

# Learning Dreams Project

*Formative Evaluation Report  
Executive Summary*

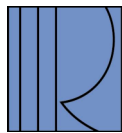
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following summary is based on a review of project documents, literature searches, eight in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in Worthington in October and November, 2006 and six in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in Southeast Minneapolis in January and February, 2007.

## ***Learning Dreams Is a Viable and Robust Model***

The Learning Dreams process is viable and robust. It can be implemented successfully:

- By trained neighborhood educators even if they differ in age, gender and cultural heritage from the families and individuals with whom they are working
- In different neighborhood and cultural contexts with different family structures (Latino, Somali and Hmong)
- In urban and rural settings
- In an interval of three-six months

In its start-up phase, the model can be implemented with:

- Limited financial resources and part-time staff

## ***The Benefits of the Model Have Broad Appeal***

The model has broad appeal and is enthusiastically received by its stakeholders, including:

- Families of diverse cultures
- Prospective partners

**Worthington:** Of 39 families that have been contacted since July 2006, 19 families are actively involved in project pursuing their learning dreams. Almost all are Latino. Participants are taking classes in citizenship, English, starting a business, sewing, purchasing a home, cake decorating and poetry. Of those, three are enrolled in college.

**Southeast Minneapolis:** Since September, 2006 25 families have been contacted and conversations initiated with 26 adults. Of these, all 25 are pursuing a learning dream. Most of the families contacted who live in the Glendale Public Housing Project are Somali and those from outside of Glendale are not.

Participants from both Worthington and Southeast Minneapolis are satisfied with the Learning Dreams project. They find it beneficial. One stated, "What I liked most was that she said that they were here to help us to fulfill our dreams." Participants are seeking ways to repay or give back. As one participant stated, "I am willing, you know if we need to volunteer or something."

Despite this satisfaction, they are also concerned the project might end before their dreams are completed. As one person said, “We are a bit worried about whether or not this project will continue next year.”

**Lessons Learned: Critical Success Factor**

The following factors contribute to successful implementation of the model.

**Project Recruitment Snowballs:** Within three to four months the project can successfully achieve a critical mass and momentum. Participants, on their own volition, tell family, friends and acquaintances about the program, which enables neighborhood educators to establish rapport, explain the project and recruit more participants at an accelerated pace.

**Neighborhood Educators are adept organizers with a nuanced sensitivity to the cultures and contexts in which they work.**

The Neighborhood Educators patiently build relationships and trust before asking about learning dreams. Their respective approaches are, in many ways, similar, and in each case creatively and sensitively adapted to the cultural and neighborhood contexts in which they work. Each understands the family dynamics of Latino and Somali cultures sufficiently well to adapt the model in simple but thoughtful ways that have contributed to its successful application.

Working respectively in Latino communities (Worthington) and Somali communities (Minneapolis) they established rapport by:

Meeting with people in their homes	Familiarity and comfort with the culture
Meeting with other families present	Exchanging stories about children
Being flexible and creative	

Also helping to establish rapport in the respective settings was:

Worthington	Minneapolis
Speaking Spanish	Cooking together with participants
Gentle demeanor	Organizing a Feast
Making multiple visits (2-3) before broaching the question of learning dreams	Bringing along arts and crafts and playing with participants’ children
	Beginning the process with the women, and working with men and women separately

**Neighborhood Educator as Navigator:** Assisting participants with finding records, transcripts and other documents, accompanying them to appointments and assisting them through the registration process alleviates anxiety around the processes’ complexity and

expedites their enrollment. It also provides valuable encouragement and support for individuals with a history of failure and/or who are easily frustrated by even minor bureaucratic impediments.

**Strategic Partners Support the Program:** Building and sustaining relationships with community partners has been very important. For example, the Worthington School District's Community Education Department

- Hosts the project in their space and provides in-kind office support.
- Provides information, advice and technical assistance to Learning Dreams staff.
- Provides referrals to their own programs.
- Provides information about available learning resources.

