

Strong Partnerships Build Strong Programs

by Beth Quarles

A public housing authority, a school district and a literacy organization tackled a cooperative, comprehensive effort to enhance the quality of life in Marble Falls. Mounting an all out effort to unite funding from federal, state and local sources, the Marble Falls Independent School District (MFISD), the Marble Falls Housing Authority (MFHA) and the Burnet County Literacy Council (BCLC) embarked on a partnership to offer the community greater opportunities to participate in family development, educational and job readiness training activities.

This Marble Falls success story began in the wake of the MFHA's response to Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) encouragement "to engage as full partners in local community revitalization, economic development and securing affordable housing."The MFHA rose to this challenge identifying partnerships with MFISD and the BCLC to reach out to our community by offering increased opportunities for lifelong learning.

The BCLC through their partnership with the Community Action Inc. of San Marcos sought to develop new ways in their community to ensure that all disadvantaged individuals have access to the education and job training necessary for transitioning into employment, career advancement, and lifelong learning.

A partnership was forged with the opening of the T.Q. Brown Community Center completed by the MFHA. With the availability of funds through the BCLC and the Community Action Inc. and the award of an Even Start grant through the Texas Education Agency, this partnership grew and became Project Family L.I.F.E. (Literacy Improving the Future for Everyone).

The Marble Falls Project Family L.I.F.E. addresses the basic educational needs of parents and children up to age eight from low-income and disadvantaged families by providing a unified program of (1) adult basic education, GED, ESL and literacy programs for parents, (2) assistance for parents to effectively promote their children's educational development, and (3) early childhood education. Project Family L.I.F.E. provides some services directly. However, the impact of these services has been greatly enhanced by the resources made available through the collaboration.

The purpose of all Even Start Family Literacy Programs is to help break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy by improving the educational opportunities for families. This is accomplished by integrating early childhood education, adult literacy and adult basic education, and parenting education into a unified literacy program. Even Start is implemented nationally through cooperative projects that build on existing community resources, creating a new range of services for children, families, and adults.

These services are to:

extend learning, enrich language development and support high levels of success

for children birth to age seven and their families;
break the cycle of limited literacy, under-employment and high mobility of participating families by building literacy skills in both parents and children;
provide simultaneous services for families, where parents and their children learn together. This builds support for parents to succeed with their educational and employment goals, and develop habits of lifelong learning for their children; and
support families committed to education and to economic **independence**.

Project Family L.I.F.E provides: adult education and adult literacy; high-quality instructional programs to promote adult literacy, including adult basic education (ABE), English as a second language (ESL), and preparation for the General Education Development (GED) certificate; parenting education; high-quality instructional programs to help parents to support the educational growth of their children; early childhood education; developmentally appropriate and educational services for children designed to prepare them for success in regular school.

In addition, Project Family L.I.F.E. offers support services designed to facilitate the provision of core services. These services include transportation and meals. Staff provide extensive mentoring to families to assist them in becoming full partners in their children's education and to obtain much needed social services such as referrals for mental health and counseling, child care, nutrition assistance, health care, services to battered women, employment, and screening or treatment for chemical dependency.

Many of the families that we serve have limited experience in maneuvering the maze of human services bureaucracies. The linkage to appropriate social services, interpreting and mentoring provided by Project Family L.I.F.E. staff has proven to be one of the principle activities of the program and perhaps one of the most significant contributing factors to the program's success. The mentoring provided by the Family Facilitators has built an atmosphere of trust between Project Family L.I.F.E. and the families that we serve.

The Marble Falls Project Family L.I.F.E. follows the principles and practices set out nationally and within Texas to offer this Even Start program. We are now entering into the third year of operation. Results of program evaluations follow.

Intensity of Services Matters. A large body of research on the effectiveness of early childhood education programs shows that gains are enhanced by intensive exposure to a high-quality, center-based program (Barnett, 1995; Yoshikawa, 1995). Research on Even Start supports this finding in that adults and children with high levels of participation in Even Start's core services had larger learning gains than those with low levels of participation (St. Pierre et al., 1995, p.180, 189-191). In Marble Falls, we have been able to offer this intensity of service through our partnerships and the pooling of resources. Classes are offered at the T.Q. Brown Community Center. Meals are prepared at Marble Falls Elementary School and transported to the T.Q. Brown Center for participants. The MFISD Transportation Department provides transportation for families from their homes to the center. Services are coordinated with the MFISD Migrant program. Coordinated summer activities are particularly beneficial to families served both through Project Family L.I.F.E. and the Migrant program. Funds for GED and ESL instruction provided through the BCLC and Community Action Inc. have greatly expanded the capability

of the program to serve more adults.

Service Location Matters. Children in projects that emphasize center-based programs had larger learning gains than children in projects that emphasize home-based services. This is probably because center-based projects can more easily provide larger amounts of instruction.

Through the use of a facility designed by the MFHA with this exact purpose in mind, we have been able to offer a comprehensive program including classrooms for computer-based instruction and an exceptional childcare facility. Plans are underway to share the use of this facility during off-peak times with additional job readiness training, and civics based ESL programs for MFHA residents.

Classroom, computer lab and office space is provided by the MFHA as a match for the Even Start Funds. Maintenance of the facility is a joint endeavor provided by the staff of both the MFHA and MFISD.

The MFISD Technology Department provided a wireless connection between the T.Q. Brown Community Center and the district's WAN to provide Internet connectivity and access to district curriculum materials. Maintenance and support for the technology is provided by MFISD. Computer literacy classes have begun for Housing Authority residents using the resources made available through this program.

Parent/Child Time Matters. Families in projects that have large amounts of time for parents and children together had better home environments (e.g., more materials in the home, parent/child learning activities, approaches to discipline) than families in projects that have smaller amounts of parent/child time together (Tao, Swartz, St. Pierre & Tarr, 1997, p.184-185).

Project Family L.I.F.E. has accomplished the goal in bringing parents and their children together in meaningful ways through such activities as Parents and Children Together (PACT). Specific curriculum is used to promote this interaction using Bowdoin and Nurturing programs. Home visits allow the parent and child opportunities to demonstrate their newly gained skills together.

The community partnerships forged to implement the Marble Falls Project Family L.I.F.E will continue its mission and will seek to: explore and continue to develop more opportunities for non-Even Start families; to participate and seek the services they need through collaborations with additional community partners; and provide an integrated package of services designed to build on each other so that the effect of the whole is greater than the sum of the effects of each of the parts. Project Family L.I.F.E. will continue to provide the "glue" necessary for families to engage in the complete set of services necessary to move them ahead of families not in the program; as a continuum of parent/child educational opportunities offered by MFISD, Project Family L.I.F.E. sets the tone for success from birth through Pre-K/Headstart and on into family literacy programs for school-aged children. We believe that through our community partnerships that we can ensure that "No Child Will be Left Behind" and that all families will have an opportunity for lifelong learning.

About the Author

Beth Quarles is the Director of Grants Development for Marble Falls Independent School District. Lifelong Learning has been a particular interest of Beth's as well as community development. These interests guided Beth, as the past Director of Community Education. As Director, Ms. Quarles was responsible for building an inclusive program for adult learning, from a program offering a series of computer classes to a wide-ranging schedule of more than 50 evening courses. Beth sees her role in Community Education as an economic development force for her community. Outside the school setting, Beth enjoys a great Hill Country lifestyle with her 3-year old son Ian.



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