants for how she can improve the programs.

To reach more parents, Parent University has an iPhone and Droid app, along with a Facebook page. She has also been researching ways to deliver programs to parents so that they don’t need to “show up.” The Parent University in Charlotte, N.C., offers online courses for parents and family members, but Wright-Williams said Syracuse isn’t quite ready for that. While many parents here do have computers, they don’t have Internet access.

#### Next Study Meeting

The next committee meeting will be at 11:30 a.m. at ProLiteracy on Tuesday, July 23.