# **Chapter 8: Program Outreach**

#### Rationale

How many times have you heard the parent of a school-age child exclaim, "If only I had known of ECFE when my children were younger"? Or, after sharing with someone what you do for a living, how often do you hear, "What is ECFE?" Answers to these questions require us to ask the following: How do parents and families learn about our programs and services?

Since its inception, Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) programs were intended to serve *all* parents of children from birth to kindergarten enrollment. ECFE programs have always been voluntary, both for families to participate and for school districts to offer. Program staff must focus not just on reaching full attendance, but on reaching a demographic cross-section of the families living in the communities they serve.

Minnesota Statutes 124D.13, Subdivision 2, lists the program requirements for ECFE programs. One of the requirements (item six) is "a community outreach plan to ensure participation by families who reflect the racial, cultural, and economic diversity of the school district." Item four requires "information on related community resources," which is also a part of the outreach process.

## **Defining Outreach**

The following was adapted from Wikipedia: **Outreach** is an effort by an organization or program to connect its ideas or practices to the efforts of other organizations, groups, specific audiences or the general public. Unlike marketing, outreach does not inherently revolve around a product or strategies to increase market share.

Outreach often takes on an educational component (i.e., the dissemination of ideas, information, etc), but it is increasingly common for organizations to conceive of their outreach strategy as a two-way street in which outreach is framed as engagement rather than solely dissemination or education. Outreach strategies are linked to the organization's mission, and define targets, goals, and milestones.

Considering this definition from Wikipedia, a program might define their outreach plan as an effort by their early childhood programs to connect its services and programming with the general public. More specifically, the effort might include connecting services with the efforts of other organizations or programs (e.g. Head Start, WIC, local hospital, school district, ABE, etc), with groups (e.g. childcare providers, pediatricians, kindergarten teachers, etc) and specific audiences (e.g. parents of children birth to age 5, parents of multiples, parents of children with special needs, grandparents, Hispanic parents, parents of newborns, etc).

Outreach is proactive, purposeful contact with others outside of your organization or program. After defining outreach, programs need to develop and implement an outreach plan. A quick internet search of "community outreach plan" will yield numerous examples.

#### **Program and Outreach Planning**

As ECFE staff develop an outreach plan, it is helpful to carefully think through programming plans. When just starting up a program, this is the obvious way to begin. But even when a program has been operating for some time, it is a good idea to regularly evaluate the plan. Zero-based budgeting can provide a precedent for this process. Instead of using last year's budget and program plan and tweaking them to fit the current year's plan, picture your programming as a detailed list written in chalk on a chalkboard. Now pick up an eraser and carefully wipe off everything on the chalkboard, getting back to a blank slate. Then ask yourselves the following questions: who, what, when, where, and why? Please note, the questions provided below are examples, not a complete list.

#### Who?

Who lives in your school district(s) and/or communities? Who are the families you are trying to reach and what are their characteristics and demographics? Who will teach or deliver the classes or home visits? One parent educator, one children's teacher, parent educator with teacher assistants, parent educator with public health or clinic nurse, parent educator with Adult Basic Education (ABE) or English Language Learner (ELL) or Early Childhood Special Education teacher, parent educator with children's teacher and teacher assistants (typical ECFE staffing), other combinations?

#### What?

What programming will you provide and at what cost to your program and/or families? Center-based classes, special events, and/or home visits? Separate classes to focus on children of different ages? Specific classes for parent affinity groups such as single parents, teen parents, immigrant families, fathers, working mothers, etc.? If mixed age, how will you best serve families of infants? Home visits to families of newborns? What organizations can you work with to reach the families in your service area?

#### When?

What days? Time of day or evening? Length of single class session or home visit? For how many weeks? Any weekend hours? Any summer offerings? How will you compensate staff for time devoted to outreach, preparation, contact, and travel?

### Where?

Parent's home? ECFE or Head Start center? Public or private school site? Childbirth education class or reunion? Hospital? Clinic? Apartment complex? Public library? Family resource center?

#### Why?

Determine one to three goals for each class or home visit series, as well as each individual class or home visit that you plan to deliver. What is the purpose of activities chosen for each class or home visit? If there was low participation in specific program components in the past, think about why.

