



Carolyn Smallwood, CEO of Way to Grow

Home visits support parents as primary educators of their children

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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Present

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Summary

Believing that parents are the primary educators of their children, Way to Grow bases its work on a holistic home-visiting model, says CEO Carolyn Smallwood. It works one-on-one with parents, starting in their children's prenatal phase and continuing through grade three. The organization works with families in North and South Minneapolis.

In their monthly—or sometimes more frequent—home visits, Way to Grow parent educators work with low-income families to help stabilize them, by addressing issues such as access to food, housing, employment and medical services. The educators also address academics by showing parents how to use books and toys with their young children and by teaching them about child development. The organization offers center-based early education and continuing academic support for children and their families by following children into 35 Minneapolis district public schools and 30 chartered public schools. Ninety percent of Way to Grow children are ready for kindergarten, Smallwood says.

She believes education is in the forefront of top unresolved issues in Minnesota and is key to moving families out of stressful situations. She notes that Way to Grow has a strong advocacy component, training parents on how to advocate for themselves and their children. The group works to put parents in touch with policymakers, including legislators.

Although Minnesota is becoming more diverse, Smallwood says there are teachers who don't necessarily know how to work with diverse children. She believes educators need more training. Way to Grow helps inform parents about their school choices and teaches them about what they should look for in a school. She says it is a priority for schools to build relationships with parents and to have

a welcoming environment for them. Smallwood disagrees with the idea of alternative schools, saying the education system must step up and train guardians and educators to deal with children from stressful situations "with grace and love."

Biography

Carolyn Smallwood is CEO of Way to Grow, Inc., a preeminent Twin Cities advocate of early childhood and K-3 education. She has served as the organization's leader for 13 years in the roles of executive director and now chief executive officer. Way to Grow serves more than 2,400 children and parents through over 11,400 home visits each year.

Prior to her work at Way to Grow, Smallwood served as vice president of sales and marketing at Twin Cities Rise! She also served as executive director of the Minnesota Minority Supplier Development Council. Before entering the nonprofit field, she was director of supplier diversity with ADC, The Broadband Company, and held a variety of senior positions with US Bancorp.

Smallwood's influence at ADC helped earn the company national recognition as the "MEED (Minnesota Emerging Development) Corporation of the Year" and "Supplier Advocate of the Year," as well as a designation as one of the "Top 25 Companies in Supplier Diversity." In addition, *Minnesota Monthly* magazine named Smallwood "Small Business Advocate of the Year."

In 2014, the *Star Tribune* named Smallwood one of the Twin Cities' "Top African Americans of Influence." She served on Governor Mark Dayton's Early Learning Council and co-chaired Minneapolis Mayor Betsy Hodges' Cradle-to-K Cabinet, an initiative to eliminate disparities for children, prenatal to three years old, within the City of Minneapolis.

Smallwood serves on several boards: the Robins, Kaplan, Miller, and Ciresi Foundation Board; the African American Leadership Forum Board; MN Comeback Board and the MinneMinds Executive Committee. She has also served on the College of St. Benedict and the MacPhail Center for Music boards of directors.

Smallwood earned a B.A. in Finance and Marketing from the University of St. Thomas.

Background

Since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On Nov. 27, 2016, the Caucus issued its report based on that review,  [Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process](#). The Civic Caucus interviewed Way to Grow, Inc., CEO Carolyn Smallwood earlier this fall to learn about her organization's work with families in North and South Minneapolis to improve family stability and to support and strengthen parents' role in their children's early childhood years through third grade. The Caucus also sought Smallwood's views on the legislative process and education policy.

Discussion

Way to Grow was created in 1989 by former Minneapolis Mayor Don Fraser, Honeywell CEO Jim Renier and Greater Twin Cities United Way. Way to Grow CEO Carolyn Smallwood said the organization was formed because so many children were not ready for school. The group wanted to eliminate some of the social and economic obstacles barriers that were prohibiting parents from getting their kids ready for school.

Originally a program of the Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board, Way to Grow became an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit in 2004. Under her direction, Smallwood said the organization began to develop and implement research-based, holistic best practices. The group bases its work on a holistic home-visiting model, working one-on-one with parents, starting in the prenatal phase and continuing through grade three, which is called the Great by 8 Initiative.

Believing that parents are the primary educators of their children, Way to Grow offers a variety of support services to families. Smallwood said Way to Grow offers four main services to Minneapolis families in its Northside neighborhood and the Southside community:

- 1. Support in helping to stabilize families through access to food, housing, employment and medical services.**
- 2. In-home health and wellness education for parents, covering prenatal care, nutrition, immunizations, well-child checkups, home safety and child development.**
- 3. Early education, focusing on social and emotional behavior and academics.**
- 4. Academic support for children and families, by following children into 35 Minneapolis district public schools and 30 chartered public schools.**

Smallwood said 90 percent of Way to Grow children are ready for kindergarten and 90 percent of Way to Grow parents attend parent-teacher conferences at their children's schools.

