



Program aims to integrate immigrants, one family at a time

By Pat Tomlinson | January 22, 2016

STAMFORD -- The Vita Health and Wellness District, a collaborative, comprehensive wellness initiative that is centered in Stamford's West Side, has instituted a new program intended to improve outcomes for children on non-English-speaking, low-income families.

The Parents as Co-Educators program is a three-year research and development program that will deliver comprehensive services to 20 families with 3-year-old children enrolled in Childcare Learning Centers in Stamford.

"We know that parents are their child's first best teacher, so if they're able to become co-educators for their children then that will have an impact in how their children do in life and school," said Vita Health and Wellness Administrator Leslie Sexer. "Hopefully we'll be able to see that having that impact helps to close the achievement gap."

Not only is this program, which will cost nearly \$500,000 to implement over three years, aimed at closing achievement gaps, but it also seeks to improve wellness, enhance education, and engage the local community by offering specialized support to immigrant families.

In the long term, this program aspires to reduce some of the socio-economic barriers that limit children's educational performance.

Sexer says that one of the ways that this program will achieve this goal will be under the Parents as Teachers curriculum, an evidence-based program developed around helping parents to understand the effect that their actions at home have on their children's development in school.

The curriculum informs parents of the many academic milestones that their children should be meeting at certain points in their development.



The program also relies heavily on social workers making frequent trips to the homes of the families so that they can enforce proper routines around the house.

These social workers focus on making sure that the families involved live healthy lifestyles, which includes building a home environment that is conducive to learning reinforce outside of school. This includes everything from simply emphasizing the importance of parents reading and speaking often with children to altering basic afterschool and bedtime routines to better benefit the children's ability to excel in school.

"Parents need to learn that there is so much more to their kids' development than dropping their kids off at school and forgetting about them for eight hours, and then going home and doing nothing with them," said Tonya Recinos, one of the programs outreach workers.

"My role as a co-educator is to work alongside the parents and teach them which activities they need to participate in for their child's development."

Another benefit to the program is Recinos' unique qualification to help immigrant families too, since she herself has experienced what it's like to live in the United States as an immigrant. She emigrated to the U.S. from Ecuador when she was 18-years-old.

"I came here when I was young, so I know how difficult it is to get used to things over here," said Recinos. "Also, I know how difficult it is to raise children in a situation like that, because I have two children of my own."

This familiarity that Recinos has with the families' situations is especially important because this program isn't only aimed at helping children to succeed in life — the program seeks to benefit parents and their role as their child's primary educator as well.

The Parents as Co-Educators program will be assisting parents in their own educational endeavors. By fostering these parents' abilities to read and speak English, Sexer hopes that the benefits will in turn trickle down to their children.

"All parents need a variety of tools and assistance to enhance their children's growth, access and opportunities," said Vincent Tufo, the executive director and CEO of Charter Oak Communities, which is one of the program's collaborators.

"Supporting parents who face challenges economically, socially or educationally is a smart way to help their children better achieve their potential," Tufo added.

According to Sexer, the overall effect of this program won't just be measured in its immediate impact either. Sexer and the other leaders of this initiative have outsourced the research component of the project to Metis Associates in New York, for an objective measurement of what parts of the program work and what doesn't work.

"So we aren't just looking at the outcomes for the parents of the children, we also want to see the outcomes as they are linked to the specific activities in which they engage in the program," said Stan Schneider, the president of Metis Associates, a national research and consulting firm.



“We also will try to look at the way that the project interacts with the participants. For example, in this particular evaluation we will be doing some comparisons to students of families that are not being served by the initiative, to see if we can make sense of the changes we see,” Schneider said.

By analyzing which aspects of the program have success and which do not over a three-year-period, the Vita Health and Wellness District hopes to narrow down a list of valuable practices that they can use to help immigrant families more effectively in the future.

For more information about the Vita Health and Wellness District, and to learn more about its educational programs in Stamford, visit the organization online at vitastamford.com.

