

# Orientation evaluation

*Robbinsdale Even Start*

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**April 2006**

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# Acknowledgments

Wilder Research staff who contributed to the completion of this evaluation were as follows:

Louann Graham

Brian Pittman

Christopher Gerrard facilitated the focus groups.

Thank you to Joyce Beaird, Michelle Berscheid, Mary Hudson, and the other Robbinsdale Even Start staff for their help in implementing this evaluation and completing the staff questionnaires, and to the parents served by the program for their participation in the focus groups.

# Summary

The 2005-06 local evaluation of the Robbinsdale Even Start program focused on the intake and orientation process. The staff was interested in learning about how the process is going from the perspective of current staff and participants, as well as what could be done to improve the process. In order to gather feedback and suggestions, focus group discussions were held with 28 parents and 16 staff members completed a questionnaire.

Results from the focus group discussions with adult participants revealed the following:

- While all participants joined the program to learn English, other motivations seemed to correspond to the parent's level of proficiency in English. Beginners joined primarily for their children and to be able to communicate in the workplace, while many advanced learners joined to accomplish higher educational goals for themselves.
- Although orientation was a positive experience for nearly all the parents, many did not fully understand the explanations given by staff due to a language barrier. New students often relied on friends, relatives, and classmates to explain or clarify.
- The explanation given by staff during orientation was the primary source of information regarding policies for parents who attended the group orientation in September. On the other hand, students who entered the program later in the year were more likely to learn about policies when talking with peers or when a staff member warned them about a violation.
- All of the parents felt welcomed at the beginning of the program, mostly due to the friendliness of the teachers. Being introduced to classmates was also important, especially for students who entered the program later in the year.

Results from the staff questionnaire indicated the following:

- Most of the staff members think that program participants understand the program purpose and policies pretty well, but there is also room for improvement.
  - The attendance policy was the most frequently cited aspect that program participants misunderstand according to staff. In particular, parents don't always call in to notify staff of their absence, either because they are unaware that they need to, they forget, or they are insecure about their language skills.
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- Some staff felt that the parents don't always grasp the importance of Parent-Child Interaction Time, and a few mentioned that parents sometimes confuse the interaction component with the Parent Conversation component.
- Staff recommended using translation and interpretation services to improve the orientation process and make the paperwork easier for program participants.
- Some staff members expressed frustration over the lack of information they had received regarding the orientation process and the lack of consistency regarding program policies.
- While all the staff members indicated that students are integrated into the program with minimal disruption during the year, a couple mentioned that this process could be improved by pairing new students with current students that could serve as mentors.

## ***Recommendations***

*Provide information in native languages.* Focus group results revealed that students attribute most of their confusion to a language barrier. The first step to increasing comprehension would be to translate all forms into the participants' native languages. Simplification of wording and consolidation of forms could also be helpful.

*Utilize interpretation services.* It is important to keep in mind that about 33 percent of adults served by the program are illiterate in any language (Robbinsdale Even Start Grant Proposal 2005-06). This means that one out of every three adults that enters the program cannot read the forms given to her even if they are translated into her native language. To address this situation, Even Start staff should consider providing interpretation in addition to translation. Any explanation of program components and policies that is given in written form should also be given verbally in the participant's native language if possible. Assign interpreters to assist with reading and filling out forms, if possible. Although few staff members are bilingual, assistance may be available. It appears that Language Line Services and family school bilingual liaisons who can provide interpreter and translation services are available through the school district (Robbinsdale Even Start Grant Proposal 2005-06, pp.11-12). To minimize future reliance on interpretation services, explanations could be videotaped.

*Establish a mentoring system to help integrate students who enter the program after classes have already begun.* It is clear from the focus group discussions that participants rely heavily on their classmates for information. This strategy could be formalized to ensure that new students get all the necessary information. Each new student could be paired with a student mentor, who could serve as an informational liaison. Ideally,

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student mentors would be advanced English Language Learners who speak the same language as the new student so that they could help translate information given by staff. In addition, new students will probably feel most comfortable with a mentor who is familiar with their culture. The mentoring system will function best if mentors are given time to meet with staff to receive instruction and provide feedback. It may also reduce the need for hiring interpreters.