The organization has two high-quality, center-based preschools offering four-day-a-week programs for families with children ages three to five who are enrolled in Way to Grow. Fifty-four children attended these schools in 2016. Both schools are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and have been awarded four-star ratings (highest rating) by Minnesota Parent Aware. Both classrooms engage parents through parent-child classes twice a month. Smallwood said 100 percent of the children who attend these preschools are ready for kindergarten.

In 2016, Way to Grow served 1,423 children and 1,009 adults through 11,462 home visits.

Enrolled families received 2,686 referrals for basic needs. The organization followed 368 elementary students into 35 Minneapolis district public schools and 30 chartered public schools. Smallwood said the retention rate in the program is 76 percent. Families stay an average of six years or so in the program. They can start as late as age eight.

Way to Grow is a very multicultural organization. Smallwood said the program's staff and its clients speak seven different languages. She said families in the program were considered very isolated before enrolling. When staff home educators make home visits, the program tries to match culture to culture.

Sixty-seven percent of Way to Grow families are two-parent households. Fifty-nine percent of program parents have completed high school and some have gone on to obtain their high school diplomas and earn undergraduate degrees while enrolled in Way to Grow.

Besides its headquarters on West Broadway in North Minneapolis, Way to Grow has another site in Lucy Laney Community School, a pre-K to grade three Minneapolis district public school in North Minneapolis. Smallwood said the program offers a parent education program at Lucy Laney and has volunteers tutoring children there. "We have many volunteers and community partners," she said. "We couldn't do the work alone."

Way to Grow receives funding from the City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County, Minneapolis Public Schools, the Minnesota Department of Health, foundations, corporations and individual donors. The organization's 2016 budget was \$2.8 million. "The need is big," Smallwood said. "We would love to expand in Minneapolis and to Richfield, Bloomington, Brooklyn Center and Brooklyn Park."

Education is always in the forefront of top unresolved policy issues. Smallwood gave that response to an interviewer's question about the top two or three unresolved public-policy questions in the metro area and the state. "Education is key to moving families out of stressful situations," Smallwood said. There is large underemployment of people of color, as well as other inequities, she said. "The state of Minnesota is missing out on a huge opportunity to take advantage of the skills of these underemployed people of color."

Policymakers can learn from the many organizations in the community with boots on the ground. Smallwood gave that response to an interviewer's question about where the best and most creative policy ideas come from. "Some of the best ideas come from people who are working daily around some ineffective policies that directly impact the people with no voice," said Smallwood.

"And there are huge grassroots efforts out there attempting to impact policy in one form or another," she continued. "What's powerful is that these groups are coming together. Young folks are on fire. I tell my kids, who are 35 and 31, that they have the social responsibility to lift up what's right. There is a lot of rhetoric in the country that is impacting our children. We have to stay focused on what's right."

Navigating through the legislative process is interesting, very challenging and sometimes frustrating. Smallwood gave that response to an interviewer's question about her insights on what could function better at the Legislature. "Some good things are happening," Smallwood said. "There are people who really want to see change, but they have limited access to information on education. We encourage people to look through another person's vision or experience. Policymakers need to have several different channels on how they obtain information. They need to talk to parents, educators and folks that are basically on the ground and can bring things down to reality. Sometimes it's frustrating, but I'm very hopeful."

She thinks Minneapolis Mayor Betsy Hodges' Cradle-to-K Cabinet, which focuses on the birth-through-age-three years, could be replicated at the Legislature. The Cabinet's members come from government, universities and nonprofits. "It would be wonderful to have a think tank like this working with legislative policymakers," she said.

Way to Grow has a strong advocacy component. Smallwood said the program participates in the yearly Voices for Children's "Advocacy for Children Day" at the State Capitol. A coalition of organizations and parents goes to the Capitol and advocates for early education. Parents have appointments to speak with legislators.

Smallwood said Way to Grow received a grant to provide families with additional training on advocacy work. "We're teaching parents to advocate for themselves," she said. "We also invite legislators to come and meet families and staff members."

Will the strategy used by Way to Grow make a significant difference in achievement test results and graduation rates? An interviewer asked that question and said there's been very little improvement in test scores and graduation rates, in spite of additional resources. Smallwood said additional investment is needed in early childhood education, elementary education and education across the board. "Research shows that if you start early with a child, there's a high probability that the child will be ready for school, ready to enter middle school and high school and ready to go on to postsecondary education," Smallwood said.

"There has not been enough investment in early education," she said. "This situation that we are currently in did not happen overnight. It's going to take some investment and a lot of hard work for the state of Minnesota to move forward when it comes to the huge disparities that exist. There has to be a really true focus on moving the dial in education, meaning that we have to put the child first. Parents are the primary educator of the child; we must support them."

Early education and K-3 education have been shown to eliminate special education. Smallwood gave that response to an interviewer who said the expenditure per pupil in Minneapolis is now up to \$23,000 a year, with a significant part of that in special education. Smallwood said it costs about \$37,000 to \$40,000 a year to incarcerate a juvenile in Hennepin County.

