

Free to Grow

Irene M. Wielawski

Editors' Introduction

Preventing substance abuse through a preschool program may seem, at first glance, like a strange approach. But this is precisely the strategy behind the Free to Grow program, which has supported fifteen Head Start programs in organizing coalitions of families and social service agencies to reduce substance abuse in their communities. The program's organizers recognized that families with young children wanted their children to grow up in a safe, nurturing environment and that Head Start was a natural locus for parents and social service agencies to collaborate on projects that would improve the life of the community and ultimately reduce substance abuse.

One reason for using local Head Start programs to house Free to Grow was the hope that if the coalitions proved successful, the national Head Start program might adopt the program and continue its funding. This hope has not been realized, however, as financial belt-tightening has hit the Head Start program nationally. Ironically, the criminal justice agencies—rather than health, education, or substance abuse agencies—have shown the most interest in the model.

Free to Grow is one of a number of initiatives that the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has funded to address drug and alcohol addiction—initiatives that are discussed elsewhere in this volume.¹ In some ways, Free to Grow is similar in approach to Fighting Back, another large Foundation-supported effort built around the development of community anti-drug coalitions.² However, Free to Grow’s more general community development approach and its home in the Head Start program distinguish it from Fighting Back. The author of this chapter, Irene Wielawski, a former investigative reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* and now a freelance journalist specializing in health and health care issues, is a frequent contributor to the *Anthology* series.

-
1. Capoccia, V. “The Evolution of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Approach to Alcohol and Drug Addiction.” *To Improve Health and Health Care, Vol. IX: The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Anthology*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006.
 2. Wielawski, I. “The Fighting Back Program.” *To Improve Health and Health Care, Vol. VII: The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Anthology*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

— **N**o one in Owensboro, Kentucky, expected Foust Elementary School to set records for achievement. With a student body of mostly poor children from the city's crime-ridden West End, Foust had consistently ranked near the bottom on statewide reading, writing, and science proficiency examinations for fourth-graders.

In 1999, the Foust students showed some improvement in their scores, but not enough to alter local opinion. In 2000, the scores went up again, but some people still saw the improvement as a statistical fluke. An even bigger jump came in 2001, and the next year, and the year after that. By 2004, no one could dispute the validity of Foust's upward trend. In writing improvement alone, Foust had reached the top 5 percent of schools statewide—and was poised to meet the proficiency goals of the Kentucky Department of Education six years ahead of schedule. Heralding the achievement, the Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer* called Foust's 2004 gains "huge."¹ A Kentucky Department of Education spokeswoman said they were nothing short of "amazing."

Why amazing? Because the Foust student body contains every socioeconomic handicap that historically correlates with subpar school performance—as well as with substance abuse and other harmful behavior later in life. Extreme poverty is one of these handicaps. In 2004, some 96 percent of the Foust students qualified for federal free or reduced-price school lunches, compared with an average in Kentucky schools of 52 percent. Many of the students also come from single-parent homes in neighborhoods riven by street violence, drug dealing, and other social ills. They may have little supervision during nonschool hours, and are more likely than privileged children to come to school anxious and exhausted. Given such conditions, "amazing" is hardly too strong a description of the Foust students' achievement.

Accounting for it, however, is more complicated, given the myriad influences on children's ability and their readiness to learn. Studies show that the conditions of early childhood have far-reaching consequences not only for achievement in school but also for later in life. So-called environmental risk factors can predispose a child to harmful behavior such as

drug and alcohol abuse. The risks identified by social scientists include severe poverty, transience, substance and other abuse in the home, neighborhood mayhem, and early school failure. Mitigating these risks are so-called protective factors that augment children's resilience in the face of adversity. Protective factors include high intelligence and positive emotional bonds within the family and the neighborhood and among peers.²

Children born into difficult circumstances aren't without resources. Many public and private agencies share a mission to help them. The work of these agencies, however, is often piecemeal, because of numerous poorly coordinated and sometimes competitive institutional mandates and funding streams. Professionals within these agencies—teachers, social workers, pediatricians, police officers, and youth counselors, to name a few—commonly express frustration at being able to do only part of the job. The question naturally arises: might coordinating these risk-reduction activities across the agencies involved while simultaneously working to build resilience yield greater long-term success?

This was the challenge—and the ambition—of a wide-ranging anti-drug-and-alcohol experiment launched by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in partnership with the federal Head Start preschool program. Called *Free to Grow: Head Start Partnerships to Promote Substance-Free Communities*, it was authorized in 1992 for testing in six pilot communities and expanded in 2000 to fifteen demonstration sites. The Foundation committed more than \$14 million over thirteen years: \$5.4 million for the five-year pilot phase, \$1 million for a process evaluation of phase one, \$4 million for the four-year demonstration phase (through 2005), and another \$4 million for evaluation of the demonstration phase. Additional support for the program comes from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (\$2.9 million) and for the evaluation from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice (\$1 million).

Free to Grow provides no direct service to Head Start youngsters. Instead, it brings together broad-based community partners in efforts to strengthen families and communities, thereby addressing the young child's overall environment. The program is based on a body of research that identifies family and neighborhood characteristics that can heighten or

moderate the risk of substance abuse and other harms. Guided by this research, Free to Grow fosters partnerships among existing community and family service organizations, police, and government agencies to mitigate the threats to children and uses the structural framework of Head Start to reach needy families and neighborhoods.

