Successful community engagement: Laying the foundation for effective teen pregnancy prevention

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Successful community engagement: Laying the foundation for effective teen pregnancy prevention

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This article explores the fundamental role that strong community partnerships play in successful recruitment and retention of program participants; prevention program implementation; program sustainability; and institutionalization of prevention strategies throughout the community. Our study revolves around the community engagement process that provided the foundation for the successful implementation of an adolescent pregnancy prevention program in a predominantly minority, low-income community. The community has long had high teen birth rates and a history of fragmented, short-lived partnerships with outside organizations. But the study found that a deliberate approach that uses a well-planned, well-executed strategy to build on existing community assets and partnerships, as well as create new ones, is a key factor in successful program implementation. This article identifies core principles and strategies that support strong community partnerships and specific engagement techniques that build, maintain, and sustain these vital relationships. Finally, it presents a broader model of community change that comes from the strong engagement of multiple partners. The information shared is intended to assist programs and their sponsoring organizations in achieving greater success in developing and nurturing strong relationships with individual community members, as well as stakeholders and gatekeepers in schools, civic organizations, the faith community, businesses, and other health and human services.

Keywords: community engagement; adolescent pregnancy prevention; community partnerships

Introduction

A deliberate approach that uses a well-planned, well-executed strategy to strengthen existing community partnerships and build new ones can lay the foundation for effective teen pregnancy prevention, particularly in communities facing barriers to successful program implementation, retention, and sustainability. North Chicago, one such community, is characterized by high poverty rates, high teen pregnancy rates, high mobility, and a history of fragmented programming attempts from both external and internal organizations. The FOCUS (Families in Our Community United for Success) program, an adolescent pregnancy prevention program of the Lake County Health Department/Community Health Center (LCHD/CHC) Family Life Education (FLE) project, used a deliberate approach to engage the North...
Chicago community in a partnership to implement and sustain effective programming.

FOCUS approaches teen pregnancy from a youth development/asset building perspective, offering a wide range of interventions targeted to youth and their parents. The program also seeks to build a network of participants and their families, friends, school personnel and community members supportive of healthy teen choices, including abstinence.

As the FOCUS program was implemented in North Chicago, staff undertook a careful, community engagement process that built new networks through an informal, fluid approach. The approach was innovative in three ways, which embody the core principles of community engagement discussed in this article:

1. Because FOCUS leaders understood that achieving programmatic goals depended on building strong community partnerships, they deferred implementing direct services until this foundation was firm.
2. FOCUS leaders deliberately approached all potential partners and interventions from an asset-building perspective, seeking to recognize and celebrate existing community strengths, promote the interests of community stakeholders, and find ways for each partner to benefit from the process.
3. FOCUS leaders sought out ‘community-building strategies and opportunities’ at every step, even when such actions did not contribute directly to FOCUS program implementation.

The result of this process was that FOCUS successfully established its program in North Chicago, implementing recruitment, retention, program sustainability and institutional change throughout the community.

This article contributes to the research by focusing on an understudied area: how community engagement efforts can be uniquely effective in a community posing substantial barriers to program implementation, retention and sustainability. Furthermore, this article seeks to answer the following research questions through a qualitative narrative summary and analysis:

1. How did FLE define community engagement?
2. What organizing principles and strategies, as illustrated by a program like FLE, can be utilized to create strong, effective community partnerships?
3. How did an effective process of community engagement contribute to the program’s success in recruitment/retention of students and parents, program implementation, and better awareness and utilization of community resources?
4. How did a process of community engagement explicitly connect to teen pregnancy prevention outcomes?

The information shared is intended to assist other programs and their sponsoring organizations to achieve greater success in developing and nurturing strong relationships with individual community residents, stakeholders and gatekeepers in schools, civic organizations, the faith community, businesses and other health and human services.

Description of the program intervention

For 30 years, the Family Life Education (FLE) program has provided knowledge-based pregnancy prevention programming throughout Lake County, with a special
emphasis on communities with high teen birth rates. Beginning in 1997, FLE received federal funding for abstinence education through two consecutive Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs (OAPP) Adolescent Family Life (AFL) prevention grants. Funding for FOCUS, the third OAPP prevention grant, began in the fall of 2007. FLE staff utilized previous evaluation results and lessons learned to revise and adapt programming to increase teens’ understanding of the health and emotional benefits of abstaining from sexual activity. Expansion of the positive involvement of parents in their children’s lives was another FLE goal.

Using the third OAPP AFL prevention grant, FLE included a community engagement component to reinforce programming addressed to youth and their parents.

Family Life Education prevention programs draw heavily on youth development theory (Benson et al. 2006). This theory focuses on promoting assets that help youth grow into productive, contributing adults.

FOCUS, meanwhile, provides teens, both male and female, with longitudinal services initiated in sixth or seventh grade and available through tenth grade. Two cohorts of teens were recruited into the program in May 2008 and May 2009, respectively.

FOCUS offers teens a wide range of evidence-based interventions, in and out of school, that promote abstinence from sexual activity and other negative risk behaviors. Programming targeted to parents includes educational sessions, coaching, and support for them to become their children’s primary sexual health educators and to increase the quality of connectedness they experience with their children. FOCUS further builds a network of teen participants and their families, friends, school personnel, and community members who are supportive of healthy teen choices.