Another interviewer commented that if an investment in Way to Grow reduces the need for special education, we should figure out a way to use some of that money for early childhood and accept a reduction in funding for special education.

Seventy percent of all young children in Minnesota come to kindergarten ready for school, but only 30 to 40 percent of children of color or low-income children are ready. Smallwood offered those statistics and asked, "Why is that? Is it the education system? Is it the school districts? Is it the parent? Is it the teacher?" Regardless, she said, "Our job at Way to Grow is to work with the parent and the child and deal with them where they are. That should happen in the classroom, too."

She noted that Minnesota is becoming much more diverse throughout the state and there are some teachers who don't necessarily know how to work with diverse children. "There are kids in the classroom who are told on a regular basis they don't have a future or are told indirectly they'll never learn," she said. "Educators and parents need help and we need to solve some of the economic and social inequities that are affecting the family at the same time," she said.

It's extremely difficult to educate a child if the family and the community are unstable. An interviewer made that comment and said we must look at what's needed to bring stability into the situation. "To close the education achievement gap, we need to close gaps in employment and

housing," the interviewer said. "We must make investments in other areas. Resources are going into a deep hole in education, but we're not investing in safe communities and housing. We're not coordinating our resources to address those problems. Without that, we will still have gaps."

"That's what Way to Grow attempts to do with its holistic approach," Smallwood responded. "We must stabilize the home so they have food and stable housing. Otherwise, they won't hear anything about education. Way to Grow attempts to navigate through those obstacles with our parents."

Way to Grow family educators are able to build relationships with families through home visits.

Smallwood said the program's family educators assess what's needed in a home. They deal with health needs, housing issues and making sure there is a safe environment in the home and they start working on academics. Family educators generally make monthly home visits, but visit some families up to four times per month.

Family educators speak the family's language and share their same culture, said Way to Grow's Kim Bowman. "They become like family members," she said. "They teach parents how to use books and toys, since parents are a child's first educators." Smallwood said the program brings at least 50 books to each family.

Bowman said economist and early education advocate Art Rolnick, a Way to Grow board member, says 80 percent of brain development happens by age three. "The earlier we can start with a child, the better chance that child has to be thriving and ready for school," Bowman said. The program also works on nutrition with young parents who are pregnant.

Smallwood said the program's family educators continue the home visits until a child completes third grade. They work with the parents, the teachers and the child.

They attempt to navigate with the family issues like school attendance, care for a child who is sick or fixing the mouth of a child with bad teeth who might be misbehaving because of pain.

Smallwood said Way to Grow gets referrals for children and families from clinics, its community partners and hospitals and through word of mouth. "We get many referrals every week," she said. "We can't serve all families because of limited resources. But we try."

Way to Grow is a learning organization that does rigorous data collection. Smallwood said the program collects data "to make sure we and the kids are on track. With 90 percent of enrolled kids ready for school, we know we're doing something right."

She said the program is metric-data driven and designs its strategies based on those data. It provides 80 hours of training per year for staff members, working with master teachers and other community members. She said multiple home visits do have an impact on the stability of the family and test scores.

Way to Grow helps inform parents about their school choices. Smallwood said the program provides information about what parents should look for in a school. It

provides information on the schools they may choose for their child. "Parents tend to move toward what's best for their family," she said.

Way to Grow's parent education component helps parents build confidence in themselves relating to their kids' education, Smallwood said. Parents have to learn to work with their child and also learn how they can approach the school system to gather appropriate information to assure that their child is getting the best education. "That's where the relationship with the parent educator comes in," she said. "What are the expectations of the school and of home life? The value system starts in the home. We don't judge, we build relationships, but we attempt to work with parents wherever they are. We work with some great parents who are working hard."

Schools need to build a relationship with parents. Smallwood made that comment and said it's a high priority in education. "If we get a child ready for school, we would like the school to carry on and build a relationship with parents," she said. "Schools must have a welcoming environment where parents can express themselves. You have to train staff to be able to relate with and talk to parents."

Schools should have a consistent process when it comes to parent engagement, education, curriculum and expectations, she said. "Sometimes I feel that school systems jump onto what's hot in education. They need consistency and to focus on the good things."

Smallwood disagrees with the idea of alternative schools. She said using alternative schools does not address a child's need. "We as guardians and educators need additional training in how to deal with children who come from a stressful environment," she said. "We must deal with them with grace and love." She said there is a huge inequity in that kids of color are the first to go to alternative schools. "The alternative schools are not good," she said. "The education system needs to step up."

An interviewer noted that once he worked on an evaluation of Minneapolis alternative schools that identified what some of challenges were. "These are Minneapolis Public Schools, but they don't have access to some of resources of the district," the interviewer said. "Many people in the district don't see them as their schools. They are orphans."

Smallwood said an excellent person to talk to about alternative schools would be Dr. Anne Gearity, a psychologist at the University of Minnesota who works with school districts.