After creating a clear picture of the who, what, when, where, and why of your ECFE program, you can better focus on *how* to market to the families you aim to serve. (See Chapter 9 for information on preschool census, needs assessment, and budget planning.)

#### **Creating your Outreach Goals**

What do you want to accomplish with your outreach efforts? Some broader goals might be to:

- Increase the visibility of your program or services
- Connect with parents and families
- Broaden community support
- Find new allies and/or partners

After identifying your broader goals, you should list specific, measurable goals. Considering program requirements as set by Minnesota statutes, your goals must include ways to ensure participation by families who reflect the racial, cultural, and economic diversity of the school district.

## **Developing Outreach Strategies**

When developing an outreach plan, think again about the "who" of the families living in your community and/or school district and compare this information with the demographics of your participants and the community at large (see Chapter 12 for information on ECFE Participant Questionnaires and utilize community demographic data, for instance, from www.census.gov). After compiling data, analyze it so you have information to guide your outreach plan. There will be many levels of analysis, so you may want to know ahead of time what information you need. Some programs compare their participant questionnaire demographics with demographics from the Census Bureau. They can then ascertain, for example, if there are there certain segments of the population (e.g. fathers, single parents, Hispanic parents, grandparents raising children, etc) who are under-represented among program participants. In turn, members of these under-represented populations can be sought for suggestions or recruited to parent advisory councils.

Wherever your analysis leads you, a potential next step is to ask staff and advisory council members to brainstorm strategies to better reach and serve these populations. After brainstorming possible strategies, examine the pros and cons of each and select one or more strategies to implement. "Who" will do which outreach tasks and "when?" After implementing the new strategies, assess whether they are effective relative to the time they require.

The following are a sampling of effective outreach strategies used by ECFE programs since their inception in 1974.

- Ask parent participants and professional colleagues to tell others about ECFE.
  Word-of-mouth has been and will likely always be the most effective outreach
  strategy. Parents who participate in and appreciate ECFE tell friends and others
  about the program. After they join and become familiar with the program, these
  parents tell others, and so on. If we think of our own experience, we are more
  receptive to referrals on child care providers, schools, doctors, dentists, carpenters,
  etc. through recommendations from a trusted friend or service provider.
  - Many programs have found social networking sites, like Facebook, to be very effective for word-of-mouth advertising. Check with your district regarding social networking policy issues.

- Send newsletters to every family with children aged birth through kindergarten entrance in the school district or program area. These newsletters should include a brief but clear ECFE program description, class and program offerings, and registration information and be mailed a few weeks prior to each new session of classes. Describe program fees clearly and promote the availability of sliding fees and fee waivers. Newsletters can also be mailed to government officials, faith communities, health providers, agency staff, public and private school personnel, etc. to inform the public about your program offerings.
- Publish an ECFE program description along with class offerings and registration information in the Community Education brochure that is mailed to every household in the school district.
- Post an ECFE program description, class offerings, and registration information on a school district Website - or create a local ECFE Website.
  - o Create a link to your programs on the main page of the district website.
- Use the state's current 13-minute ECFE informational video (available from the Minnesota Department of Education at 651-582-8402 or see Preface Appendix) as part of a presentation by staff or advisory council members to such groups as community agency staff, legislators, candidates, school board members, county commissioners, council members, public and nonpublic school personnel, doctors, hospital personnel, public health nurses, clergy, realtors, service clubs, resource and referral personnel, chambers of commerce, law enforcement, and other community leaders. If applicable, ask them to regularly refer parents to your program.
- To highlight your program, offer open houses and potluck suppers at the program site for the same groups as above.
- Provide public service announcements to local radio and television stations
  throughout the year. Interviews with staff on community service programs on local
  cable television and radio stations are good ways to introduce ECFE and keep it in
  the community spotlight.
- Suggest that advisory council members and parent participants send a letter to the editor of the local newspaper describing their personal experiences with ECFE and recommending the program to other parents.
- Publish weekly or monthly schedules, information on workshops, speakers, field trips, other special events, and class registration procedures in the local newspaper or free community shopper publication.
- List program announcements in local church, temple, and synagogue bulletins and newsletters.
- Send special mailings to families of newborns after getting addresses from newspaper birth announcements and birth records from the Minnesota Department of Health (see Appendix 9B). Enclose a simple flyer with information on your program's offerings for families of infants along with a copy of the state's parent brochure on infants.

