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The language of parenting

Partnering with the Academy of World Languages



Darlene Kamine and Jill Smith, Community Learning Center Institute

You might say Beech Acres speaks “Parenting”—in a way, it’s a universal language. No matter the nationality, race, geography, gender, or religion of a parent, we all love our kids and want the best for them. That’s one of the reasons we’re excited to embark on a new partnership this school year with the [Academy of World Languages \(AWL\)](#).

Family peer support

At AWL, we will provide Family Peer Support (FPS) to legal immigrants from dozens of countries across the globe, who are settled in Cincinnati by the U.S. Department of State. Jill Smith, Resource Coordinator at AWL, describes a typical refugee parent arriving to enroll his or her children. “They mostly come here from a refugee camp. Three days later they’re walking into our office to fill out a 30-page packet—in English—to enroll their child in school. They’ve possibly never even been in a formal educational setting. They’ve never seen a school bus.”

Thanks, in part, to funding from [The Greater Cincinnati Foundation](#), we will help parents overcome the many barriers they face to helping their children achieve school success. Beech Acres’ [Mental Health](#) Program Manager, Jaimi Cabrera, explains, “Our Family Engagement Coordinator will reach out to families and connect them with valuable school and community resources. That person keeps the big picture in view. Meanwhile, a Family Peer Support Provider may serve as a coach and advocate for parents, walking ‘hand-in-hand’ with them as they receive services, answering questions that may arise.”

History of AWL

Founded in 1985 as a foreign language magnet school, and part of [Cincinnati Public Schools](#), AWL serves a population that is roughly half local and half international. More than 40 countries and 30 languages are represented. Local parents send their children to the school for its strong academic foundation. Their kids learn a second language and get the benefits of exposure to new cultures.

Jill says, “In one classroom, we’ve had as many 13 different countries represented. So being able to learn about each other’s cultures, customs, the games they play at home... You just can’t create that anywhere else. The interactions among the students are just outstanding.”

The school seeks to not only serve children’s educational requirements, but the whole family’s needs, knowing that a student’s success is directly related to his or her family’s adjustment to a new environment. AWL is one of a growing

number of Community Learning Centers in Cincinnati, schools that join forces with relevant community services to nurture families.

Darlene Kamine, Executive Director of the Community Learning Center Institute, has been instrumental in developing such places in Cincinnati since 1999. “Each school has its own set of partnerships and its own approach to supporting the vitality of its unique neighborhood,” she says.

AWL serves families from every part of Cincinnati. “It’s a one-and-only,” Darlene tells us. “Nothing else has the challenges, but also the excitement and the opportunity that this brings.”

Unique challenges for refugees

Darlene explains the problem: “We have a tremendous number of international refugees in Cincinnati, about 11,000 and growing. Most of these families don’t live near each other. There’s not a Congolese community, for example, with people who speak the same language and can help each other through the transition to a new country.”

AWL staff and teachers want to build that sense of community. “What can we do to make them feel comfortable and welcome?” asks Jill, “It starts from the moment they first walk in.” Many critical resources are in place, from dental care to interpreters. But, until now, parent engagement was still lacking.

“We haven’t had someone who could just focus on helping those parents understand their role in their child’s education, helping them feel connected to the school,” Jill recounts. “We’ve had our eye out for an agency that could help us with parent engagement. Beech Acres is the top name that comes to mind when you think of parent engagement.”

The people behind the partnership

Through conversations with Patrick Nugent, Vice President for Development and Marketing at Beech Acres, Jill and Darlene recognized an opportunity. Patrick had originally visited AWL not as a representative of Beech Acres, but to share his personal skills in speaking and translating Swahili. But his conversations with the two women turned to parents’ needs.

Darlene felt that Beech Acres and AWL shared a similar approach to social services. “We don’t say, ‘this is what they need. Oh, those poor people. Let’s write a grant to get them this thing we think they need.’ That’s the significant difference between our approach in Cincinnati and almost everywhere else. We’re asking, what does this community tell us they really need? What’s going to make a difference in their lives today”?

Two former Beech Acres board chairs, Linda Smith and Priscilla Ungers, encouraged and supported these conversations. Both were already familiar with AWL through their involvement with the Junior League of Cincinnati, which has made a significant commitment to working with refugee families.



The Greater Cincinnati Foundation provided, through several different funds, a generous grant for Beech Acres to establish a Family Peer Support program at AWL. “This was such an outstanding opportunity and a wonderful fit,” Patrick says, “that we just had to find the funding to make it work. We’re so grateful to those who stepped forward.” The ESL and World Languages program at Cincinnati Public Schools followed suit with generous, multi-year funding from their Future Project CLASS grant that will also enable some services to refugee parents in Princeton City Schools (in northern Hamilton County).

For Beech Acres’ Family Peer Support providers, the new project will be challenging—

navigating the cultural differences of so many families—but rewarding. Jennifer Wikette, Peer Support Program Manager at Beech Acres says, “We’re eager to grow and learn by having such a unique opportunity. Many thanks to everyone who worked so diligently to make this happen.” Echoing her sentiment, Jaimi Cabrera said, “I am very excited about this unique opportunity to customize our School Based Service and Family Engagement model to meet the unique needs of children and parents attending the Academy of World Languages.”