**Community engagement and coalitions**

The vast research available about community engagement and coalitions views collaborations as an increasingly popular strategy for addressing community issues, particularly in health improvement (Butterfoss and Kegler 2002; Roussos and Fawcett 2000). Grounded in a belief in participatory democracy (Kegler et al. 2005), countless collaborative efforts have been developed over the past quarter century (Butterfoss and Kegler 2002).

One structured approach to collaboration is the use of a community coalition. Recent research defines ‘community coalitions’ with a range of overlapping concepts. Butterfoss and Kegler (2002) characterize community coalitions as groups that unite individuals, leverage resources, and ‘focus on a problem of community concern to achieve better results than any single group or agency could have achieved alone’. In Brown’s definition, diverse interest groups combine resources to ‘effect a specific change that members are unable to bring about independently’ (1984). Kramer et al. (2005) includes the element of ongoing change as part of their definition, describing coalitions as ‘organic entities, changing both as they mature and as they respond to both internal and external exigencies.’ Coalitions are ‘issue oriented, structured, focused to act on specific goals external to the coalition, and committed to recruiting member organizations with diverse talents and resources’ (Butterfoss, Goodman, and Wandersman 1993).
While researchers have differed about the capacity of community coalitions to achieve permanent, far-reaching change (Butterfoss, Goodman, and Wandersman 1993; Chervin et al. 2005; Fawcett et al. 1997; Kegler et al. 2005; Kramer et al. 2005; Kreuter, Lezin, and Young 2000; Zakocs and Edwards 2006), they have documented these coalitions’ utility and importance in several studies (Butterfoss and Kegler 2002; Kegler et al. 2005; Kramer et al. 2005; Wandersman and Florin 2003). Butterfoss, Goodman and Wandersman (1993) suggest that coalitions can enable organizations to become involved in issues without having the sole responsibility for managing or developing them. Further, the researchers suggest that coalitions can help mobilize more talents, resources, and approaches to influence an issue than any single organization could achieve alone. Finally, coalitions can provide an avenue for recruiting participants from diverse constituencies.

While successes with regard to short-term and intermediate-term goals have been documented, researchers lament the lack of empirical evidence connecting community coalitions to the accomplishment of longer-term, community-wide goals (Butterfoss, Goodman, and Wandersman 1993; Chervin et al. 2005; Fawcett et al. 1997; Kegler et al. 2005; Kramer et al. 2005; Kreuter, Lezin, and Young 2000; Zakocs and Edwards 2006).

Several authors offer explanations for the lack of empirically-based studies finding longer-term effects of coalitions at the community, system and population levels (Barton, Powers, and Morris 2001; Fawcett et al. 1997; Kreuter, Lezin, and Young 2000; Lasker, Weiss, and Miller 2001; Roussos and Fawcett 2000). The coalition may simply have been poorly planned or poorly implemented, authors say, or anticipated outcomes may have been unrealistic, with expectations set too high. Measuring change also can be difficult because planned effects are often long-term, or because accurate indicators of change may be absent.

Community coalitions represent a relatively formalized approach to collaboration, while the concept of community engagement offers a less structured framework. Some researchers prefer to study collaborative efforts from a community engagement perspective. As Jones and Wells (2007) defined it:

Community engagement refers to values, strategies, and actions that support authentic partnerships, including mutual respect and active, inclusive participation; power sharing and equity; mutual benefit or finding the ‘win-win’ possibility; and flexibility in pursuing goals, methods, and time frames to fit the priorities, needs, and capacities of communities.

FLE drew upon both the community coalition and engagement concepts in establishing FOCUS. Approaching North Chicago from an asset-based perspective, FOCUS staff had program outcomes in mind and the desire to involve diverse constituencies and organizations, while recognizing the benefits of formal agreements for shared responsibilities.

In other ways, FOCUS more closely resembled what researchers define as a community engagement model: a program using an organic process that evolves and grows in response to participants while focusing on the quality of their relationships. Throughout, the FOCUS community engagement process reflected the core values of informality, flexibility, inclusiveness and equity.
Context of the target community

North Chicago, Illinois, located in northeastern Lake County, historically has been the poorest community in a very wealthy county. Indeed, North Chicago is characterized by high rates of poverty, teen pregnancy and mobility among its residents. It is the home of the Great Lakes Naval Station, a large military installation, which significantly impacts both the tax base and stability of the community as a whole.

Including the naval station’s 12,000 transient military personnel, North Chicago’s population is 32,608 (U.S. Census Bureau 2010c). According to the most recent Census estimates, more than 60% of all North Chicago residents are African-American or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau 2010a), as are 88% of public school children. North Chicago also has a rapidly growing immigrant community (Illinois State Board of Education 2010).

From 1999 to 2009, the Latino student population in the North Chicago School District grew from 18.1% to 41.7%, and, in 2009, 13.6% of students in the district had limited English proficiency (Illinois State Board of Education 2010). The proportion of low-income students grew from 61.6% in 1999 to 76.2% in 2009 (Illinois State Board of Education 2010), and 13.2% of the population was unemployed in 2009 (Illinois Department of Employment Security 2010).