- o Make hospital visits to mothers of newborns.
- Supply local health care and child care providers and public libraries with free copies of the state's parent brochures on infants and toddlers (available from the Minnesota Department of Education at 651-582-8402 or see Preface Appendix). Have address stickers made with your program's name and telephone number (with area code) and attach them to the state brochures.
- Organize telephone and/or door-to-door recruiting by parent participants and staff.
   Having a staff member make home visits for program outreach can be very helpful for reaching isolated and/or special needs families.
- Ask parent volunteers and/or ECFE program staff to distribute program information to families at Early Childhood Screening sites, immunization clinics, library story hours, food shelves, and WIC clinics.
- Set up informational booths at community festivals, educational fairs, professional conferences, and county fairs.
- Send brightly colored one-page flyers on ECFE programming home with every public and nonpublic elementary student and child attending a child care center, preschool, or Head Start program.
- Display attractive program posters with attached brochures or calling cards in high traffic locations such as: Laundromats, grocery stores, coffee shops, doctors' and dentists' offices, hospital maternity floors, public libraries, movie rental stores, natural food coops, family restaurants, used clothing stores, apartment building lobbies, major employers' employee lunchrooms, bookstores, and banks.
- For program components that require a fee, publicize the first class session as free
  of charge, offer free classes to families of newborns, distribute discount coupons for
  new participants, and award coupons to current participants for bringing in new
  participants. And *always* publicize the sliding fee scale and availability of fee
  waivers.
- Create adult and child sized T-shirts, tote bags, coffee mugs, or buttons with the program logo and name as a fundraiser. Parents and children who use them provide free advertising for the program.
- Offer inservice training by ECFE program staff to health and human service practitioners, child care staff, and elementary school teachers. At each training's conclusion, briefly promote the ECFE program, provide program brochures, and ask for referrals.
- Arrange and publicize transportation to the program for families without access to cars or public transportation.

#### **Considerations for Printed Program Materials**

The first impression many people will have of the Early Childhood Family Education program is its printed brochures, newsletters, or flyers. With personal computers widely available and printed materials everywhere, it is critical that printed materials about the ECFE program:

- be well written, clear, and succinct and free of spelling, typographical, or content errors.
- include photographs and/or illustrations of diverse families (by age, ethnicity, gender, ability, composition, etc.).
- include information on the "who, what, when, where, and why" of their topic.
- tell about program fees, discounts, and waivers and any transportation assistance available.
- have an attractive and easy-to-read design and layout with a consistent format from issue to issue.
- be attractive to both fathers and mothers and avoid overly "cutesy" illustrations and language.
- offer some educational content such as parent-child interaction suggestions, activity ideas, poems, book reviews, etc. for parents who choose not to participate in the organized programming.
- look professional and polished. Check out and use the printing resources of the school district (e.g., print shop, communication department) or community print businesses.

#### **Suggestions for Writing Press Releases**

The key criteria in determining whether an event is newsworthy are its novelty, timeliness, uniqueness, and human interest. Is your program new or offering a new component? Are you planning a special event that will offer great photo opportunities such as a vehicle fair for parents and children? Has your early childhood teacher just completed a continuing education trip to preschools/child care centers in another country? An article about a newsworthy event at your program will give your program free publicity. The steps to writing a press release are:

- 1. Summarize your story in the lead paragraph. Answer the questions "who, what, when, where, and why" near the beginning of the press release.
- 2. Keep the press release to one page if possible to respect the space limitations of most publications. Include no more than 15 words per sentence or 50 words per paragraph.
- 3. Keep your writing factual and objective. Avoid words that editorialize such as "wonderful, beautiful," or "a good time was had by all."
- 4. Include the address and specific location for any event you want to publicize. You may know where your school or park building is, but not everyone else knows.
- 5. If you mention a name, use the full name with correct spelling.
- 6. Write your release for an average reader who knows little about your organization. Avoid professional jargon and explain terms that may be unfamiliar to a lay reader, even if your staff uses them all the time.
- 7. Double-space type your releases.