*Consider holding more group orientations throughout the year.* Although all students receive the same information regarding the program components and policies, students who entered the program in September and attended the group orientation tended to remember and understand the information better than those who entered the program later in the year. There are at least two factors that might explain why the group orientation proved to be more effective. First, the group orientation was better organized than the individual orientations. Second, students tend to learn better in groups because they are able to rely on each other for clarification. It may be worthwhile to hold more group orientations throughout the year and admit several families at a time rather than admitting them separately. Holding more group orientations might reduce the need to pair new students with mentors, but it might be helpful to make both changes if possible.

*Establish and maintain consistency.* While it is unknown why some program participants have trouble distinguishing between program components, some of the current confusion might be due to a lack of consistency with component titles. For example, the Parenting Class is also called Parent Discussion and Parent Conversation. Program participants, the majority of whom are English Language Learners, might not make the connection that those three titles refer to the same component. It is likely that at least some of this confusion could easily be resolved by deciding on one name and sticking with it. In general, it would help to establish consistency in the wording and specifics of policies, as well as in their enforcement. Make sure that all staff members are aware of current policies so that they can confidently support their students when questions arise.

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# Introduction

The Robbinsdale Even Start family literacy program is a project of the Robbinsdale Area School District in partnership with People Responding in Social Ministry (PRISM) and Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) of Robbinsdale Area Schools. The program began in September 2005 and is located at the Winnetka Learning Center in New Hope. About 95 percent of the parents served were born outside of the United States, and about 80 percent of the parents served are English Language Learners. The program is held Monday through Thursday from 9:00am to 2:00pm and includes the four Even Start components: adult basic education, early childhood education, parent education, and parent-child interaction time. Program staff also do home visiting, which is a requirement of Even Start programs.

## *Orientation evaluation*

Each Even Start program undergoes a local evaluation focused on one aspect of the program. The 2005-06 local evaluation of the Robbinsdale Even Start program focused on the intake and orientation process. The staff was interested in learning how well the process is currently working and what could be done to improve it. In early March, sixteen staff members completed a questionnaire regarding their views on the orientation process. On March 21, 2006, a focus group was conducted in English with nine adult participants at the program site. Three additional focus groups were conducted in Spanish at the program site on March 22 and March 23. Four parents participated in the first Spanish-language focus group, two parents participated in the second group, and nine parents participated in the third group. During the discussions in Spanish, a teacher took the students who did not speak Spanish (four in total) out of the classroom and interviewed them separately in English.

Of the 28 parents who participated in total, 10 had been students at the learning center prior to the beginning of the Even Start program, six had begun the program at its inception in September, and 10 had joined the program at different times during the year (start dates were unknown for the other two participants). Those who had been present in September (16 in total) would have attended the group orientation that was held for all parents at the start of the program. On the other hand, the 10 parents who entered the program at different times throughout the year would have experienced a less formalized orientation process geared at integrating them into the classes already in progress.

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## ***Background on orientation***

### **Statewide guidelines**

The *Minnesota Family Literacy Program Quality Indicators* (November 2005) provides an instrument for evaluating the intake and orientation process. The instrument includes the following criteria (somewhat abridged from the original text):

- Discuss participation requirements and available services with parents on an individual basis.
- Schedule enrollment and orientation in order to provide maximum support to incoming families with the least amount of disruption to the existing program.
- Include a discussion of program goals and policies.

### **Approach to orientation used by the program**

The program uses one of two approaches to orientation, depending on the time of year.

At the start of the program in September, families go through the following process:

- The parents meet in a large group on the first day of classes.
- A teacher goes over all of the program information and forms.
- Students with more advanced English skills help explain the information to students who do not yet know English.
- The students fill out as much paperwork as they can during the orientation. If students are unable to complete all the paperwork, they meet later in the week with a staff member who helps them finish it.