As is typical in many low-income communities, the majority of North Chicago residents have obtained high school diplomas, but only 14% have bachelor’s degrees or post-graduate degrees. Finally, North Chicago has the highest proportion of teen births in the county at 15.9%, as compared to a countywide teen birth rate of 7.3%. Nearly half (48.1%) of teen births are to girls under 18 (Illinois Department of Public Health 2010).

Significantly, North Chicago is a community of constant change. The presence of the military base ensures that a significant fraction of the community’s population is transient military personnel. In addition, beginning in 2000, many people displaced by the demolition of Chicago’s high-rise housing projects relocated to North Chicago.

In 2008, more than one-quarter (26%) of North Chicago residents had moved from another state within the previous year, and another 10% had moved from a location within the state (U.S. Census Bureau 2010b). As residents come and go, so too do employees, employers, and community leaders. For example, North Chicago has seen ongoing changes in school leadership, with 13 superintendents in nine years. As a school partner commented:

The district has a lot of turnaround, and making and maintaining connections can be difficult from year to year. For example, this year FLE may have formed a rapport with a building principal and staff, and the following year, those staff members may be relocated to another building, thus making it very difficult to maintain continuity and familiarity with the program.

Social service organizations also see high turnover rates in staff and leadership. This lack of stability has affected the success of North Chicago’s other recent community initiatives.

All of these factors have contributed to the relatively thin array of primary prevention services available to residents, and past unsuccessful attempts only have
exacerbated the problem. Both parents and school partners have recognized the need for additional supports and services. As several parents commented:

North Chicago needs to give more support to get young men and women off the streets. We don’t even have a grocery store. And we need to show them that people care about them.

I wish there were more after-school programs and learning.

I would like to see more parent involvement and the whole neighborhood involved in each other. So that if my son does something another neighbor would be OK with saying something to him – and know that after we spoke, I’d speak to my son about it again and not just get into a thing with them. ‘I am your son’s keeper while you are away.’ It takes a village.

I think North Chicago is a work in progress. There are great people here, including parents and kids, but we haven’t learned to come together. We’re often stuck in our own home.

[I wish] that there were more community things. That there was a community center that people actually wanted to go to. We have one, but nobody goes there or uses it.

Debería de tener más programas para los jóvenes, para que no haya tantas gangas. ([North Chicago] should have more programs for our youth so we wouldn’t have so many gangs.)

I don’t think [the North Chicago community] gives us any tools or support. They don’t really offer anything.

Because of the various challenges it faces, North Chicago, at first glance, could well be described as ‘hard to reach,’ a term used in health communications literature and applied to communities where, for a variety of reasons, such campaigns have been unsuccessful. Freimuth and Mettger (1990) assert that, besides having been deemed unreceptive to information campaigns, communities that receive this label are more likely to be comprised of residents with lower levels of socioeconomic status (measured by income and/or education level), lower literacy levels, and higher percentages of residents of color.

Accompanying this label, Freimuth and Mettger (1990) contend, are some preconceptions. Residents considered ‘hard to reach’ are thought to be disconnected from information and unable to process the information that they obtain. They are thought to lack hope and trust in institutions around them.

These descriptions find some resonance in North Chicago. A perceived lack of safe outside spaces limits the possibility of casual information exchange, and many residents are not native speakers of English or have limited reading skills. In addition, according to interviews and communications with program leadership and staff, perceptions exist that many residents distrust institutions, particularly those from outside the community.

Freimuth and Mettger (1990), however, observe that the label ‘hard to reach’ implies that some quality of the community is the cause of the problem and that members of these communities are intentionally resistant or unreachable. They disagree, suggesting such alternate conceptualizations as recognition of the structural or institutional causes that could make a community ‘hard to reach.’ They also urge researchers to focus on the assets of a community rather than its deficits.
Like Freimuth and Mettger, FOCUS’s staff were unwilling to characterize the residents of North Chicago as ‘hard to reach.’ Rather, they adhered to an asset-based approach in planning the community engagement process, which led to development of solid partnerships and support for the program.

**Methods**

To understand the FOCUS program’s successful process of community engagement, evaluators used a case study approach. According to Creswell (2007), a case study is a useful qualitative methodology when researchers seek to understand a particular, bounded case (e.g., a program).

Data collection for case studies typically involves multiple sources and takes place over time. Here, the focus of data analysis is to better comprehend the complexity and nuance of the case itself, rather than generalize findings beyond the case (Creswell 2007). Data are analyzed to generate key themes, which together illustrate the ‘meaning of the case’ (Creswell 2007).

For the past two years, staff, leaders and evaluators have explored and described the process that enabled FOCUS’s success within the North Chicago community. Specifically, the group examined the carefully designed innovative community engagement process and the ways in which it translated to positive outcomes for program participants, the program itself and the community at large. The evaluators surveyed community partners, conducted three focus groups with program staff over a two-year period, and interviewed program leaders and staff six times. They also conducted telephone interviews and surveys.

Parents had multiple opportunities to give feedback, while staff members participated in at least two of the three focus groups. All of the instruments contained similar questions with both open-ended and closed-ended questions, and positively and negatively-framed questions.

