



The Engagement Imperative

Forsyth Family Voices models the importance of family engagement in grantmaking

June 2019

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At MDC we are committed to creating an infrastructure of opportunity in the South so everyone, particularly a community’s most vulnerable and economically marginalized people, can thrive. A true, community-wide infrastructure of opportunity should reflect the breadth of the community: employers, education systems, community-based organizations, policy makers, civic and neighborhood leaders, philanthropy, and people of all ages and experience. To close the gaps that separate people from opportunity, communities must understand how different people experience and interact with the institutions and systems that make up the infrastructure of opportunity. “Place-based” work includes both history and current context—and that means place-based change also must include perspectives from the people who make up those systems, people who are trying to navigate them, and people who have been excluded from them. Whether it’s community, family, or youth engagement, whatever name it takes, the creativity and critique of varied voices are a crucial part of ensuring a South where all people thrive.

Established practice and our experience with community-based partnerships tells us that stronger solutions emerge when the people most affected are involved in creating and implementing those solutions. In “Community Engagement Matters (Now More than Ever),” Melody Barnes and Paul Schmitz note that sometimes organizations or people who have formal power within a system want to respond quickly and, thus, take a top-down approach to speed implementation—and lose the trust of the community. Indeed, “engaging a community is not an activity that leaders can check off on a list. It’s a continuous process that aims to generate the support necessary for long-term change.”¹ More than just testing assumptions or seeking feedback, engagement means creating a reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship² that establishes trust and a long-term practice of asking questions, sharing information and resources, and sharing the responsibility for changing policies and practices that make up our institutions and systems.³

Forsyth Family Voices: Asking Questions Together

Forsyth Family Voices (FFV) is an example of an engagement effort in a place-based initiative that involves actors across a complex early childhood system. FFV, funded by the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust (“Trust”), is an ongoing engagement strategy to ensure that the perspectives of parents and families of young children inform Great Expectations, an initiative of the Trust that

¹ Barnes, Melody and Paul Schmitz, “Community Engagement Matters (Now More Than Ever).” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Spring 2016.

² Halgunseth, Linda C. and Amy Peterson, “Family Engagement, Diverse Families, and Early Childhood Education Programs: An Integrated Review of the Literature.” National Association for the Education of Young Children. 2009.

³ See also *Do Nothing About Me Without Me: An Action Guide for Engaging Stakeholders*. 2010. Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.

works to ensure that all children living in Forsyth County enter kindergarten ready to learn and leave set for success in school and life. FFV is designed to:

- Build the capacity and align the data collection efforts of early childhood and family support agencies so better data can be used to improve individual programs and strengthen the early childhood system overall
- Share data with stakeholders and facilitate peer learning among agencies and parents
- Identify additional opportunities to engage and develop parent leaders in the programs that serve them and their children
- Gather insights from parents to inform Great Expectations' strategies and guide local grantmaking

FFV began with a shared survey and focus group tools to listen to and learn from families. It was developed collaboratively with a diverse, cross-sector group of agencies representing different fields within the early childhood system. The experience and learning from survey development, honest conversations with families, shared reflection, and data-informed decision-making, led to the creation of the FFV Learning Network, a group of agency staff and parents who have been deepening their learning through continued engagement and leadership development opportunities.