- 8. Include your name and phone number with area code and e-mail address at the top of the press release in case someone wants to clarify something, ask a question, or ask for the best time to take pictures.
- 9. Send your release in as early as possible, preferably at least a week before you want it to appear in the paper. Some newspapers publish a deadline for submissions.
- 10. In any press release, include a one or two sentence description of your program with a contact telephone number with area code and e-mail address. *Spell out Early Childhood Family Education, as well as using the better-known acronym ECFE* not everyone knows what ECFE is.

(Press release steps adapted from list by Norma Linsenman.)

## **Program Registration Considerations**

If ECFE programs are truly attempting to serve a demographic cross section of the families in their community, staff must ensure that registration for classes and other program events does not encourage only highly literate and educated, organized, two- parent, assertive, persistent, car owners to enroll. Some registration practices may *limit or exclude* participation of families who are less literate or educated, are new parents of infants, speak English as a second language, do not have stable housing, work long hours at low wages, are single parents, face frequent crises with few resources, or do not have a car. Consider the following:

- first come, first served registration requiring in-person sign-up on a specific day, resulting in long lines and long waits;
- registration required for extensive periods of time such as a semester or school year and/or asking families to register in spring for fall classes, necessitating long range planning and commitment; and
- registration procedures which require completion and submission of long written forms, immunization records, children's social security numbers, emergency contact cards, fee payment or waivers, and other detailed information *prior* to acceptance into classes.

ECFE program registration strategies that will encourage participation by a more diverse variety of families include the following.

- Heavily publicize registration dates with a wide variety of outreach strategies. (See possibilities earlier in this chapter.)
- Keep registrations forms and procedures *clear and simple* and ask for submission of immunization forms, emergency contact forms, etc. at or before the second class meeting.
- Schedule registration and beginning of new classes in the fall, winter, and spring. Include a number of alternate entry points throughout the year, such as open attendance classes for families of infants, drop-in family play times, special family events, and ongoing access to resource libraries.
- Carefully determine relative priority to be given to registrations in person, over the phone, by postal mail, by e-mail, or by Web page. Plan for adequate staffing to process registrations quickly and efficiently.
- To minimize the distraction of phone inquiries during registration, publicize how registrations will be confirmed (may include notifying only if class is full) and follow up. Postcards can be sent to families with specifics about their registered class (what, when, where) and reminders about information to bring to early class meetings (e.g., immunization records, emergency contact numbers, etc.).

- Give priority to school district residents and charge higher fees for non-residents.
- Add new classes to accommodate demand for over-enrolled classes and/or hold lottery drawings after a well-publicized deadline for printed registrations.
- Give registration priority to under-represented families and families with limited resources.
- Reserve a portion of mixed-age class slots (up to 25 percent) for referrals, moveins, and other new participants.

## **Special Family Events**

As an outreach strategy and non-threatening introduction to ECFE programming, as well as legitimate programming in their own right, special family events can be very effective. These events at which the whole family is welcome include celebrations around a seasonal theme, children's music concerts, open gym nights, swim sessions, toy-making workshops, puppet shows, or a vehicle fair (a parking lot full of parked vehicles such as an ambulance, fire truck, tractor, limousine, taxicab, bus, etc. with friendly, knowledgeable drivers/owners to talk about their vehicle with parents and children). These events can be primarily recreational or educational in focus, or a blend of both.

One strong caution around seasonal events is to avoid focusing on specific cultural or religious celebrations to the exclusion of others. A second caution is to avoid making one-time family events the centerpiece of ECFE programming to the detriment of ongoing parent-child classes or home visits. If the mission of ECFE is to enhance the ability of parents to provide the best possible environment for the healthy growth and development and school readiness of their children (see Chapter 1), this is better accomplished through building relationships with and among families through ongoing educational programming.

The planning and organization of special family events can be done in part by volunteers, but program staff will need to oversee event development and implementation. Although the basic element in any family event is an opportunity for families to enjoy activities they may not be able to do at home, the specific mix of activities can be of almost infinite variety. A typical family event may have a wide variety of activities available in a number of different locations throughout large areas of a school building or other community facility. It might consist of large group activities in the gym, such as singing, creative movement, scooter relays, or parachute games; snack making in the kitchen; art activities in the art room; science activities and free play in the children's room; a puppet show in the library; and bubble blowing outside on the playground. A well-publicized family event can attract large numbers of people, so it's important to include a blend of large group, small group, and parent-child one-on-one activities.