A focal point of the research was a survey of North Chicago community partners. Community partnership survey questions were jointly developed by program leaders, FOCUS staff, and the evaluators, and then piloted with selected North Chicago residents. FOCUS staff developed a list of 53 key community partners, representing multiple sectors, who were asked to complete an online survey. These partners included individual volunteers; organizations as diverse as the U.S. Navy and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.; and educational partners such as the University of Illinois Extension 4H Program and PASS/SAVE Regional Office of Education. Other selected partners included such non-profit organizations as the Boys & Girls Clubs of Lake County, Habitat for Humanity Lake County, the Latino Coalition of Lake County, Lake County Forest Open Lands, and the YWCA Lake County. Finally, there were participant financial institutions, such as the Great Lakes Credit Union and First Midwest Bank. In addition, the North Chicago Public Schools, the City of North Chicago, the North Chicago Public Library, and Lake County Forest Preserve District served as governmental partners with the program.

Respondents were asked to describe their level of involvement in FOCUS activities, to assess the benefits and accomplishments of the collaboration and of the FOCUS program itself, and to define the primary characteristics of an effective community partnership. Thirty-five (66%) of those who received the survey responded.
Data analysis was conducted using ‘analysis of themes,’ a standard form of analysis in case study methodology (Creswell 2007). Individual responses were compiled, coded, and analyzed for each instrument. Consistent themes were identified within each individual instrument, and among instruments as well. The common themes that emerged are reflected in the core principles and strategies. Representative quotes were selected to reflect the themes that emerged. The evaluation team also analyzed program records, obtained demographic data and other information about the North Chicago community, and researched newspapers and other public reports and materials. This comprehensive case study design produced a wealth of rich information about the community engagement process and understanding of the outcomes for the FOCUS program.

Results

Engaging the community

Research question 1: ‘How did FLE define community engagement?’

Before FOCUS’s direct services were implemented in North Chicago, FLE staff undertook a multi-faceted process of community engagement that laid the groundwork for the program’s implementation. True to FOCUS’s youth development programming philosophy, community engagement was defined by asset building. This involved recognizing the strengths within North Chicago, bringing community leaders and residents together in the spirit of positive change, reserving a ‘place at the table’ for everyone, and respecting the interests and needs each individual or group presented.

To successfully operationalize this definition, four key components had to be in place: staff investment, marketing strategy, engagement, and enhancement of networks.

Community engagement: core principles and strategies

Research question 2: ‘What organizing principles and strategies, as illustrated by a program like FLE, can be utilized to create strong, effective community partnerships?’

Over its history, FLE has developed core principles and strategies that embody its values about, and approach to, community engagement. This approach has emphasized existing strengths, inclusiveness, and equity in an atmosphere stressing flexibility and the power of informal relationships and networks. With the implementation of FOCUS, these principles and strategies were only reaffirmed. The core principles shown in Figure 1 are grouped by the values they support.

Importantly, each core principle was an underlying force in various aspects of the program’s implementation, including staff engagement, marketing, engagement, and the enhancement of networks.

The core principles and strategies for developing successful community partnerships were then placed in the context of the program’s implementation with regard to four key components: staff investment, marketing, engagement and enhancement of networks. Each of these components is described below.
Core principle I: promote asset-building/recognize strengths
- Begin the process with the recognition that all communities are steeped in assets that can empower their residents.
- Learn about and respect the history and traditions of the community.
- Make sure that the changes you want to make are the changes that the community wants to see.

Core principle II: build a shared vision, and respect individual and organizational interests
- Know that true community engagement is a quiet, long-term process that requires patience and perseverance.
- Identify individuals within institutions who share the same definitions of problems and solutions.
- Carefully tailor messages to your audiences, making sure to understand their perspectives.
- See communication as dialogue and listen carefully to responses.

Core principle III: be inclusive and value equity
- Get to know people who are formal and informal leaders/stakeholders. Strive to engage everyone possible.
- Be generous in giving credit to all involved.
- Emphasize consent rather than control. Focus on social networking and social engagement rather than imposing a power structure. Be non-competitive.

Core principle IV: value informality and flexibility
- Create engagement strategies that are organic, rather than formalized and structured.
- Be attuned to changes in the community and shifts in perception.
- Identify partners that will carry your shared message forward.

Figure 1. Core principles and strategies for developing successful community partnerships.

Staff investment
First and foremost, FOCUS was designed with input from FLE staff members who were born and raised in North Chicago. The FOCUS program staff included a program development specialist who was charged with guiding this community engagement process. This staff member, also a lifelong area resident, was well known in the community and had more than 30 years of experience in program development and community outreach. Other staff members, who also were North Chicago residents, provided new employees with guided tours to see the homes, schools, and neighborhoods in order to better understand local changes over the years. Staff introduced new employees to other North Chicago residents, including family, friends, and colleagues at other organizations. The opportunity to hear the personal stories of several North Chicago generations afforded new employees an awareness of local culture and history.

