

# **D R A F T - June 2004**

## **Family Living Education Philosophical Statement on University Engagement and Controversy**

### **Why is Family Living Education Involved?**

Consistent with the Land Grant Mission, Extension Family Living has the responsibility and resources to enable people to improve their lives and communities through learning partnerships that put knowledge to work. Through a network of state and county staff with a wide range of expertise, Extension Family Living Education is well positioned to engage citizens in community problem solving on public issues. Extension Family Living Professionals are encouraged to be actively involved at all levels in appropriate community engagement.

### **What Role Can Family Living Educators Play?**

After analysis of key issues, existing conditions, and the nature of the dialogue surrounding the issue(s), Extension Family Living Professionals may determine the best role to play from among the many alternatives:

- Community-based research
- Information/research dissemination
- Family-centered community building
- Issue analysis
- Leadership development
- Capacity building
- Mediation and conflict resolution
- Organizational development
- Public policy education
- Problem solving

### **How Can Family Living Educators Approach These Issues?**

Any of the above roles need to be approached from an alternative consequences education\* stance. The alternative consequences education approach influences public discourse by clarifying the potential consequences of several alternatives. When a Family Living colleague advocates or campaigns for a particular policy alternative using one's own value system and personal interpretation of scientific evidence, they may find themselves in a dangerous environment and jeopardize their credibility and that of UWEX. Extension Family Living supports the alternative consequences education model as a vehicle for movement toward University engagement in communities.

\* Public Policy Education, NCR publication 203. Richard Barrows

## What Principles Guide the Work of Family Living Education on Controversial Issues?

Family Living has an obligation and opportunity to help families and communities make informed decisions about issues that affect them. Family Living professionals are relevant, respectful of our land-grant mission, responsive to our clientele and responsible to our public funding sources. The following principles, taken from the position statement on public issues adopted by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP), guide our work:

- Initiate public discussion before positions harden or a crisis point is reached
- Draw all interested parties into the discussion
- Increase and encourage understanding of all points of view
- Address controversial issues objectively
- Introduce relevant academic knowledge and research into the discussion, and communicate the local needs to the university
- Facilitate a process of active learning and discovery
- Involve participants in analysis, forecasting, strategic planning and problem solving
- Create an understanding of complex, controversial issues
- Broaden the range of alternatives; discover new approaches and opportunities
- Increase the likelihood of collaborative solutions
- Help people and communities anticipate emerging issues and their implications

In accord with ECOP (1992), we believe that Family Living professionals, along with their network of colleagues at the county and state levels, will be “viable components of the land grant university of the 21<sup>st</sup> century — an educational leader that addresses critical local, state, and national issues in a learning context.”

### EXAMPLES

*Extension Family Living professionals may undertake community engagement in a variety of contexts and may assume a number of different roles on controversial issues. The following are a few examples from many possible topics of how Extension Family Living professionals are conducting community engagement in selected contexts and locations.*

#### I. Family Impact Seminars

Family Impact Seminars are a series of seminars, briefing reports, newsletters, and discussion sessions to inform the decision-makers of local and state policy. Given the growing realization that one effective way to help individuals is by strengthening their families, Family Impact Seminars analyze the effects of policies and programs on family well-being. Rather than lobbying for a particular policy option, the seminars provide objective, state-of-the-art research and practice-based information on a range of policy alternatives. The

seminars provide policymakers with a neutral, nonpartisan forum for fostering dialogue and seeking common ground.

Family Impact Seminars, held at the local and state levels, have focused on a variety of topics including juvenile crime, education, health care, helping poor kids succeed, parenting, and welfare reform. Policymakers report that the seminars have increased their knowledge of research on family issues in ways that are useful in decisionmaking and that have shaped the development and enactment of public policies.

## II. Survey of Extension's Role in Conflict Management, Boyd Rossing

Extension Family Living professionals have conducted programs on these potentially controversial public issues:

- Parent education, discipline and problem solving
- Parent groups – conflict resolution
- Community partnership conflict
- Tobacco coalitions
- Strategic planning
- Internal personnel situations
- Anger management

## III. The Families, Schools, and Communities United for Students (US) Project

Extension professionals working on the US Project are conducting community engagement by filling content roles and providing the latest research on the contributions that family involvement makes to school success and process roles, including convener, facilitator, and program developer. The US Project aims to promote parental school involvement by building stronger family, school, and community partnerships in Wisconsin middle schools. The US Project brings together parents, teachers, administrators, youth, community leaders, and other community stakeholders. During the three meetings, the partnership team assesses how “family-friendly” a school is, identifies gaps in family involvement in their schools, prioritizes strategies for building stronger family/school partnerships, and develops specific action plans tailored to their middle school. During this process, an Extension faculty presents research-based information, facilitates group discussions, and oversees the development of action plans specific to the school site. A key in this project is the diverse coalition of local stakeholders, which own the prevention strategies implemented in their communities.

## IV. The Adams County School Breakfast Program

In one of the poorest counties in Wisconsin, teachers and staff noticed that children were coming to school hungry. They approached the county Extension Family Living Agent and together the group decided to conduct a survey to gather hard data on the extensiveness of the problem. The data

substantiated their observations—45% of all children under the age of 13 went to school without breakfast.

An interested group of teachers, staff, parents, and the Extension Family Living Agent in Adams County, Edie Felts-Podoll, alerted the school board to this problem. Although the group favored a school breakfast program, the approach chosen was to solicit the school board's involvement in the issue through the alternative consequences education model. In keeping with the tenets of the educational approach, they developed seven different policy alternatives for addressing the problem of hungry school children.

The school board agreed that children coming to school without breakfast was a problem that warranted a response. After considering the seven alternatives, the school board voted to provide nutrition classes for parents, which were subsequently taught by the teachers and the Extension professional. The issue did not come to an end, however, following the completion of the policy education effort. Six years later, the school superintendent called the county Extension agent and asked if she still had the data about children coming to school hungry. She was asked to present the data to the school board that evening, at which time they passed a school breakfast program.

### **Future direction for Family Living engaged community efforts could evolve from models used in Oregon**

#### V. Oregon State University PIE

This website is one tangible way that Extension can reach the public through engagement. This is a more "passive" role for an individual Extension professional; however, a website with current information about relevant topics for policy could be an invaluable resource for Extension professionals working in the field.

The focus on OSU PIE website is on providing education about specific public issues. Issues covered on their website include:

- Family and Community Health
- Poverty and Welfare Reform
- Oregon's Economy
- Salmon Restoration in Oregon
- Sustainable Agriculture
- Land Use Planning
- Government and Taxes

Oregon State University Extension Service. (2001). *Public Issues Education*. Retrieved April 5, 2004, from OSU Extension Services via <http://oregonstate.edu/dept/pie/>

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