There is not enough space in the program to accommodate all interested families. Many families choose to join the waiting list. They fill out the registration form in advance and are allowed to enter the program as spaces open throughout the year. The intake and orientation process is different for these families:

- When space opens up, a staff member calls the family to schedule a start date. The parent is instructed to come to the office on the first day.
  - When the family arrives at the office, a staff member greets them and walks them to the children's classrooms. The staff member introduces the parent to the child's teacher and shows the parent where to store their personal belongings.
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- After all the children have been taken to their classrooms, the staff member walks the parent to his/her ABE classroom. The staff member gives the student's ABE folder to the teacher and asks the student to return to the office after Parent-Child Interaction Time to fill out the paperwork.
- Oftentimes the parents do not return to the office because they are busy with their children. If the parent does not return to the office, the staff member will try to locate her by calling her classroom. The staff member and parent will find a time to go over the paperwork within the next few days. The staff member will follow-up with the parent until all paperwork has been turned in.

Sometimes students already attending the daytime ABE classes want to join the Even Start program. These students go through essentially the same process as the others, but they are asked to fill out the paperwork before they start to bring their children.



# Evaluation results

Results from the focus groups are summarized below followed by results from the staff questionnaire.

## *Participant focus group results*

Twenty-eight parents participated in focus group discussions regarding the intake and orientation process. Orientation was a positive experience for the majority of parents. However, a language barrier made it difficult for many to fully understand the explanations given by staff.

### **Motivations for joining**

The participants were asked why they decided to enroll in the program. While nearly all mentioned a desire to learn English, the other reasons mentioned by the parents seemed to correspond to their level of proficiency in English.

Beginning English Language Learners joined primarily for their children and to be able to communicate in the workplace.

I wanted to participate in the first place for my daughter. She began preschool and she is going to be prepared for kindergarten. And also, for me, because I am working and I need to be able to speak English.

I feel that it helps a lot to be with other babies for my baby's development.

...to help my kids with their homework.

The more English you know, the more possibilities you have to grow in your job.

Advanced English Language Learners have higher educational goals for themselves, and many joined the program to accomplish their goals.

Improve my English and get my GED.

Learn, more education, how to read and write correctly. I would like to go to college in the future if possible.

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## **Comprehension of information received**

The participants were asked how well the program was explained to them, whether anything was missing from the explanation, and whether any aspects were difficult for them to understand.

Overall, most of the participants thought the explanation of the program components and policies was clear.

I think they explained everything well in the moment that we entered. To the majority, at least to me, they gave us many papers about how the program works, what we have to do, what is permitted and what is not.

Everything was clear. No surprises. No deception.

All of this was explained step-by-step so that we would understand the policies well.

My experience was very informative. They helped me fill out the application and gave me a timeline on the test. It was informative. I understood the process clearly.

Despite the positive feedback, most of the participants had received explanation in English only and had some trouble understanding because of a language barrier. Many relied on friends, relatives, and classmates to explain or clarify.

At that time I didn't understand very well because I didn't understand English when I came here. So I didn't really understand the explanation. But then someone else who spoke Spanish explained it to me.

I thought I understood the policies, but I didn't because of the language, lack of communication.

...I knew about it because other people who were attending the classes had commented about it.

It appears that those parents who attended the orientation for all families in September had a better understanding of policies than those parents who entered the program at different times throughout the year. Of the 15 parents who mentioned the attendance policy, only seven indicated having learned the policy during orientation (6 of those 7 had attended the orientation for all families in September). Of the eight respondents who reported that they were not informed of the policy during orientation, six were parents who had entered the program after classes had already started. Four of the eight learned about the policy by talking with classmates. The other four had the policy explained to them by staff only after being warned about a violation (see Figure 1). The policy caused

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emotional distress for one participant who was worried about balancing her responsibilities as a wife, mother, and student.

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### 1. Source of information for attendance policy

<b>How did you learn about the attendance policy?</b>	<b>Students that entered at the start of the program in September</b>	<b>Students that entered the program later in the year</b>
Staff during orientation	6	1
Classmates	1	3
Staff after a violation	1	3
Total	8	7

Six parents wished that they had known about the three year participation maximum so that they could have made plans for their children who will not yet be school-age by the time the program ends. Several parents began ESL classes with the false assumption that the teachers would know Spanish and use Spanish when teaching them English. A couple of the parents did not initially understand the difference between Parent Conversation and Parent-Child Interaction Time.

### Quantity of information

The participants were asked whether the amount of information they were given on the first few days of the program was too much, too little, or about right. The majority felt that the quantity of information was about right (17 respondents). At the same time, several admitted that they were unable to judge the quantity since the information was given in English and they were not able to understand all of it (7 respondents).

