

agog dinner & discussion | **Education as a Social Determinant of Health**



On June 27, **Jim and Cheryl Myers**, North Clackamas School Board Member, hosted 11 guests at their home to explore Education as a Social Determinant of Health. Conversation leaders **Ellen Baltus**, school counselor at Lot Whitcomb Elementary in Milwaukie and **Patty Metropulos**, Director of Public Funding and Government Relations at Metropolitan Family Service presented Lot Whitcomb's community school model as a case study for the effectiveness of community school programs and community cohesiveness in low-income neighborhoods.

There is an emerging body of research which suggests that factors such as education level, income and one's physical environment is just as important in determining one's health as his or her genetic makeup. The conversation leaders shared how the very successful community school model at Lot Whitcomb addresses these factors by transforming the school into a community hub and improving the social, physical, emotional, and academic lives of children and their families.

Cheryl Myers acknowledged the combined tenacity, dedication and efforts of Ms. Baltus and Ms. Metropulos: "The emotional and physical well-being of our kids has forever changed because of the work of these two women." MFS operates six after school programs in the North Clackamas School District.

Ellen Baltus shared what the atmosphere was like at Lot Whitcomb prior to partnering with MFS in becoming a community school. It was 1999. Girls were in gangs. Some were sexually active. Seven year olds would hear a gun and run toward it to see what happened, sometimes seeing the unimaginable. Attendance was sketchy. The school had over 600 students, and the turnover rate was 250 kids per year...for many years. Kids went home hungry on the weekends. Several had nothing to do after school - the time of day when most juvenile crime takes place. Many parents worked two jobs, leaving siblings to raise each other. Many parents were uninvolved and even avoided the school.

Responding to the needs of the kids and community, Ms. Baltus began to design an after school program with a couple of the school's teachers, then with another organization, and found that it was not effective. One day, a boy, upon transferring to Lot Whitcomb asked her where the Boys &



Girls Club was, explaining that it kept him out of trouble. It was too far away. There was nothing for kids and families near the school. This interaction sparked the idea of creating a community center. Fully aware of the need for systemic change in this community, she talked to people and organizations, looking for guidance. The staff at Lot Whitcomb searched for other community school models in the area and contacted Metropolitan Family Service.

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Over the last 6 years, MFS has partnered with providers to create a vibrant community school and after school program, building that systemic change Ms. Baltus has been working so diligently for.

Now, Lot Whitcomb is a community hub. Numerous family events attract and connect school families with each other and needed community services. Health fairs at the school provide haircuts, medical and dental care. Adult classes include English literacy, GED completion, computer literacy, financial management, fitness, and how to prepare healthy meals on a shoestring budget.

Research shows that once you get people through the doors of a school, they are more likely to be involved with their children's education, volunteer in their child's classroom, interact with the school staff, and get involved in their neighborhood and school district.

Metropolitan Family Service CAFE (Child & Family Enrichment) community school programs have been shown to yield measurable results in academic achievement, increased parental involvement, and development of positive life skills among participating students. CAFE has been particularly successful in assisting students that are performing below benchmarks and face barriers to achievement. To address these needs, CAFE curriculums are designed to enhance school day learning. They include a broad range of engaging enrichment activities including Readers' Theater, Adventure Club, Knitting, several sports classes, World Myths, Animal Adventures, Comedy Club, and many others, and provide older adult mentors and daily homework assistance.



Organized by Metropolitan Family Service, parents, students and volunteers came together to build a community garden at Lot Whitcomb in 2008. CAFE continues to nurture the garden today.

During the 2008-2009 school year, 432 kids - over half of the school population - participated in Lot Whitcomb CAFE.

Outcomes:

- 88% of CAFE students that attended 30 or more days, met/exceeded state benchmarks in reading.
- 64%% of students who needed to improve homework quality and completion did show improvement, according to CAFE teacher surveys.
- 61% of students who needed to improve their classroom behavior did show improvement, according to CAFE teacher surveys.
- 80% of CAFE students attended 30 days or more during the school year.

Other statistics:

- 600 adults attended a CAFE event held at Whitcomb
- 119 adults enrolled in a class such as English as a Second Language, GED, and computer literacy.

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The after school classes have indeed changed lives – forever. What about the girls in gangs, or considering being in gangs? They’re participating in Hula classes, and loving it. The troupe has grown from 12 to over 30 girls and performs multiple times per year throughout the Portland area, including the Rose Festival. Girls of all shapes and sizes, cultural backgrounds and economic levels have formed a sisterhood. They not only learn the dance, history, and language of Hula and the Hawaiian culture, but learn compassion, respect and care for each other - qualities to last a lifetime.

There are still so many kids to serve. MFS will continue to partner and collaborate with other organizations to provide services to children and families who need them the most. As Cheryl closed with at the dinner, “You never know when an adult can make a difference in a child’s life.”

The mission of Metropolitan Family Service is to strengthen families and individuals while enhancing their participation in community life. Organized by MFS, **A Gathering of Good (agog)** is a series of community events promoting discussion, civic engagement and social change. In addition to exploring important social issues as a community, **agog dinners & discussions** raise public awareness of MFS’s effective programming for children, families, and older adults. MFS is celebrating 60 years of community service in 2010.



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Because together, we can do more.