Marketing strategy
FLE recognized the challenge that a new grant would encounter in gaining acceptance. It was essential that FOCUS not interfere with or take away from any current entities or appear to replace any existing organization’s activities. FOCUS had to present itself in a manner that avoided the ‘we tried that already’ and ‘we’re
already doing that’ response from some very dedicated, but disenchanted, community members.

With this caveat in mind, FOCUS spent many months building a marketing approach that embodied the principles of asset building discussed above. Staff decided to present the addition of the FOCUS grant as an ‘energizing opportunity’ to revitalize the spirit of everyone who had faith in the potential of North Chicago and its youth. Great care was taken in developing a logo that would provide a very visible presence, as well as a consistent reference throughout the community. FOCUS staff, using both personal and professional networks to introduce the grant in a manner that spoke to the interests of each potential partner, found North Chicagoans receptive. One community member, who worked with a local social service agency, said of the initial meeting, ‘I have learned more about North Chicago in the past one-and-a-half hours with you at this meeting than I have in my first three months of working.’

Engagement

Engaging a key partner and the target population: a school-based poster contest. A youth development approach was also used to introduce FOCUS in the North Chicago public schools. Staff utilized a strategy that engaged the school, initiated a link with families, and encouraged adults to support and recognize youth. Staff further visited every fifth- and sixth-grade class to describe FOCUS and invite students to submit posters portraying what they felt was important for youth in North Chicago. The FOCUS poster contest was designed to advertise the program to the students who would be recruited as sixth- and seventh-grade participants, so it was both a marketing tool and an embodiment of FOCUS’s youth development principles. Students, their parents, school staff and the community as a whole had an opportunity to highlight positive aspects of North Chicago; prospective youth participants had the opportunity to highlight their potential.

The poster contest attracted almost 150 entries, with 12 designs chosen as finalists. These designs were used in the FOCUS 2008–2009 school year calendar, which was made available to FOCUS participants, family members, schools, and community representatives. The top fifth- and sixth-grade entries, which helped announce FOCUS to the community, were incorporated into larger posters, many of which were framed and displayed at various community sites. A community leadership breakfast was chosen as the occasion to honor the students whose posters were selected.

Engaging the community: FOCUS kick-off community leadership breakfast. The FOCUS Community Leadership Breakfast, held in April 2008, was designed to build and strengthen connectedness among various individuals and groups in North Chicago. FOCUS staff invited community members from schools, government, faith sites, agencies, coalitions, and other groups to the event honoring the 12 students who designed the posters.

The students attended, accompanied by their families. Staff members with roots in North Chicago invited their personal contacts as well. Some 150 people attended, and the resulting blend of leaders and staff represented an array of service organizations and North Chicago families.
At the breakfast, attendees were encouraged to consider various ways in which they might support FOCUS. Many suggested ideas and other potential supporters. Several people who were unable to attend later contacted FOCUS staff to offer their support.

Enhancing networks
Consistent with the community engagement model, FOCUS staff created multiple opportunities for dialogue through informal, regularly scheduled gatherings entitled ‘A Time to Connect.’ The first three gatherings, which drew 36 representatives from 24 different youth-serving organizations, sparked information sharing, dialogue about potential collaborations, and discussion about the broader needs of young people in North Chicago.

Topics included: building a positive perspective for youth; creating a consistent emphasis on academics; and facilitating parent involvement. Longtime community leaders who attended shared valuable professional information from a personal perspective, and this gave newcomers a better sense of the community.

The gatherings facilitated communication, increased interest and expanded connections. As a result, groups used one another’s resources and expertise. Community and school partners recognized the value of the ‘A Time to Connect’ meetings, commenting, for example:

The ‘A Time to Connect’ meetings have been very valuable [as a way] to meet all of the community leaders from so many agencies that on my own I would never have been able to meet.

Collaboration is happening...we are all becoming a team.

Many people in the community have gained an appreciation of their neighbors since they have gone to meetings with them, thanks to the FOCUS program.

[My organization has benefited from] awareness of other agencies and what they are doing – networking possibilities that have led to collaborations.

I’ve been referring other organizations to FOCUS’s ‘A Time to Connect.’

‘A Time to Connect’ meetings offer an opportunity to reach many agencies at one time to promote our programs.

Awareness of other agencies and what they are doing, networking possibilities that have led to collaborations.

I’ve found a location to host my program.

[A Time To Connect’ has helped in] connecting with other individuals in the community serving youth and families.

The gatherings were perceived as a partnership-taking action. They reflected the core values of the engagement process: emphasizing existing strengths; respecting interests, inclusiveness, and equity; and doing these things in an atmosphere emphasizing flexibility and the power of informal relationships and networks.
Outcomes of the community engagement process

Research Question 3: ‘How did an effective process of community engagement contribute to the program’s success in recruitment/retention of students and parents, program implementation, and better awareness and utilization of community resources?’

Program leaders, staff and partners identified specific changes at the participant, program and community levels that they believed were related to the community engagement process.

Youth and families

Both initial recruitment and longer-term retention efforts were successful among the youth and their parents involved in FOCUS. The program originally envisioned recruiting 180 sixth-grade students, but from a pool of just over 600 sixth graders, it recruited 219 over the first two program years, and then maintained an 88% retention rate through the end of the second year. A full 49% of active participants had one or more parents attend program events.