One cannot grasp all the information without the vocabulary that one learns as time passes. So I don't know if the information was a little or a lot.

It can be hard to understand – sometimes things go over our heads.

I think I didn't catch a lot the first time because I didn't know what to ask.

### Feeling welcomed

All of the parents agreed that they felt welcomed. The most common reason why (mentioned by 9 of the parents) was because of the teachers.

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They make you feel like you are in a trusting environment. Not to worry if you don't know something. They don't pressure you to answer a question that you don't know. They give us time and they explain to us.

I felt really good because the teacher is a good person. She teaches well and she gives you confidence to feel good.

Several others mentioned that the introductions with classmates helped them feel welcome. This was especially the case for those who entered the program after it had begun.

Even though we began a little bit after the others had – they introduced me to everyone, and everyone said their names, and I felt welcome here.

It was an opportunity to share something about our lives with the others and to learn about everyone else too.

### **What really helped**

The parents were asked if there was anything done at the start of the program that was especially helpful to them. Several of the participants who entered the program later in the year said that what helped them the most was the teachers' willingness to answer any question that they had.

Everything was good because whatever doubts I had, if I asked, they always had answers.

I also asked questions, and they always responded, and if I didn't understand, they taught it to me. They helped me.

If we don't understand a word, even if it's really short or easy, she explains it to us.

A few participants had unique experiences and shared their stories about how the staff had helped them.

When I began in September, I had (an illness), and I didn't have insurance. (The teacher) stopped by my house to see how I was doing and to give me some advice on how to care for myself, and she even helped me find a clinic where they helped me and I didn't have to pay a lot.

When I started, my partner was pregnant. The teachers gave a lot of advice to my partner, what she should eat, basically, and about their experiences with pregnancies.

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## **Suggestions**

Only a few parents offered suggestions for improving the orientation process. This is likely due to the overall favorable opinions with regard to the current process. However, it may not have been clear from the wording of the question that we were interested in suggestions for the program rather than for prospective families. Suggestions directed at the program included the following:

Have another student help. Write down schedule.

...encourage the kids to speak up and ask questions.

Have the teacher put the schedule on the white board because then they don't have to bother other students.

It is important for a staff person to show the student around and have the teacher help them remember.

## **Other comments**

Several parents expressed that they would like more time in their parenting class. They have a hard time getting to this class on time because they often get delayed by the time they spend with their children after lunch. The parents suggested extending the class period by 15 minutes or rearranging the children's nap time. Overall, the parents are very appreciative of the program.

I don't think I have any complaints. Because more than anything else, they are dedicating their time to us. We are different people, foreigners. They are giving time, effort, and, more than anything else, money to support these programs. In our countries, we don't have these types of programs. It's very rare that we have a program like this where we go to classes for foreigners and where we can bring our kids.

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## *Staff survey results*

Sixteen staff members completed a questionnaire regarding the orientation and intake process.

### **Student comprehension**

Most of the staff members think that new program participants understand the program purpose and policies pretty well, but some also felt that they are not so well understood (see Figure 2).

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#### **2. Student comprehension as perceived by staff**

##### **A. How well do new program participants, who have received orientation, understand what the program is about (that is, the content and purpose of each of the program components)?**

	<b>Number</b>
Very well	1
Pretty well	11
Not so well	3
Uncertain	1

##### **B. How well do new program participants, who have received orientation, understand the policies, rules and expectations of the program (for example, the attendance policy or the policy when their child is ill)?**

Very well	0
Pretty well	11
Not so well	4
Depends on the level of English	1

### **Misunderstood aspects and policies**

Staff members listed a variety of aspects and policies that are sometimes misunderstood by new program participants. The most common response was the attendance policy (mentioned by 11 staff members), with “calling in to notify” as the most commonly cited aspect of the policy that students struggle with (see Figure 3).

They don't *believe* that they need to call in when they can't come to school or else they think their English isn't good enough.

Nearly half of the staff members mentioned that new program participants have trouble understanding different aspects related to program components. In particular, four staff members expressed that new participants do not always grasp the importance of Parent-Child Interaction Time. A couple of staff members also mentioned that participants

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sometimes have difficulty understanding the difference between Parent-Child Interaction Time and Parent Conversation (see Figure 3).