### ***Potential Issues and Challenges***

While Learning Dreams has been quite successful through its early formation, it faces challenges that could impede further development and implementation.

#### **Contextual Issues**

##### **Worthington**

**Undocumented Workers:** Worthington has experienced exponential growth in immigrant populations, particularly Latino, who come to work at the Swift & Co. meat packing plant. Some are undocumented workers living and working illegally in Worthington who fear deportation and protect themselves by maintaining a low profile. A small, but not insubstantial, number of Worthington's immigrant families will not participate in project to avoid identification. The problem may be exacerbated by the December, 2006 arrest and pending deportations of over 230 undocumented workers at Swift & Co., the community's largest private employer.

Most community residents support the new arrivals, but some resent them. A majority of voters approved a 2006 school referendum in a district where almost half the students are from immigrant households. Additionally, local citizens, leaders and public officials rallied to support immigrant households affected by the raids offering moral and material support to them and their families and criticism of federal immigration policy. However, some letters to the local papers and web posts articulate the prejudices and nativism of a small but vocal minority: Some see immigrants as a tax burden who exploiting local resources, such as schools without carrying their share of the costs. Others express discomfort or resentment concerning unfamiliar cultures, languages and people and expect newcomers to assimilate into the dominant culture.

##### **Minneapolis**

Under the current funding arrangements, the neighborhood educator in Minneapolis is obligated to work with the families of children attending two Southeast Minneapolis schools,

who, under open enrollment, can live anywhere. Conversely he can't work with families who live in the Southeast Minneapolis neighborhood whose children don't attend these two schools.

Given these arrangements, it is difficult for the families involved in Learning Dreams to become acquainted with each other, and for the neighborhood educator to work with families that sign a contract, as he must spend time traveling to their homes all over the city.

### ***Administrative and Management Issues***

Learning Dreams, reaching the end of its start up phase as a new model, is experiencing the normal growing pains of an emergent organization. Developing internal management and administrative structures, processes and procedures are critical next steps to institutionalizing and sustaining the Learning Dreams project, as it grows in number of employees, participants and locations.

A formal administrative structure, with a clear division of roles and responsibilities will mark Learning Dreams transition from a project to a program. Doing so will the program to routinely and efficiently to handle the following functions that are in need of attention: governance, human resources, financial management and reporting, supervision, resource development, planning, and communications.

**Limits on Technical Assistance and Support:** As the number of project sites grows and claims on the founder's time increase, he may be able to sustain the same level of support to all the sites that he does now.

### ***Structural Issues***

**Instability:** The model, by design, centers on a single neighborhood educator and can be implemented and supported on very modest resources. Such a model is basically unstable, and somewhat vulnerable to discontinuity and disruption, particularly when turnover occurs.

Each of the sites has experienced staff turnover in the last year with different, but instructive outcomes.

**Minneapolis:** The new neighborhood educator did not have the benefit of his predecessors' knowledge, contacts or experience. He did however receive support from staff at the local school and community organizations that helped to fill him in on the project's development.

**Worthington:** The departing neighborhood educator agreed to remain with the project a few hours a week providing her successor with ample opportunity for knowledge transfer, introductions to partners and families, and socialization into the work. As a result, discontinuities were minimal and the project will move forward.

**Undefined and Changing Relationships:** Relationships between Learning Dreams and its partners, as in any organizational start-up, are largely undefined or informal and quite fluid. Ambiguity creates uncertainty about roles, relationships and expectations and with it the possibility of misunderstandings, tension and conflict.

**Sustainability:** Without more funding, that is ongoing or multi-year, justifying continued in-kind support from the project's community partners could become problematic in the long term. Partners will have difficulty defending their support for a project in which the sharing of resources and expenses is so asymmetrical and skewed.

**Staff Compensation, Terms of Employment and Benefits:** The project requires highly skilled, experienced and committed neighborhood educators. In the start-up phase they were working part-time on modest salaries that are sometimes paid irregularly, because of the lack of a paid administrator. They are also working without benefits (e.g. health insurance and time off).

