

Foundation launches '2-generation' program

Busy. Resilient. Passionate. These are some words 13 mothers used to describe themselves at the first session of the Evanston Two-Generation Education Initiative, which combines education for parents and their children.

Targeted at low-income families, the program trains parents in educational and career advancement to promote economic self-sufficiency and provides early education for their children through community-partner programs. The 13-week pilot program launched in February, organizers announced last week.

The initiative is the result of a three-way partnership between Ascend at the Aspen Institute, Evanston Community Foundation and the Institute for Policy Research. The program also works with other community nonprofits and businesses in Evanston.

"It's very powerful and very motivating," said Teresa Eckrich Sommer, senior research scientist at Northwestern's Institute for Policy Research. "These are women who have faced challenges and are motivated, and they realize that going through this training will help themselves and help their children."

The two-generation initiative bases its approach on research that shows how parental education levels can affect success and economic mobility for their children, Sarah Haight, program manager for Ascend at the Aspen Institute, said.

"We focus on two generation strategies in practice, policy and research," Haight said. "We feel like, too often, services between parents and children are disjointed."

To improve the pilot in Evanston, Sommer and SESP professor Lindsay Chase-Lansdale are researching the implementation and effectiveness of two-generation initiatives in the U.S., including the Community Action Project in Tulsa, Okla., a leader in this approach, Sommer said.

"We want to get a strong model in place and learn about what we would do differently," Artishia Hunter, director of the Evanston Two-Generation Initiative, said.

The initiative's weekly two-hour training sessions mostly take place at the main branch of the Evanston Public Library. The program participants will also visit Oakton Community College and local employers to learn about educational and job opportunities. Each session includes training, questions and reflections.

"I think the women find strength and support from each other," Hunter said. "Obviously in the group, there's lots of participants. Some are more vocal, some are more laidback. Some are reaching out to each other outside of classes. It's been a way of creating networking. Some are questioning what it is they want to do."

The parents have done online career identification to match with a career that will fit their needs. They then explore possible careers, looking at salaries, education and hours while reflecting on their family situations. The parents will also receive financial-literacy training and opportunities to find jobs or enroll in certificates or an associate-degree program. Hunter will do one-on-one counseling with each mother.

"We think this is a starting point," Haight said. "For the parents in this pilot, there's a great opportunity to learn the skills they can develop and improve wages."

In order to qualify for the pilot program, the parents had to have a GED or high school diploma, live in Evanston and have a child between 0 and 6 years old, Hunter said. They take a survey at the beginning of the program and at the end, researchers will collect their demographics and study how the perceptions of their careers change over time.

Chase-Lansdale applied for a grant to start the two-generation approach in Evanston. Ascend at the Aspen Institute provided a \$100,000 grant to start the program, and the Evanston Community Foundation also provides funding and support.

Sommer said in the future, they hope to start a child savings account for every child and continue mentoring the parents, even after the 13-week program ends. Currently, they are negotiating with potential funders, including organizations and private funders. A panel on the initiative will take place in April at the Evanston Township High School.

“We’re hoping the philanthropy and policy community in Evanston can come together in helping families,” Haight said. “We’re excited that Evanston can be part of a movement of two-generation initiatives. We see Evanston as a place where the Two-Generation Initiative can work.”

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