

Atlanta Promise Neighborhood Family Engagement Roundtable



MEETING OVERVIEW

The United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta (UWMA) and the Morehouse School of Medicine (MSM) have formed a partnership to work on a comprehensive community initiative known as the Atlanta Promise Neighborhood (APN). The APN project seeks to improve the educational, health and social developmental outcomes for children and youth by building community-centered education continuum that serves children and families in the communities of Vine City, Washington Park, Ashview Heights, Bankhead, West End, Adair Park, Mechanicsville, and English Avenue.

On March 25, 2011, UWMA and MSM hosted a Family Engagement Roundtable to bring together community leaders, service providers and families to discuss the challenges for effective family engagement within the APN communities. The goal of this meeting was to develop a shared vision for effective family engagement strategies within early childhood settings, elementary schools and extending learning programs birth-3rd grade within the APN communities.

The meeting was held at Morehouse School of Medicine and over 30 people attended, representing organizations, schools, and families within the APN community.

HIGHLIGHTS

UWMA President, Milton Little Jr., discussed the opportunities to for collaboration and partnership that will bring forth sustained transformation in our APN communities.

B. J. Walker, Senior Fellow – Annie E. Casey Foundation, talked about how the APN initiative can build a framework for success:

- Incorporate evidence-based elements nationally recognized best practice models
- Build on strengths, assets and knowledge of local stakeholders,
- Execute on those things that matter the most

Dr. Martha Okafor – Director, Satcher Institute – MSM, highlighted the local and national perspective on parent engagement, sharing findings from her Neighborhood Healthy Child Development Project. Key findings include:

- Culture matters – parent engagement should be responsive and meaningful to parents/families and engage their participation
- Schools and pre-school organizations should have a parent/family engagement plan
- Standard criteria should be developed for effective parent/family engagement and rewards should be given for excellent practices

Gary Romano, Principal Consultant - Romano Consulting, shared stories and experiences from three other family engagement projects that he took place in: Miami-Dade, FL; Pueblo, Co; and Global Partnership Schools. Through his past efforts he encouraged the APN communities to:

- Listen first to understand why families are making the choices they do
- Remember that every community has strengths
- Realize that every family has the capacity to participate in family engagement

Atlanta Promise Neighborhood Family Engagement Roundtable



Jenny Ocon – Executive Director, Parent Service Project, encouraged the APN communities to systematically focus on those family engagement efforts that are already being done across systems, and look for ways to transform these efforts, making them more strategic, meaningful, and fun for parents.

DISCUSSIONS

Clarification & Mediation, Inc. led roundtable participants in small group discussions surrounding family engagement in the APN communities, including:

- *What are the challenges that keep us from maximizing family engagement in the APN?*
- *What would the ideal model of family engagement in the APN look like?*

Common themes that emerged from the discussions:

- **Challenges:**
 - *Parents unable to participate due to other family and financial issues*
 - *Lack of communication between schools and parents (sometimes viewed as an adversarial relationship)*
 - *Some parents intimidated by their own lack of education*
 - *How to adequately define and measure successful parent engagement (success may look differently in individual families/communities)*
- **Ideal Model – Critical Elements:**
 - *Positive communication between schools and parents*
 - *Parent advocates/leaders to help recruit other parents*
 - *More events/meetings out in the community – not always at the school*
 - *Adaptability – ability to meet the lifestyle of the community environment*
 - *Creative opportunities for more male involvement*
 - *Ongoing evaluation for checks and balances*

NEXT STEPS

Those individuals and organizations interested in participating in future sessions were encouraged to provide their contact information as well as how they would like to participate in the APN initiative. UWMA and MSM will notify those interested of ways to get involved, including future discussions around Family Engagement, leadership sessions, surveys, focus groups and other opportunities.