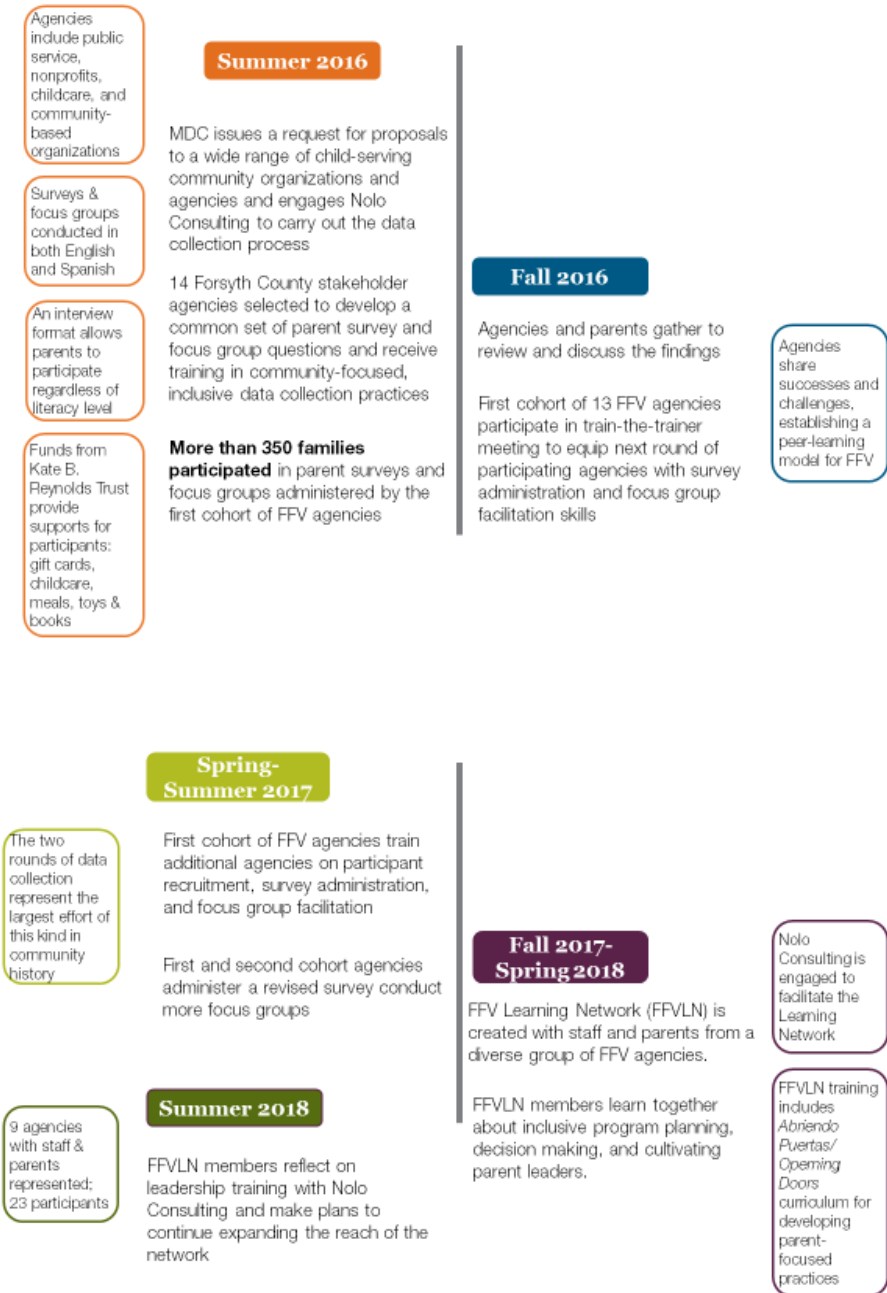
THE FORSYTH FAMILY VOICES LEARNING NETWORK (FFVLN)

The FFV Learning Network began with staff and parent representatives from nine early childhood agencies (MDC and the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust also participated). Over the course of a year-long engagement (from September 2017 to August 2018), a consistent group of more than 20 people participated in training and coaching led by staff from Nolo Consulting, a local consultancy with early childhood sector expertise. The backbone of the training was the *Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors* curriculum, a nationally recognized train-the-trainer model for parent engagement with culturally relevant material tied to local conditions and education systems. The group began by exploring leadership styles, levers for change at their agencies, and sharing their personal priorities for improving early childhood and parent engagement in Forsyth County. The series of meetings also included trainings such as focus group facilitation and discussions about communication and delegation related to agency activities and parent engagement.

At the conclusion of the training series, participants said they valued the trust and transparency in the group and the opportunity to share with people who had the “same goal and similar struggles.” Sharing and learning about other community resources improved the agencies’ work, for example, helping them update their parent education materials. Network members were grateful for the new skills they developed, like learning to conduct focus groups and new communication approaches—especially because they could apply them immediately to their programming and interactions with other staff members and parents. Agencies said they have increased focus on parent representation and increased delegation to parents as leaders. One child care center director described the result this way: “We used to talk to families and now we are consulting with the families, listening to the families.... We now want to be the voice for our families.”

The group now wants to work on developing clear messaging about how parent *involvement* is different from *engagement*, improving their ability to measure the effects of parent engagement, and building on the buy-in from existing leadership to garner more support and connections for early childhood efforts in Forsyth County. They are eager to share what they have learned, including facilitating peer workshops based on their areas of expertise and introducing more staff and parents to the Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors approach.

FORSYTH FAMILY VOICES TIMELINE



Survey Says

Here's just some of what was learned in the most recent round of FFV data collection⁴:

Income level of respondents



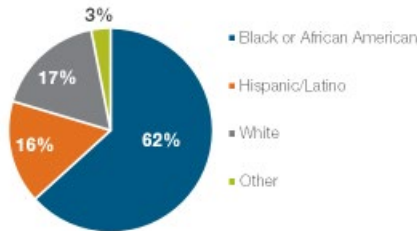
93% of respondents have a child under age 6

46% of respondents have a child over age 7

“What are the 2 or 3 most important things you need to improve your family’s quality of life?”



