Year 2 Evaluation
Whole Family Systems
Digital Equity Component

Evaluation by Cradle 2 Career
October 2021

Executive Summary

This report looks at the impact of WFS's digital equity work over the course of the 2020-2021 funding year. The evaluation used empathy mapping as well as importance/difficulty matrices.

- From empathy mapping, it was found that the client experience of the distribution processes was perceived similarly by families and staff - overall positive and straightforward.
- From the importance/difficulty matrices, it was found that staff suggestions on improvement were supported by family suggestions, but the potential impact of these changes are drawn into question based on staff observations of utilization.
    - Staff suggest that tech support would be impactful, and families agree. However, based on the number of devices which were rendered inoperable during the past year, any tech support or training would first need to address some of the more basic tech fundamentals than current tech support/training offers.
- A follow-up evaluation asked about how devices were used suggests that the whole-family impact is broader than originally anticipated.
    - 76% of families used the device(s) for early education but
    - Only 20% of families report this was the only use of the device(s)

Summary Recommendations

1. Work with families to better understand what culturally-responsive IT classes would look like
2. Work with WFS partner organizations to learn what level of on-going tech support can be provided

Context

Whole Families Systems work in Rochester MN is funded in part by MDH. Whole Families Systems work is focused on collaboration and systems change work that impacts early childhood education, in particular for recent immigrant and refugee families. There are three main branches to the initiative: digital equity, transportation, and access to resources.

This evaluation is focused on the efforts made by the initiative with regards to digital equity, as this component of the grant has been implemented over the course of the previous year. The other two branches of the initiative (transportation and access are to resources) are in the pilot and planning stages, respectively. After the evaluation of digital equity, the initiative may begin similar evaluations for the other two branches.

The focus of this evaluation is two-fold:

1. What has been the impact of this work over the past year?
2. What are some changes we can make to the work moving forward?

Throughout this evaluation, we wish to draw special attention to the fact that this is an evaluation of a pilot, which may or may not be scaled in the coming year. More than the growth/expansion of the existing program, we want to call into question the assumptions that our initial work was built on, and identify ways in which the program may be improved - whether that is scaling, pivoting, or being incorporated into another branch of the work.

To that end, we are working directly with families served in order to understand the impact of the program on their families and early education. It is important to note that the original work was largely in response to digital inequities exacerbated by the economic and education shut-downs in 2020, and that the meaning of ‘digital equity’ has evolved significantly since the inception of this work. To that end, any continuation of the work is likely to be transformative in nature, as the initial demands brought on by the pandemic are no longer in existence.

Overview Year One

The Whole Families Systems initiatives started by interviewing families around their aspirations and challenges related to education. This lead to the identification of three pillars - digital equity, transportation, and access to resources. Each of these pillars is believed to have a large impact on early childhood education for recent immigrants and refugees in Southeast Minnesota (largely Olmsted and Winona Counties).

The digital equity work focused on the distribution of laptops and broadband access. Over the course of the year, 116 families received laptops/chromebooks and 16 families received access to broadband.

Review of Initial Data and First Year Community Conditions

This evaluation began with a review of data collected through interviewing families in April and May of 2020. The timing of the initial interviews is an important piece of context, as they were completed at the peak of the economic shut-down. The duration of the pandemic, the health impacts of COVID-19 (including route of transmission and identification of high-risk groups), and the time it would take to develop the vaccine were unknown at the time of the initial interviews. Many families had experienced job loss and were at risk of losing their housing. Demand at food banks was unprecedented, and students had transitioned to remote learning over the course of two day. As a society, we did not know if the shut-down was going to be a short-term or a long-term scenario.

Through the course of the interviews, a number of questions were asked specifically about technology use. The main findings were:

- 73% of families used technology to connect with friends and family
- 61% of families used technology to connect with their child's school
- 16% of families used only phones
- 16% of families reported they did not have the skills needed to access technology
- 83% of families said they would use technology to connect with their child's school
- 86% of families said they would participate in culturally-appropriate technology training

Whole Families Systems digital equity work was intended to improve families' connectivity with schools, particularly early education providers. Work began with the distribution of laptops and broadband access in the summer of 2020. Over time it became apparent that many refugees and immigrants with children under five were being left behind due to socio-economic problems obtaining technology or remaining connected to broadband. Many families were facing challenges applying to jobs, getting news, and paying bills. As the pandemic progressed, there were disparities in tardiness and class attendance due to access as well as family awareness of distance learning requirements.

