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## Early Learning in Eastern Idaho: A Case Study of Community Collaboration

The Working Group model of Partners for Prosperity (P4P) exemplifies community-driven, grass roots initiatives that create holistic change. The model emphasizes active participation and community engagement as the avenue for creating long-term, authentic change in relation to poverty reduction. During Phase 1 of a ten year strategic plan for poverty reduction, P4P will implement a total of seven working groups in areas linked to previous research and opportunities for success.

The Early Learning Working Group (ELWG) was the first of the seven groups established and as such serves as a valuable tool in evaluating both the successes and the challenges in implementing the Working Group model. This case study not only highlights the early successes and challenges, but also provides a solid road map for positive growth and adaptation in future Working Group efforts. As the initial Working Group of P4P, the ELWG provides a quality picture of the model as it evolved over the first year of implementation.

In considering a framework for effective Working Groups, a number of criteria were initially established by P4P to ensure what we consider “community authenticity”: (1) Working Group membership is comprised of members of the community with a special emphasis in engaging those in the LEQ; (2) No status, positions, or titles exist within the Working Group and each member has an equal voice in the process; (3) Ideas and solutions in relation to poverty reduction are formulated by Working Group members, not P4P; and (4) The role of P4P is to act as facilitator and provide technical assistance in assisting each Working Group in implementing community-level solutions to poverty reduction.

The ELWG began in early 2004 since early learning was strongly linked to poverty prevention during the planning phase of P4P. The initial discussions centered on developing structure for the Working Group and developing the constituency necessary to form a group representative of the region. During those two months, a high priority was establishing personal relationships with professionals and community members who either had an interest in or involvement with Early Learning and Early Childhood issues.

The ELWG experienced strong success in the participation of community members, professionals, service providers, government entities, and other interested parties. Some of those relationships were developed during the planning phase since many community members and professionals had expressed a strong interest in Early Childhood issues as a way to reduce poverty. Outreach efforts were spread across all the counties of Eastern Idaho and the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. P4P developed a stakeholder analysis of individuals and community organizations which would make this Working Group both productive and successful.

During that time P4P established the ground rules of the Working Group; with the basic value of respecting all ideas and opinions and making the meetings a safe place to express opinions and ideas the focal point. That provided the basis and foundation for any



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member, regardless of background or experience, to feel comfortable in their ability to speak openly and serve as change-agents in Early Childhood issues throughout Eastern Idaho.

The following highlights both the successes as well as the challenges in the past year. Both provide valuable insight and a learning tool for improving and enhancing not only the ELWG but also the other Working Groups.

- One of the first lessons learned was the importance of bringing people together from across the different sectors of the regional community—including geographic, racial, rural and urban, and across agencies. Ideas about Early Learning and poverty reduction that had once been isolated, narrow issues, now had a forum for both discussion and action. In essence, the ELWG provided a medium for both traditional and non-traditional stakeholders to meet together and discuss common interests in relation to Early Learning. The simple act of discussion and dialogue among community members who had not typically worked together, had a profound affect in helping members realize that there was a considerable amount of common ground in establishing ideas and solutions for improving and enhancing Early Childhood issues in Eastern Idaho.
- A work plan was developed by the members to increase and enhance Early Learning opportunities in the entire region. One of the key lessons learned in this planning process was the need for effective facilitation methods to ensure that the ideas and issues of the members were translated into an effective plan of action, representative of community ideas and solutions. At the same time, it was recognized early in the facilitation process that members could be overwhelmed with strategic planning terms. A more effective hands-on approach to teaching strategic planning was utilized. Rather than teaching the group technical terms of strategic planning first, P4P staff took the basic ideas and input of members and helped them translate it into more technical terms. This allowed the process of planning to continue while at the same time introducing many people to strategic planning for the first time.
- One of the major benefits for members was the significant amount of networking opportunities during the course of strategic planning. The time was taken to establish personal relationships among members. Members were able to learn from one another and enhance their knowledge and networks across the region. Members continue to express the appreciation and benefit that this networking time affords them, in addition to the formal work that takes place within each meeting.
- While a significant amount of outreach was performed both at the inception of the ELWG and since, there was a gap in representation from some of the most rural counties and communities of the region. It was recognized that continual outreach was necessary, specifically from P4P District Coordinators, whose main responsibilities were to provide outreach to these rural communities. Working Group members continue to work with P4P staff in developing effective outreach to ensure that the voices of people from across the region are heard.
- Because the Working Group model is truly a grass roots effort, the ELWG faced challenges about how the work would be accomplished. With members serving as



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volunteers rather than in a paid position, one of the challenges was ensuring that the activities developed by the ELWG were actually carried out and accomplished by the members themselves. Special efforts were taken by P4P staff in communicating with the Working Group chair and members to ensure they had the capacity to carry out the activities of the work plan. P4P adopted procedures and follow-up efforts to provide more consistency and efficiency in ensuring that each Working Group member was able to follow through with their individual and group responsibilities.

- One of the significant and primary benefits recognized by P4P staff and Working Group members is the leveraging power that the Working Group model provides. By dissolving traditional community boundaries; rejecting the notion of “turf” or territory; and working toward a common purpose; traditional and non-traditional stakeholders have been able to enhance their ability to make lasting, effective change in poverty reduction. One key example of the leveraging power of the group was a federal Early Learning Opportunity Act Grant (ELOA) that was awarded directly to the ELWG for \$994,000. By all accounts the primary reason for receiving the grant was the partnership efforts and collaboration of traditional and non-traditional stakeholders working across the entire region to enhance early learning services, primarily for children living in the lowest economic quartile.
- The fluid nature of the ELWG often presented challenges since the membership of the meetings changed to some degree each month. Because the working group meetings are open to any person at any time, new membership typically changed the dynamics of the meetings. The positive aspect was that this also injected new ideas and valuable information. Efforts continue to find a balance in the outreach and participation across the working group while maintaining efficiency and effectiveness in the meetings each month.

## **Summary**

While this is not a comprehensive list of all the successes and challenges within the ELWG, it does represent the major successes and challenges from the first year. As a learning and responsive organization, P4P has worked diligently to adapt and grow in response to new information, issues and challenges. P4P is strongly committed to the Working Group model as a systemic approach in poverty reduction and an effective tool in community based solutions.