No matter how dedicated and enthusiastic, retention will be difficult without providing them with a secure and equitable livelihood. Be it disenchantment, demands of family, or the allure of higher paying more secure positions with benefits, turnover could be high and fairly rapid. Losing talented individuals, and, with them, the trust and relationships they have built with Learning Dreams' participants and their communities is a threat to sustainability.

### ***Programmatic Issues***

**Family Inactivity:** The project now has families with whom they developed a relationship and/or enrolled to pursue learning dreams but whom for one reason or another didn't proceed. To address these situations, the program may consider creating an 'inactive status', defining criteria under which work with these families is suspended and staff are freed up to enroll new ones.

## **Project Strengths and Assets**

1. Commitment, passion and experience of the project's supervisor (Jerry Stein) who has implemented a tested model successfully,
2. Consistent and close involvement of Stein and the University
3. Capable, passionate neighborhood educators (e.g. Julie Lopez and Mark Hendrix) who have established good rapport with participants.
4. Flexibility of project design.
5. Adaptability to different cultural and community contexts
6. Accommodation of nontraditional educational requests that meet diverse needs
7. Parents are encouraged to seek out resources to support learning dreams on their own , to avoid creating an expectancy that the project can or will necessarily support them.

8. Concept of meeting parents' educational interests to better meet the educational interest of their children.
9. Community organizations and programs serving the same population create opportunities for synergy, consolidation or better collaboration.
10. Co-location in a facility that puts the neighborhood educator in contact with prospective participants who come there for other reasons and with staff that can make referrals.

## **Project Weaknesses and Challenges**

1. Project lacks definitive funding sources, a defined funding period and long-term financial commitments.
2. Lack of literature about the project in colloquial Spanish for people to refer to after the project has been explained to them. (Specific to Worthington site.)
3. Part-time staff limits the hours of operation. Potential participants who work split shifts and are hard to reach.
4. Lives of prospective participants are busy, demanding and challenging leaving little time and space to pursue learning dreams.
5. Lack of a neighborhood base to sustain efficient and effective organizing through community building with participants (Specific to Southeast Minneapolis site.)

## **Other Lessons Learned**

**Cultural Adaptations of the Model:** The model is readily adaptable to other cultures by making adjustments that reflect and respect important elements of their family system's and the dynamics between husbands and wives.

**Explaining Learning Dreams concept to parents/families:** Parents welcome the opportunity to become involved in their own learning.

**Developing Trust:** Taking time to develop trust and rapport before introducing the Learning Dreams concept is a critical cultural dimension of working with Latinos. It typically takes two to three home visits to get to know the family before they will buy into the concept.

**Explaining the Concept:** The Worthington experience has shown that explaining the concept works best when parents are alone. Additionally, the Learning Dreams concept translates well into Spanish as "Suenos de aprendizaje," which helps in participants' understanding of the concept.

**Identifying Learning Dreams:** Learning dreams of some immigrants, refugees and migrants are initially focused on practical matters related to their livelihood. For example,

they are interested in learning English, taking citizenship classes, learning how to drive and acquiring a license, taking vocational education or learning how to start a business.

The Worthington experience has shown that crystallizing dreams takes time. Getting at core dreams seems to occur only after developing deeper, longer term relationships and trust. Once that trust is established participants are less likely to drop out of the program.

**Matching families and learning opportunities:** It is easy and takes little time to enroll people in established programs through community education or a community college for an associate degree program.

Participants, however, are more likely to follow through on opportunities with the support of the neighborhood educator to keep and go to appointments, make introductions and assist with the paperwork.

**Leveraging parental involvement:** Pursuing learning dreams successfully leverages parental involvement in their own and their children's learning outside of the public school system.

**Where to begin: children or parents first:** The model calls for beginning with parents. Experience doesn't provide an easy answer on where to begin.

While it's important to draw in parents, because there is already far more programming for children than adults, working with children first establishes credibility and trust. It is also easier for parents to have someone work with their children than it is for them to get involved.