As this evaluation commenced in the spring of 2021, there was a growing divide between students who remained online and those who returned to school in-person. Contributing factors, such as large families size, access to vaccines, and the vulnerability of multi-generational families meant that immigrant and refugee families were likely to keep their children in the distance learning model even as school reopened.

Assumptions and Description of the Program

Many of our underlying assumptions impact program design, including but not limited to:

- *The lack of digital connectivity is linked to socio-economic and educational status of households, to a far greater extent than cultural or personal preference.*
- *There are workplace opportunity gaps (in terms of who is able to opt to work from home) that impact educational opportunity gaps (in terms of children who have a parent present in the home to supervise distance learning) that has made the impact of our digital equity work two-generational. This means a single connection may provide opportunities for working parents as well as their children. That is, even if a device is used by the parent but not the child, there may still be a strong impact on the child's education.*
- *Families place value on education, for both parents and children, even when behavior may seem to contradict that value.*
- *Immigrant and refugee families have lived experience which is different from the general population in meaningful ways.*

The program, as run in the 2020-2021 program year, was implemented through Hawthorne, Families First, and IMAA. This year of programming is best thought of as an initial/targeted rollout moreso than a pilot, as it was not restricted to a particular geography and all families requesting services were served.

As not all partners from the Whole Families Services initiative were engaged in the first year of programming, they may be encouraged to engaged in future years of programming. Programming may be scaled at the state level (i.e. implemented in other communities throughout the state) and policy recommendations may be made. At the outset of this evaluation, however, it is not determined in what dimension the work will be scaled, if at all.

Methodology

As it is a no-wrong-doors model, the exact method of referrals and matching is not as important as the user (family) experience. For this reason, the evaluation will be focused on how the process experienced families, how staff perceive family experience, and how the technology received has impacted the families in real terms. This allows insights on process and impact.

The evaluation started by surveying program staff on how they believe the process is experienced by families, and to collect ideas on how the program could be improved. Then families are interviewed to learn about 1) how they experienced the process, 2) the impact of the technology 3) provide feedback on the improvement recommendations provided by staff and 4) provide additional improvement recommendations.

This methodology engages two human centered design tools - importance/difficulty matrixes as well as empathy mapping. It also calls upon leadership to be directed by the findings of the evaluation, and be critical of instances in which family and staff perceptions differ. Lastly, it sets families as the drivers of programmatic change. Family voice is outsized (25 families engaged as compared to 6 staff), and families act as the filter through which continuous improvement ideas pass.

Findings

25 Families Interviewed

- Total of 139 people in interviewed families; average family size of 5.5
- Total use by 92 people; average number of people using device is 3.6
- 20% of families had a single user of device (child under age of 5)

Families Use Devices in Multiple Ways:

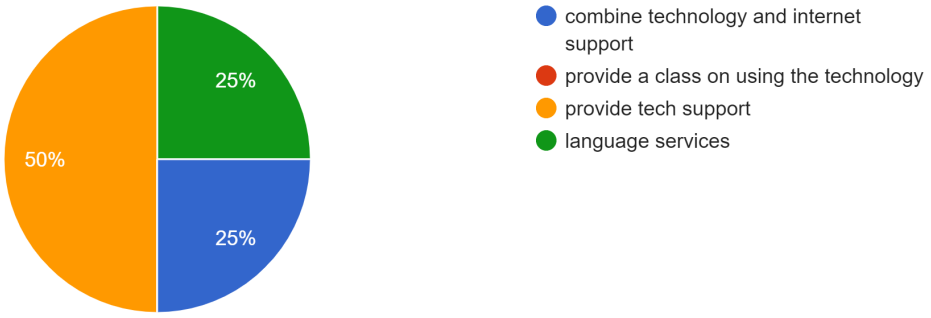
- 76% education for child under 5
- 56% education/distance learning for older children
- 32% personal use
- 8% job search
- 4% parent education
- 0% remote work

