

## Using the Consultancy Protocol to Advance Family Engagement Practice

The DC Community of Practice (DC CoP) introduced a problem-solving tool, the Consultancy Protocol (CP), to its members in January 2020. The CP helps people develop innovative solutions by exploring different ways of conceptualizing problems and challenges. The CP process is accomplished through a fairly straightforward process: a participant (the “presenter”) describes a challenge to a small group of colleagues and peers and then one individual, serving as a facilitator, encourages other group participants to ask clarifying and probing questions to better frame the context of the dilemma. The group then examines the issue and discusses possible solutions while the person with the dilemma attentively listens. The facilitator is charged with inviting all people participating to provide input to ensure a diversity of perspectives is represented in helping solve the presented dilemma. The session ends with a debrief during which the original presenter has a chance to respond to the group’s suggestions.

The DC CoP’s Family and Youth Engagement Practice Group (PG) recently used the CP to help clinicians from two DC public charter schools identify new strategies to engage more families in their schools. Ms. Dorothy Brockington, the school-based mental health coordinator, Ashley Watkins, school social worker and Lakia Lockett, director of family engagement, also from Eagle Academy Public Charter School, presented their challenge at the May PG meeting and Ms. Ellen Livingston, social work and related services supervisor at The Children’s Guild DC Public Charter School, presented hers at the April PG meeting.

The team from Eagle Academy came to the PG seeking ideas to draw more parents to school for events, such as school orientation and parent-teacher conferences. The team shared that the school enjoys strong attendance at school events such as dances and social gatherings, but would like to see this same level of engagement at academic meetings and events.

Parents participating in the PG suggested polling parents/caregivers using text messages on how best to engage them. Parents also noted that some parents within their school likely have one or more financial and personal circumstances that may prohibit them from being an active member of the school community.

In response to the CP discussion, the behavioral health team at Eagle Academy is making plans to be much more present in the school community throughout the next school year, especially during school orientation and progress report time. “We plan to feature resources available to

our families by the Department of Behavioral Health, our community-based partner, Hillcrest [Children and Family Center], and the services our internal behavioral health teams offer,” said Ms. Brockington. “We don’t want to just hand parents a brochure and say this is what we do, come see us, instead we are going to be interactive with our families and show them what a therapy session might look like. We want parents to know that if they need Tier 3 support, we are here, but we also want them to know that we offer Tier 2 and Tier 1 supports here at Eagle Academy.”

Ms. Livingston shared that most of the students at The Children’s Guild DC Public Charter School are bussed to the school from other areas in DC and that she believes this makes parent engagement more challenging than it is for schools located closer to where children live. “We bus 90 percent of our children to school, so this prohibits us from checking in with parents in the morning or at pick-up after school,” said Ms. Livingston. “I came to the Practice Group meeting hoping to identify new ways to engage more with parents.”

Ms. Livingston also shared with the group that she was hesitant to continue offering gift cards as incentives to draw parents to the school for orientation and parent-teacher conferences. Parent participants suggested that before abandoning these types of incentives entirely she might explore whether parents and/or caregivers have financial needs. Participants offered that some parents may need financial support in order to leave work or home to come to a meeting at the school.

Ms. Livingston said she appreciated hearing directly from parents during the practice group meeting. “The discussion gave me the idea that our school should consider offering travel vouchers, Metro SmartCards or free Uber or Lyft rides to help remove financial barriers that may be impacting caregiver attendance at important school meetings.”

While at first neither were sure they came away with many new ideas, all of the participants are going to pilot innovative practices this fall that were informed by the discussion. Furthermore, after reflecting on the CP process, both schools also offered advice when using the process in future meetings. This included ensuring all participants were fully informed as to what parent engagement activities were already underway in the school, suggesting more active facilitation of the discussion to move the conversation along faster once a main point or idea has been shared, and ensuring enough time is left in the meeting for schools to reflect and respond to what was shared by the group.

- Learn more about the CP [here](#).
- To learn more about Eagle Academy, please contact Dorothy Brockington, [DBrockington@eagleacademypcs.org](mailto:DBrockington@eagleacademypcs.org).
- To learn more about The Children’s Guild DC Public Charter School, please contact Ellen Livingston [LivingstonE@childrensguild.org](mailto:LivingstonE@childrensguild.org).

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