FOCUS staff also consciously sought to demonstrate to youth their value in North Chicago. Accordingly, the program created opportunities to involve participants in the broader community, starting with the poster contest and FOCUS kickoff Community Leadership Breakfast.

Later in the program’s first year, a North Chicago financial institution ‘adopted’ FOCUS and sponsored a fundraising event conducted by the teens. Youth also were given the opportunity to participate in a countywide teen leadership summit and to work with a North Chicago native, now on the design staff for Nike, Inc., in a competition to design a new athletic shoe.

Along the way, families benefited from the opportunity to discuss their needs and gain a greater awareness of available services. Parents’ comments, both self-initiated and gathered through telephone interviews and surveys, showed that they valued the program’s direct effects on their children:

I have five boys. Raising children is difficult; you are never too old to learn. It has been really helpful. With my eighth grader I needed help to get him motivated at school…and to get new ideas and get support for enhancing their education and modifying their behavior.

Es más fácil para nosotros explicar cosas a nuestra hija y hablar con ella sobre sexo, drogas, gangas y tales cosas. (It is easier for us to explain things to our daughter and to talk with her about sex, drugs, gangs, and such things.)

As part of the interviews and surveys, parents were asked, ‘To what extent, if any, do you feel that FOCUS has had an impact on your community?’ The majority of responses were positive:

I’m getting to know my neighborhood. Because of the program, I know their names and faces.

Lo que hacen por la comunidad es grandioso, al ayudarnos a los padres a entender a nuestros hijos y a prepararlos para un mejor futuro. (What you do for our community is
great, helping us parents to understand our children and to prepare them for a better future.)

FOCUS nos ha ayudado a comunicar con los padres de la comunidad mejor y FOCUS les ayuda a muchos jóvenes directamente. (FOCUS has helped us communicate better with parents in the community, and FOCUS helps lots of kids directly.)

FOCUS ha ayudado a cambiar la comunidad con programas para padres y con la policía. (FOCUS has helped us change our community with parent programming and programs with police.)

Oh yes, now when we see each other on the street or at the store we stop and greet and talk to other parents because of FOCUS.

Other parents were more measured in their response, noting the relatively small number of participating families:

It wasn’t a big group. A small group has been involved, like a discussion group, so [there is] not a huge impact.

Lots of parents are not involved. For me it is a huge impact – if more people were involved it would help a great deal.

Not a lot of kids involved, though the word of mouth is helpful. The kids want to get involved, and they are drawing the families in. People start and then drop out due to moves or have problems.

One parent suggested:

I’ve been here 30 years and I’ve seen a lot, and making some progress is better than none.

School staff and community partners echoed the sentiments of parents:

[Families] have a better understanding of the resources available in the community.

Many people in the community have gained an appreciation of their neighbors since they have gone to meetings with them, thanks to the FOCUS program.

It’s been a very great experience for North Chicago; [it] shows the kids that there are a lot of people concerned about their well being.

Parents connected with one another, offering a supportive environment and sharing information on beneficial resources that might lead to a greater sense of community. Staff members also were able to connect families with other free or low-cost events. Through the combination of community engagement and the availability of a range of programming, FOCUS successfully established a pattern of strong, multi-generational, multi-cultural involvement.

**FOCUS in the North Chicago community**

In its first two years, FOCUS was able to establish itself as a leader in making connections among schools and other partners, and as a trusted, reliable support to families and organizations. Several staff members commented that one documented example of the program’s acceptance in the community was the relative ease with
which the eight-page parental consent forms were completed for the second round of recruitment in May 2009. This process, which often stymies the work of youth programs, was aided by helpful school principals and staff. A popular priest at an area Catholic Church with a large Latino congregation from North Chicago also promoted FOCUS from the pulpit. A staff member’s account:

[Several staff members] went to a Sunday Spanish mass for a pre-arranged recruitment event at a North Chicago Catholic Church. After the sermon, the priest asked if the people from the Health Department could stand up and wave so people could see them. [We were sitting at the back of the church.] He then said, ‘These people come from a program called FOCUS and are here looking for families to join their program. It is a good program that will help our kids avoid teen pregnancy and stay away from risky situations like alcohol, drugs and gangs. It is a good program so please see them as you leave.’ After that, [a parishioner whose child was involved with FOCUS] asked if he could say a few words and the priest said yes. The parent gave a short speech saying, ‘These are good people; we need to take advantage of this program. I have been with them for some time now and it really makes a difference.’

As another measure of support, the local credit union adopted FOCUS as their project, and other institutions took on fund-raising.

To better assess the impact of the FOCUS staff’s deliberate community engagement strategy, involved community partners responded to a survey, asking them to assess the benefits and accomplishments of the collaboration and the FOCUS program, and to define the primary characteristics of an effective community partnership.

Staff and partners were able to identify specific ways in which their organizations and North Chicago itself had benefited. One of these ways, they said, was evidenced by the 36 individuals, representing 24 youth-serving organizations, who were participating in ‘A Time to Connect’ meetings. New connections were being made and symbiotic relationships developed, evidenced by the survey response to, ‘Have you maintained contact with anybody from another organization, other than the Lake County Health Department, that you met as part of working with the FOCUS program?’

