



Parents as Teachers (PAT) for Families with Low Incomes: A Collaborative Approach for Children Birth to Three

Background on Parents as Teachers

The Early Childhood Development Act of 1984 mandated that every school district in Missouri provide Parents as Teachers services to families with children birth to age 5. The services include personal visits from parent educators, group meetings, developmental screenings, and connections to community resources. In 2003-04, a total of 45% of families in Missouri who had children birth to age 5 received PAT services; 46% of Missouri families with children birth to age 3 received services. PAT is a program for all families with young children, but districts are able to provide more home visits to families with high needs. These families are eligible to receive as many as 25 home visits each year. Families with one or more of 19 characteristics qualify for the additional services (e.g., parents with low educational attainment, single-parent households, foster parents, families with low incomes, teen parents). For a complete list of eligibility characteristics, go to: <http://dese.mo.gov/divimprove/fedprog/earlychild>

It is well documented that children growing up in poverty are less prepared to succeed when they enter kindergarten than their peers who do not live in poverty.^{1,2} Although poverty is not the sole eligibility characteristic for PAT families who meet the “high needs” definition, it is highly correlated with many of the other 18 characteristics. Thus, successful PAT programs are always attempting to find strategies that will engage parents with low incomes to enroll in and continue using PAT services. Many parent education programs use incentives to encourage participation among parents, especially those with low incomes. A wide variety of strategies have been used to promote participation and completion of programs to support parents, including cash incentives and tangible gifts, such as toys, books, diapers, and strollers.¹ No study has explicitly tested whether the use of tangible gifts improves engagement among low-income mothers in parent education programs. We do know, however, that attrition is observed to be as high as 61% in the studies evaluating parent education programs with high-risk populations.^{3,4}

A Success Story—Columbia Public Schools

In 2000, the PAT Coordinator of Columbia Public Schools estimated that only 1 in 5 (20%) low income families with children birth to age 3 were served by PAT. Just five years later, approximately 60% of eligible families with low incomes were being served.

How Did This Dramatic Improvement Occur?

There are two major reasons, both involving extensive collaborative efforts, that contributed to this improvement. Boone Early Childhood Partners (BCEP), a community-based organization funded primarily with Department of Social Services funds, collaborates with PAT and other organizations serving families with low incomes. For some at-risk families, PAT and BCEP have been able to offer more intensive services and materials: parent education, mentoring, support groups, toy

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lending library, play groups, cribs, and diapers. In the past four years, more than 870 families with low incomes were recruited into PAT with some or all of these extra services. In 2004-05, for example, 214 families with approximately 300 children were recruited into PAT via the diaper program alone.

In addition, Columbia Public Schools PAT parent educators reach out to families of low income by meeting with parents at the local WIC offices on a weekly basis. A team of specially trained parent educators meet with teen parents at all three high schools at least two times each month during the school year. Parent educators collaborate with many local community agencies to reach even more families. PAT works with Daniel Boone Regional Library, Columbia Parks and Recreation, local hospitals, the Boone County Health Department, Division of Children's Services, child care centers, public/private elementary schools, Head Start, and First Steps to offer all families participation in the program.

**Columbia Public Schools Enrollment in PAT—2004-05
(Parent Education for those with Children Prenatal to Three Years of Age)**

# of families served by PAT/ Total # of eligible families	# of families served by PAT who do NOT live in poverty/ Estimated total # of eligible families who do NOT live in poverty	# of families served by PAT who live in poverty*/ Estimated total # of eligible families who live in poverty**
2486/3746 = 66.4%	1669/2367 = 70.5%	817/1379 = 59.2%

*Families on WIC, TANF, and/or free and reduced lunch.

**Based on the CPS elementary school free and reduced lunch percentage.

In 2004-05, 56% of the families with children birth to three who lived in poverty received 1 to 5 visits; 35% received 6 to 9 visits. Only 9% received 10 or more visits. The state allows up to 25 visits for families who live in poverty.

Recommendations to Serve More Families in Poverty

- Collaborate with community agencies and programs serving families with low incomes.
- Offer families incentives for needed equipment/materials/services to enroll in PAT.
- Increase the number of personal visits for families in poverty.
- Keep the families currently enrolled in the program until kindergarten entry.

¹ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

² Pfannenstiel, J. (1999). *School Entry Assessment Project*. Overland Park, KS: Research & Training Associates, Inc.

³ Katz, K. S., El-Mohandes, A., Johnson, D. M., & Jarrett, M., Rose, A., & Cober, M. (2001). Retention of low-income mothers in a parenting intervention study. *Journal of Community Health, 26*(3), 203-218.

⁴ Mischley, M., Stacy, E. W., Mischley, L., & Dush, D. (1985). *Prevention in Human Services, 3*(4), 45-57.

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For a complete list of references or more information about this topic, contact the Center for Family Policy and Research

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