

Parent Ambassador Focus Group Report

Methodology:

Three 1-hour focus groups of 5-6 participants held October 15, 2014. Moderated by Katy Warren. Two focus groups were held in English, one in Spanish.

Background:

WSA Parent Ambassadors is a year-long leadership program for 15-20 Head Start/ECEAP Parents chosen from a statewide application process. In four in-person trainings, Ambassadors receive training in:

- Leadership and teambuilding
- Community organizing, advocacy skills, and policy development
- Communications and presentation skills
- Government structure
- Policy information about early learning and other issues important to low income families
- Financial literacy
- Racial equity (new 2014)

Purpose:

The purpose of the focus groups was to get direct feedback from Ambassadors about what elements of the Parent Ambassador experience was most valuable and specifically how our more intentional focus on racial equity. (Please note we highlighted a few key parts of this report where we thought there was a clear value added because of our intensified work around racial equity.)

Describe a moment or experience when you felt empowered to advocate for your community as a parent ambassador? What skills did you develop that contributed to your increased confidence?

Predictably, these moments varied according to the specific experience and position of the Ambassador. Some spoke of speaking to a legislator, some of testifying or speaking to large groups, some of speaking to parents back in their community and inspiring them to get involved.

"I learned that my story impacts big things. I can share my story with the legislature. With training I can speak out – I'm very well educated about what's going on, and I know what's happening with families."

"Families come to me because I'm seen as a leader."

"Watching Joel and the lobbyist talk about Ross Hunter's bill, then telling our story to legislators and seeing them take notes was very empowering. It makes me think about what information I give to other parents, and how to make sure they take it seriously. "

The skills discussion was interesting. **There was a significant distinction between the Ambassadors of color (and particularly the Spanish speaking Ambassadors) and the Caucasian Ambassadors on what skills they gained that they found most contributed to their advocacy.** Caucasian Ambassadors spoke at length on the benefit of the practical training around early learning policy, how a bill becomes a law, and how to effectively reach decision makers.

Ambassadors of color focused on the way the training empowered them to speak up where they wouldn't have before, helped them develop confidence in taking on projects they wouldn't have otherwise. They spoke more about the benefits of the communications elements of the training – presentation, how to package yourself, knowing your audience. Spanish speaking Ambassadors clearly saw their role as bridging the divide between their local community and the English speaking world, and spoke of opportunities and access that were previously unknown or unavailable to them. Just knowing who to contact about things and the vocabulary and process enabled them to help other parents.

"Through Parent Ambassadors I developed the tools to do more – I hosted a community café, organized the sessions and developed the discussion questions. It gave me confidence, knowing that I could do it."

"I really valued the organizational skills and leadership skills and how to approach legislators. Before they were elite, and I wouldn't think of interacting with them. They're people too. "

Both groups spoke about how being an Ambassador conferred legitimacy among other parents and the confidence to speak to leaders. Several spoke of experiences outside of early learning when they became a leader in a group because they had the confidence and information they needed.

"I went to a meeting at the middle school and there were several parents there who couldn't understand anything. I made a meeting and spoke to the principal, and now we have interpreters at all the meetings."

Describe a moment of success this year as a parent ambassador?

It was clear that going to Olympia and meeting with legislators is an incredibly empowering and eye-opening experience for Ambassadors. Many spoke of how important it was and how they wished it came at the end of their Parent Ambassador year rather than the beginning. Several followed up with local site visits with their legislators.

"Just going to Olympia and watching the process was amazing, and realizing that there are no rules about talking to legislators. I'm shocked that we spend so little time in our educational system talking about the legislative process. We should teach children how to share their voice."

"Being part of Parent Ambassadors renewed my enthusiasm for grassroots organizing and advocacy, and the power of a group of passionate people to affect policy. I was jaded, but watching our legislation [child welfare bill] get passed was really optimizing. And actually having representatives come and appreciate feedback from parents."

"I invited Senator Brown to a family night at my center. I was really nervous because of my language. The newspaper did an article and he talked about how great ECEAP is. But what I really consider a success is seeing the reaction of my children. I'm less timid, and they see me differently."

Describe a moment of personal or professional growth for you this year that you can attribute to serving as a Parent Ambassador? (interest in going back to school, job, career and life goals etc...)

Many Ambassadors spoke of the requirement to do personal goal setting and how it changed their future plans. Several are going back to school, several have new jobs or are looking.

Others spoke of personal growth, and how the confidence they have gained has changed their outlook, and has changed how others see them and their potential. **Spanish speaking ambassadors in particular talked of these areas of personal growth**

"It helped that I had to do a plan – it made me think about my future, and what steps need to be taken."

"Parent Ambassadors has helped me in all aspects. I'm not the same person. Attitude, self esteem confidence. I don't have to take no for an answer, and it's made me realize that there is more work that I want to do with advocating for foster children. Testifying was a big step for me."

What do you think of when you think of racial equity? How is it connected to your work as an advocate for children?

Ambassadors responded to this question in several ways - 'equity' for all children regardless of circumstance, bringing up children in a multi-racial environment, and now to engage diverse communities. **There was a lot of growth in this area over the year, and there were differences even among Ambassadors of color regarding whether schools should focus on identifying and addressing each child's individual need (without discussion of 'racial equity') or whether the discussion of racial equity should be higher profile, particularly in discussions at the legislative level.**

"When I first became part of Head Start, I heard that all kids were together, regardless of disability, race, etc. It's a beautiful way to raise children, and there are so many adults who lose that. It's so important to teach equity early, it's not just about literacy and math."

"This question is really difficult, whether it's local, nationally, or globally. It's unfortunate that it took my daughter being in ECEAP for my daughter to be able to identify with another child who resembled her. It was the first time she had peers, staff that she could relate to. Diversity needs to be talked about on more than just this scale – needs to be more universal. It needs to be mirrored back to a child or it's just words. Talking about it seems really current and relevant. How do you implement policies that reflect the ideal?"

"Every child has the right and opportunity to have education, but some need more attention at certain points. Doesn't matter if he is Latino or not, every child should get what he needs. I like to think of Equality and Equity for all, whatever the individual child needs, not 'racial equity'. "