Seventy-one percent of respondents said ‘yes,’ and 29% responded ‘no.’ In comments, some partners emphasized their expanded ability to fulfill their organization’s mission because of the collaboration. Others reported opportunities for community volunteerism. Staff and community partners commented on an increased willingness to recognize teen pregnancy as a problem within the North Chicago community.

Levels of involvement in FOCUS events or efforts

A series of survey questions highlighted the relationships between the FOCUS program and various community organizations or, in some cases, individuals. Respondents were asked to rank their organization’s level of involvement with various FOCUS efforts. They were most likely to describe themselves as ‘very involved’ (34%) or ‘somewhat involved’ (17%) in FOCUS by publicizing the program through word of mouth. At least a third of the respondents described themselves as either ‘very involved’ or ‘somewhat involved’ in three other efforts: (1) assisting with
recruitment of participating students; (2) participating in the FOCUS Community Leadership Breakfast; and (3) providing support to FOCUS families in their fundraising efforts.

The diversity of the organizations involved allowed them to play to their strengths. For example, financial institutions provided facilities and fundraising assistance, while non-profit or community-based organizations described themselves as more involved with recruiting participants for the program.

Benefits of FLE programming

Sixty percent of the community partners said they felt that Family Life Education (FLE) had met or exceeded their expectations as a community partner: 31% ranked FLE as ‘excellent,’ 29% as ‘very good,’ 20% as ‘average,’ and 6% as ‘very inadequate.’ Fourteen percent reported not knowing or being unsure.

Most organizations pointed to specific benefits they had received as a result of their collaboration with FOCUS. Several highlighted the opportunity to collaborate with other local organizations (e.g., ‘Collaborations with other agencies were made possible because of this relationship’). Others commented on the impact on local youth as a specific benefit of collaborations (‘Awareness, networking, opportunity to speak to and connect the youth we serve with education/hope’). Those seeking opportunities for community volunteerism described FOCUS as a good partner organization (‘Our collaboration with FOCUS has given us additional volunteer opportunities. Additionally, we have gained valuable information for appropriate referrals’).

FOCUS partners were further asked to identify benefits of the program for families. Many highlighted the increased awareness families had of community resources (‘Families knowing there are people in the community that care about their family needs’). They said that an additional benefit of FOCUS was the enhancement to networking in the community.

Accomplishments and successes

Community partners were asked to rank, from a menu of choices, the top three accomplishments of FOCUS since its inception. Of the 27 respondents who answered this question, 14 (52%) selected the fact that FOCUS had ‘established partnerships with community organizations’ as a top accomplishment. About a third (33%) chose the ‘ongoing participation and involvement of parents’ and the ‘offering of positive activities for youth.’ Nearly 30% (29%) noted that FOCUS was successful in both recruiting and retaining students, and 26% ranked the establishment of programming in the North Chicago schools as a top accomplishment.

The most frequent responses among the 10 options are summarized in Table 1. More than 90% (93%) of the respondents felt that the program had been ‘very successful’ or ‘successful’ at creating community interest in working with and supporting FOCUS. Almost all (96%) of the respondents felt the program was ‘very successful’ or ‘successful’ with regard to ‘developing a commitment to participate in implementation and follow-through among community partners.’ Over three-quarters (78%) responded that the program had been ‘very successful’ or ‘successful’ in expanding community partners’ organizational capacity.
FOCUS community partners seemed optimistic that the program would be successful during its multi-year grant in reducing the teen birth rate in North Chicago; in fact 88% percent predicted that the program would be ‘very successful’ or ‘successful’ (see Table 2).

**Perceptions of top characteristics of effective youth programming**

Drawing upon their own experiences working in the community, partners identified what they considered the top three characteristics of effective youth programming. More than 40% (41%) identified efforts to include parents at every level. More than 30% noted the importance of ongoing, sustained communication among collaborators (35%), a strong investment of staff time and resources from multiple organizations and schools (34%), and a recognition of the need for programming addressed to youth (31%). Other factors that were recognized included: (1) Agreement on core values and principles of youth development (24%); (2) widespread understanding of the interrelationships of the various individual missions (24%); and (3) the inclusiveness of the process and willingness to collaborate (24%) (see Table 3).

Table 1. Top-ranked accomplishments of the FOCUS program since its inception, FOCUS community partners (N=27).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accomplishment</th>
<th>#1 (%)</th>
<th>#2 (%)</th>
<th>#3 (%)</th>
<th>Total #1, #2, and #3 rankings (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Established partnerships with community organizations</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing participation and involvement of parents</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers positive activities for youth</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful recruitment of students</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful retention of students</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established programming in North Chicago schools</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Identified FOCUS program successes in working with community partners (N = 24).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program successes</th>
<th>FOCUS has been successful or very successful (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creating community interest in working with and supporting FOCUS</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing commitment among partners to participate in FOCUS implementation</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanded community partners’ organizational capacity</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief that FOCUS will help to reduce teen pregnancy in North Chicago</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Challenges

Respondents were asked to identify challenges to their collaboration with FOCUS and challenges facing the FOCUS program itself. They also were asked to name the most important change that might improve the FOCUS program. Common themes emerged in their responses to all three questions:

Several program partners suggested expanding and strengthening the relationships and communications with community organizations:

More and stronger community partners. Making them aware of different ways they can help, not just with money.