#### Field Trips

Fun and educational field trips are an attraction for parents and children, with many destination possibilities. A program staff person should visit a field trip site before taking families there. This enables staff to find out if it is a suitable place to bring parents and young children, as well as plan ways to minimize any hazards. Staff can also give the person who will be conducting the tour suggestions on talking to preschoolers in simple concrete language and making the tour age-appropriate. Staff should prepare children and parents in advance for what they will see on the field trip. Rules for behavior on fieldtrips must be clearly explained to parents and children. It is not unusual for children to

misbehave when both their parents and teachers are present, so expectations and parentteacher roles should be clarified. Be informed about and address the liability and safety issues of both the school district and field trip site. (See Chapter 10 for information on requirements for transporting young children.)

Some good possibilities for field trips for young children and parents are:

- airport
- apple orchard (in the fall)
- art museum
- automobile repair shop bakery
- boat trip
- botanical garden or arboretum chick hatchery (in the spring) children's theater
- circus
- city or state park (see if a naturalist will lead the group in nature activities, hikes, and a visit to the park museum)
- conservatory or greenhouse (especially nice in late winter or early spring)
- construction site
- creamery (call to find out when they are making cheese)
- dentist office
- farm (milking time on a dairy farm)
- fire station fish hatchery
- grain elevator (call to find out when grain will be delivered)
- grocery store
- historical site or museum (especially if they are living history sites or have hands- on activities)
- hospital
- ice cream shop music store newspaper
- pet shop planetarium
- public library (ask ahead if there's a children's librarian and how families can apply that day for library cards)
- rock quarry short train trip snow sliding hill
- television or radio station veterinary clinic
- water department
- Z00

### **Guest Speaker Nights**

Guest speakers can be a good attraction for families new to ECFE. Again, it's important that guest speakers not dominate ECFE programming, since ongoing, interactive parent education is generally more effective at stimulating learning and motivating behavior change. Although programs may pay professionals to serve as guest speakers, it is also possible to recruit high quality guest speakers for free. For some professionals such as psychologists, book authors, or pediatricians, this is a good way to advertise their services, sell their books, or reach new clients. Even if guest speakers do not charge for their time, programs should offer to pay travel expenses or mileage. The likelihood of a good turnout will increase if guest speaker nights are offered free or at a minimal cost to families and free child care is provided. It is also important to publicize speaking events heavily and well in advance

#### **Resource Libraries**

Program libraries that loan a variety of parent and child books, videotapes/DVDs, and audiotapes, as well as children's toys, can attract parents to ECFE programs, especially in rural areas. Some parents report they enrolled in the program so their children could benefit from access to a variety of toys and books. Others indicate they appreciate learning how children's development can be enhanced by appropriate toys and activities. Still others borrow more expensive, durable toys from the library to determine which toys their children enjoy before purchasing them. If ECFE programs offer resource libraries, it is important that staff closely coordinate efforts with other local libraries and regularly inform families of the public library's many services. When families of young children gain the habit of using their community libraries, they have gained a lifelong opportunity for enjoyment and learning.

Toys, books, and videotapes/DVDs can often be gathered by purchasing gently used toys at rummage sales and soliciting donations from the community. Focus on gathering and purchasing multi-use, durable, educational, and high quality toys. The toys and learning materials the program stocks and uses serve as models for parents. Staff can ask parents, grandparents, vocational schools, and high school woodworking classes to make toys for the classroom and resource library. Some programs have received contributions from local service organizations or applied for grants to purchase toys and books for their libraries and children's rooms. Book drives can ask parents to deposit new or used books in labeled boxes set out in elementary schools. The books can be used in the resource center, classroom, or for outreach efforts. Homemade toys and games, with directions for making them, are good inexpensive library items. After initial setup by staff, the maintenance, repair, and checkout of library materials can be handled by staff and/or parent volunteers.

Revised August 2010