Race/ethnicity of respondents



TIME

was the most frequently named as a barrier to being involved in a child’s school or childcare



Parents were confident in their ability to support learning at home, but:

68% need more information about health & education services for their children or family

In Forsyth County, families of color experience significant economic challenges that negatively affect kindergarten preparedness:

more than **50%** of Latino families reported they could not afford a needed medical appointment in the last year

more than **35%** of African American families reported struggles to pay rent and find work in the last year

In supporting development & education, families placed the highest priority on:

- a role in their child’s education
- relationship with teachers
- saving money for their child’s education

⁴ For more about the survey responses, see *Great Expectations: Forsyth Family Voices 2017 Survey Results*. 2017. MDC and Forsyth Futures.

Sharing Resources and Responsibility Yields Broad Benefits

Moving beyond data collection, MDC and the agencies involved in Forsyth Family Voices are thinking about other ways to change their practice to center their work on families. Because inequitable power dynamics often exist between organizations and the families they serve, it's important for organizations with influence and resources to take on the burden of change. In community engagement, awareness of those dynamics and efforts to share resources and responsibility more broadly have benefits for everyone involved. In an early childhood initiative like Great Expectations, those shared responsibilities and benefits might look like this:

	Families...	Organizations...
When organizations consider what life is like for the families they work with and change things like meeting times and places so that parents can be part of program decisionsfeel welcome, supported and valued.	...are able to more successfully include the voices and leadership of underrepresented families in the planning and decision-making that affect families most.
When organizations make it a habit to ask for and respect the perspectives of families, sharing information about what affects families in ways that honor different cultures and languages...	...are empowered to act based on increased understanding and knowledge.	...are more accountable to families.
When organizations and funders support family and community strengths with resources for parent leadership, including compensation for time and funds for things like transportation and childcare...	...have more opportunities to become active and effective leaders in their own communities.	...are able to sustain long-term, family-led growth and change in their communities.

When you ask a question, you are able to...

When respectful, routine, and inclusive engagement practices are integrated into an organization’s culture—as reflected in values, habits, and behaviors—the potential for sustainable, positive parent influence increases. For Forsyth Family Voices, developing shared tools to listen and learn from families creates a sturdy foundation for a stronger early childhood system in Forsyth County. Together, agencies trained in the FFV approach are supporting parent leadership skills, improving organizational capacity to involve parent leaders in program planning and decision-making, and increasing the system’s commitment to being accountable to the families it serves. The early FFV efforts demonstrate that when you take time learn with families, organizations, and funders, you are able to:

Share your experiences with other parents and agencies	Make your organization stronger and smarter	Improve your investment strategy
<p>At the conclusion of the 2016 survey period, agencies and families gathered to review and discuss the data. Parents were encouraged by the opportunity to share their ideas and concerns. They welcomed the invitation to gather with agencies to process the data and what it means for the Forsyth County community. Parents in the FFV Learning Network took part in professional development and priority setting activities.</p> <p>“We need to take another parent to meetings and invite them. Sometimes it is intimidating to come solo, so having parents team up is best.”</p>	<p>Through Forsyth Family Voices participating agencies have deepened relationships within their agencies, with peers, with parents, especially those they may have a harder time connecting with. The FFV Learning Network is providing even more opportunity for connection, mentoring, and learning. Learning Network members gained new skills and will continue to expand the reach of their engagement efforts.</p> <p>“We used to talk to families and now we are consulting with the families, listening to the families....we now want to be the voice for our families.”</p>	<p>Data from FFV complemented other data collection and research efforts of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, like the Early Childhood Service System Analysis and Family Friend and Neighbor Care research. The Trust used FFV insights about family context and needs to inform their strategic priorities and ongoing consideration of investment opportunities.</p> <p>“...we’re discovering what we collectively as a community can do to foster the kind of change that’s needed to help children, families, and our entire community prosper.”</p>

About Great Expectations

A project of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, Great Expectations works to ensure that children in Forsyth County enter kindergarten ready to learn and leave set for success in school and life. Right now, almost half of the children entering school in Forsyth County are at risk of falling behind their peers in reading, and we believe this is unacceptable. Through building collaborative bridges among agencies, community members, business leaders, policymakers, and other funders—we are listening to parents to find out what they need and aligning efforts to ensure our children, and entire community, thrive.

About MDC

MDC for more than 50 years has brought together foundations, nonprofits, and leaders from government, business and the grassroots to illuminate data that highlight deeply rooted Southern challenges and help them find systemic, community solutions. Our approach uses research, consensus-building and programs that connect education, employment, and economic security to help communities foster prosperity by creating an “infrastructure of opportunity”—the aligned systems and supports that can boost everyone, particularly those who’ve been left behind, to higher rungs on the economic ladder. MDC’s landmark State of the South reports since 1996 have shaped the economic agenda of the region, shining a spotlight on historic trends, deep-rooted inequities, and solutions that offer rural and urban communities a path forward. Read our past reports at www.stateofthesouth.org. Learn more about MDC at www.mdcinc.org.