Have the collaborating organizations become involved with the program either by providing presentations or donating time to an event.

Not enough information or direction as to how the [partner] organization can assist in better serving the FOCUS initiative.

Receiving information pertaining to all events/activities being held on behalf of FOCUS.

Several others suggested that the program should increase its visibility, communicate its outcomes and tout its success:

Reporting back the success stories and outcomes of families involved with FOCUS.

Maybe more community awareness on a consistent basis.

More visible in the community that you serve.

The only direct criticism of FOCUS came from parents and community partners who felt that more intensity of services was needed for both teens and adults.

Table 3. Top characteristics of a strong, effective community partnership focusing on youth development, as identified by FOCUS collaborators (N = 26).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>#1 (%)</th>
<th>#2 (%)</th>
<th>#3 (%)</th>
<th>Total #1, #2, and #3 rankings (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Efforts to include parents at every level</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing, sustained communication among collaborators</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong investment of staff time and resources from multiple organizations and schools</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of the need for programming addressed to youth</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement on core values and principles of youth development</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widespread understanding of the interrelationships of the various individual missions</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusiveness of the process; willingness to collaborate</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Discussion
The deliberate approach to community partnerships that FLE used as the foundation for the new FOCUS program resulted in some planned benefits, and some unexpected positive outcomes.

The planned benefits of being able to engage and retain North Chicago teens and their parents in meaningful teen pregnancy prevention/abstinence education certainly were achieved. The unexpected positive outcome was the level of commitment to a collaborative approach that addressed a variety of issues facing young people in North Chicago. Further, the benefits recognized by other partners extended beyond the scope of the FOCUS program and positively impacted other organizations in achieving their goals.

FLE used an evolving process – one responsive to the participating individuals and groups and focused on the quality of their developing relationships. The FOCUS community engagement process reflected the core values of informality, flexibility, inclusiveness, and equity. One FLE staff member described the process as ‘a building-block approach that is a quiet, long-term process that develops and cements networks of like-minded individuals who are willing to support each other to achieve a specific end.’

As Figure 1 illustrates, core principles and strategies are highly interrelated, and the single most important factor in the success or failure of any community engagement strategy is staff understanding of and investment in the process.

The process of community engagement described in this article involved careful examination of the determinants of successful implementation of pregnancy prevention programming. The FOCUS program engaged the community in recognition and discussion of adolescent sexual activity and pregnancy prevention, topics that are often sensitive and culturally charged. The program was able to gain the support and confidence of the community for this discussion, because of its community engagement approach.

A review of this approach suggests a broader model for successfully bringing pregnancy prevention programming into high-need communities. In linking this model of community engagement to the ultimate outcome of teen pregnancy prevention, the fourth research question, posed at the outset of this article, is addressed. Specifically, How did a process of community engagement explicitly connect to teen pregnancy prevention outcomes?

The research conducted regarding this deliberate community engagement strategy spurred development of an initial model of community change. This model of change represents the full cycle of potential linkages between the engagement process and specific outcomes in the area of teen pregnancy prevention. As Figure 2 shows, the model starts at the grassroots and constructs the ‘building blocks’ that lead to change.

This research is a preliminary step to future work seeking to quantify the direct relationship between community engagement and better outcomes for youth and their families. This initial model of change delineates the relationships between engagement and outcomes as they were observed by program leaders, staff, parents, community partners, and evaluators over the course of the past two years.
Study limitations

There are limitations inherent in any qualitative study. While a broad range of stakeholders took part in the study, participants were not randomly selected, and as such, their responses may not have represented the views of all participants in the community engagement effort. The authors have tried to mitigate this selection effect by collecting data over time, from multiple sources.

While recognizing these limitations, this study still offers an initial model of change connecting community engagement to program implementation, program effectiveness, and positive community change. This research is a preliminary step to future work seeking to quantify the direct relationship between community engagement and better outcomes for youth and their families.

Figure 2. FOCUS model of change.
Conclusions

This community engagement process, which took the major part of the FOCUS grant’s first year, reinforced key lessons for FLE leaders and staff, particularly the following:

- **The critical importance of taking the time to build a community commitment to the program before beginning services.** Using a carefully constructed strategy to engage individuals and institutions in FOCUS was pivotal. It was worth the lead time needed to present the FOCUS concept and gain broadly based community acceptance prior to beginning recruitment for direct services.

- **As a corollary, recognition of the importance of understanding the community context as a program is developed.** Community context – for example, issues facing the school system, and issues of high mobility – has to be carefully considered and addressed in order to build a successful program.

- **The ability of staff to integrate the core values of community engagement is essential to success.** Staff must be able to see the strengths in the community; adhere to the core values of informality, flexibility, inclusiveness, and equity; and adopt the interests of the community as their own.

Acknowledgements

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Note

1. A discussion of FOCUS’s specific outcomes is beyond the scope of this article. A strong community engagement process is foundational to the program’s effectiveness, so this work is a necessary precursor.

References