Other misunderstood aspects mentioned by the staff include lunchtime, schedules, transportation, home visiting, bad weather information, and the participation maximum of three years (see Figure 3).

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### 3. Misunderstood aspects and policies

<b>Are there any particular policies or aspects of the program that new participants sometimes misunderstand or have difficulty with? (Aspects mentioned by staff are grouped into categories and subcategories. Staff could mention more than one aspect.)</b>	<b>Number who mentioned</b>
<b>Attendance</b>	<b>11</b>
Calling in to notify of absence	6
Keeping child at home for 24 hours if fever detected	3
Remaining at school from 9:00 am to 2:00 pm	2
Maximum number of absences allowed	2
Attending all of the components	2
<b>Components</b>	<b>7</b>
Importance of parent-child interaction time	4
Difference between parent-child interaction time and parent conversation	2
<b>Lunchtime</b> (leaving classrooms by noon, knowing where to go, attending lunch)	<b>5</b>
<b>Schedules</b> (personal schedules, children's schedules, parenting class schedules, volunteer schedules, and monthly afternoon program schedules)	<b>4</b>
<b>Transportation policy</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Home visiting</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Bad weather information</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Participation maximum of three years</b>	<b>1</b>

The staff members were also asked how well they think new participants are integrated into the program when they enter at different times throughout the year. All of the staff felt positively regarding the integration of new participants, with the majority expressing that the process goes pretty well and a few expressing that it goes very well (see Figure 4).

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### 4. Integration of students that enter the program after classes have already begun

<b>A. How well are new participants integrated into the group with minimal disruption during the year?</b>	<b>Number</b>
Very well	4
Pretty well	12
Not so well	0

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## **Staff suggestions**

The staff members were asked to offer suggestions regarding different aspects of the orientation process. In regards to improving the paperwork, staff most commonly suggested using translation and interpretation services. Some also suggested simplifying and consolidating the forms, as well as having the participants fill them out prior to the start of classes (see Figure 5).

Providing translation and interpretation services was also the most common suggestion for improving the intake and orientation process in general (see Figure 5).

Some staff members expressed frustration over the lack of information they had received regarding the orientation process and the lack of consistency regarding program policies.

Consistency of enforcing the policies. Having one person in charge of enforcing the rules. We tend to be inconsistent with our rules and policies, which leads to parents not following the rules. Many often try to be the exception. As a staff member, I am unsure of what our policies actually are and am afraid to say anything to our participants for fear of being told something different later.

I do not know what the intake and orientation process is and there is usually confusion about policies. Therefore I am not able to feel I can evaluate it. If staff were given copies of policies, and included in the intake and orientation process, we would be better equipped to support students when they ask or not. Example: attendance, transportation, etc. I have never been there when intake and orientation has gone on to make any other comments. This is extremely confusing when we think there are policies, but 1) what are they, 2) who is to monitor and enforce them, and 3) how many and what expectations are there.

A couple staff members also suggested setting aside a day for orientation prior to the start of class (see Figure 5).

When asked how to improve orientation for students that enter the program after classes have already begun, the most common suggestion was to pair new students with current students from their cultures who could serve as mentors (see Figure 5).

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## 5. Staff suggestions

<b>A. Do you have any suggestions for reducing or streamlining the paperwork or making it easier for ELL participants?</b>	<b>Number who mentioned</b>
Translate paperwork into the participants' native languages	4
Have an interpreter assist new participants while they fill out the forms	4
Reduce the amount of paperwork by consolidating forms	3
Simplify the wording on forms	3
Have the participant fill out and return the forms prior to attending the first class	2
<b>B. What could be done to improve the intake and orientation process?</b>	
Provide translation and interpretation services for students low in English	6
Inform staff of policies and involve staff in the orientation process	2
Be consistent with policies and enforcement	2
Set aside a day for orientation prior to the first day of class	2
<b>C. What could be done to improve the intake and orientation process specifically for students who enter the program after the start of classes in September?</b>	
Pair new students with current students from their cultures who can serve as mentors	3
Introduce the new parent and child to other parents and children during parent-child interaction time	1
Hold several orientations throughout the year and have new families enter the program in groups	1

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