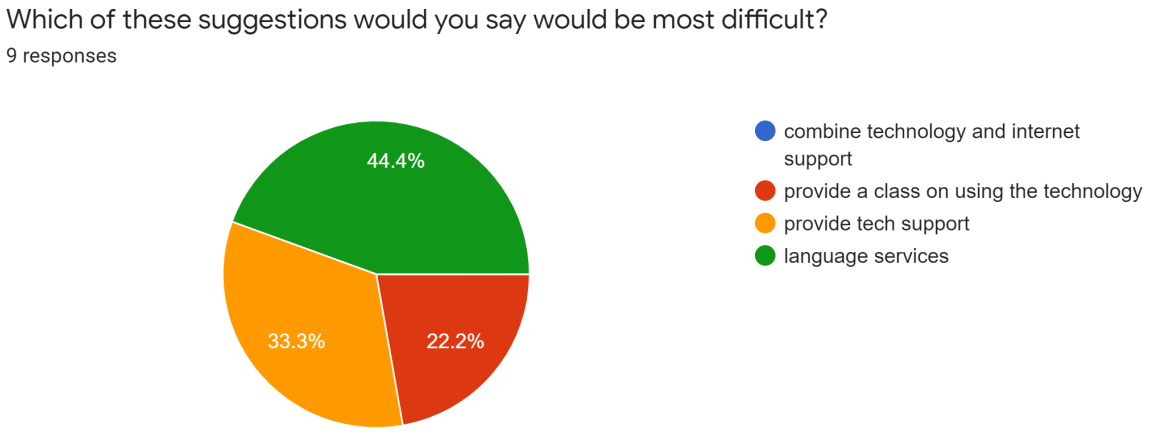
Process Findings

- 96% are referred to the program; 4% learned through friends/family
- All respondents shared that the process worked as they expected: they spoke to staff, were screened in, then coordinated receiving the laptop (pick up or drop off)
- Complaints: tech issues (logins, updates)

Which of these suggestions would you say is most important in terms of making sure families are able to access what they need, in a way that has the most positive impact?

12 responses





Follow-Up Conversations with Families

Five families were called to learn more details on their use of the devices. Across the five families, devices were used in the following ways:

- 6 adults looked for a job
- 8 adults worked from home
- 12 adults participated in their own education
- 18 older siblings participated in distance learning
- 25 people used the device for personal/recreational purposes
- 3 people accessed health care
- 3 people paid their bills online

If these families are representative, our work over the past year would have impacted our 132 participating families in the following way:

- 158 adults looked for a job
- 211 adults worked from home
- 316 adults participated in their own education
- 475 older siblings participated in distance learning
- 660 people used the devices for personal/recreational purposes
- 79 people accessed health care
- 79 people paid their bills online

Additional Data Collected - Anecdotes from Staff

In initial interviews, 86% of families reported that they would take training on using technology if it were available. However, when staff offered training at device drop-off, most people said they had a friend or family member (often, their children) who could teach them how to use the device. For 12% of families, the device became inoperable within months, but in all cases it was found that a user error (not manufacturing error) had resulted in the device becoming inoperable.

Empathy Mapping

All in all, staff and family perspective on what families do, say, think, and feel while accessing services. Overall, it is a positive experience and families are grateful. The process is simple and straightforward. Families report an additional feeling of empowerment that staff do not mention.

Summary of Findings

- Devices reached more people than anticipated
- The expected percentage of people used it for early ed purposes
- Culturally-appropriate training was identified as a need prior to device distribution, was declined during device distribution, but IT support (not training) was identified as the top priority after distribution

RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON FINDINGS

IT classes are offered in the community, through programs in which WFS families are active participants, in languages WFS families speak. WFS families have a high degree of technological literacy as evidenced by our initial interviews. This tech literacy is primarily applied to phone usage and apps, but *could* in some ways be translated to laptop and broadband use.

Our hypothesis is that there is a mismatch between

- the skills being taught in current IT classes and the immediate needs of adult immigrant students
- the level of foundational computer knowledge that is assumed in current IT classes and the actual level of foundational computer knowledge of students
- educational strategies/methods used in current IT classes and the preferred learning style students

In short, families initially relied on their friends, family, and neighbors to provide IT support because it was culturally tailored and addressed specific needs. This system works well on new devices for which there are no technical quality issues, and for problems that friends, families, and neighbors have encountered before and thus know how to solve. However, this informal IT support breaks down at a certain point for many families, resulting in devices becoming inoperable.

Families do, however, reach out to their front-line staff in this instance for support. This suggests that individual attention and responsiveness meets families' needs.

However, from a programmatic point of view, neither IMAA, Hawthorne, or FamiliesFirst are positioned to take a long-term role as on-call tech support. These organizations do, however, specialize in training and curriculum instruction. And, given that most devices were rendered inoperable by user error rather than technical error, most devices could remain in use with well-tailored training for device recipients.

Our recommendations are:

3. Work with families to better understand what culturally-responsive IT classes would look like
4. Work with WFS partner organizations to learn what level of on-going tech support can be provided