The program defines threat broadly. Obvious threats—addicted or abusive family members, for example, or roving street gangs—share attention with subtler threats, such as vermin-infested housing, lack of supervised after-school programs, and hostility between neighborhood residents and police. Free to Grow, as a result, stands apart from traditional substance abuse prevention efforts such as DARE, through which police officers visit schools to teach children about the dangers of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. Many of Free to Grow's activities are only tangentially related to substance abuse; the program's portfolio includes initiatives against crime, negligent landlords, unemployment, adult illiteracy, language barriers, even traffic problems. Residents in one target community credit Free to Grow with helping them get stop signs installed at a dangerous intersection. That the signs had no immediate impact on the local methamphetamine trade is beside the point. The theory of Free to Grow holds that when impoverished families and communities believe they can change things for the better—like making an intersection safer, for instance—the neighborhood will gather the resolve to purge itself of other problems.

Judith Jones, clinical professor at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University and founding director of the National Center for Children in Poverty, is director of the Free to Grow national program office. The principal investigator of a national evaluation of the program's fifteen-site demonstration phase is Mark Wolfson of the Department of Public Health Sciences at Wake Forest University School of Medicine. The evaluation is funded through 2006. This isn't long enough to answer the question of whether Free to Grow interventions adopted during the preschool years increased protective factors sufficiently to alter patterns of substance abuse during the teen years. Instead, the evaluation is tracking change in the mixture of family and community risk and protective factors across Free to Grow sites, and comparing these sites with

comparable communities whose Head Start agencies did not participate in Free to Grow.

—w— **The Genesis of Free to Grow**

How an undertaking as diffuse as Free to Grow came to be embraced in 1992 by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the signature government antipoverty program, Head Start, is best understood in historical context. America's drug problem was major news at the time—a problem that had been made worse by crack cocaine's devastating impact on inner-city families and neighborhoods during the 1980s. At Head Start, teachers were seeing that impact in the behavior of three- and four-year-olds in their classrooms—and on Head Start's prospects for readying these children for kindergarten. At the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, meanwhile, staff members were scrambling to respond to a new president's call for innovative approaches to reduce the harm from alcohol, tobacco, and drug abuse.

Steven Schroeder, who served as Foundation president from July 1990 until December 2002, remembers being asked, during interviews for the job in 1989, what he would do differently. "I said, 'Well your mission is health and health care, but you are only doing health care.'" Schroeder suggested adding substance abuse initiatives to the mission for two reasons. First, drugs, alcohol, and tobacco are harmful to health, which puts substance-abuse interventions squarely within the mission to improve health and health care. Second, the field needed innovation. Private philanthropies, Schroeder argued, have greater latitude than government "to try some new approaches."

As president, Schroeder was given the go-ahead. He launched a restructuring of funding priorities to prune the Foundation's many health improvement ventures to only those defined by three broad categories: access to health care, chronic illness, and the new one: substance abuse. An immediate problem was lack of in-house expertise in alcohol and drug abuse prevention and treatment. Staff members schooled in other disciplines headed to the library to get up to speed. Free to Grow was one of several prevention-oriented initiatives to come out of this era. Its chief ar-

chitect was Marjorie Gutman, a social psychologist and, at the time, a Foundation program officer. She worked with Nancy Kaufman, who had recently joined the Foundation as a vice president, on early conceptual versions of Free to Grow.

“We wanted to do something for high-risk kids, and we wanted to get in earlier than the usual time, adolescence,” Gutman recalls. “The theory was that if you could alter the trajectory early enough, it might make a difference.” But how to reach these high-risk youngsters, and at what age? Gutman was inspired by research from the mental health field on pediatric emotional and behavioral disorders (a risk factor for substance abuse), some of which emerged as early as preschool.

“Suddenly we thought, ‘Oh my gosh, Head Start!’” Gutman recalls. “The Foundation is big on infrastructure, and our challenge was to get this idea past the exploration stage. Head Start seemed like it would maximize a lot of potential. There was a huge national infrastructure, and Head Start’s mission—in addition to a focus on early childhood education—encompasses health and family and neighborhood.”

From Head Start’s point of view, Free to Grow was “a natural partner,” says Sarah Greene, president and chief executive officer of the Head Start Association, a not-for-profit organization that supports and serves as an advocate for the 1,670 local Head Start agencies serving 900,000 low-income preschoolers nationwide. The concept fit with Head Start’s holistic approach to children and families as well as with an operating style that sought partnerships with existing social and health service agencies to meet preschoolers’ needs. Free to Grow’s designers hoped to build the network of partnerships so family and community needs might also be met. A rough outline emerged from discussions between Head Start and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation staff. “One of our local responsibilities is to assess the family and make whatever changes are necessary to assist the child and that family,” Greene says. “The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s goal to rid these neighborhoods of drug abuse was a perfect fit for what we do, because so many of our children grow up in neighborhoods stricken with violence.”

A 1992 article published in *Psychological Bulletin* provided the theoretical framework for Free to Grow.³ It described how prevention science

could be applied to reduce substance abuse by teenagers and young adults. Essentially, it outlined an approach similar to the comprehensive public health measures typically deployed against infectious disease. Direct action to contain or neutralize the threatening bio-organism is accompanied by efforts to boost public protection, such as vaccination, better diet, improved hygiene, and so on. In the context of reducing illegal drug abuse, this comprehensive approach means targeting not only drug dealers but also conditions in neighborhoods—abandoned buildings, for example—that attract the drug trade, and conditions in peer groups and families that may predispose individuals to substance abuse. Richard Catalano, Jr., of the University of Washington, coauthor of the 1992 study, who has published widely in the field of substance abuse prevention, is chairman of Free to Grow’s evaluation advisory panel.

Building the Structure

Because the main ideas behind Free to Grow were untested, the program’s leaders decided to roll them out in distinct phases, refining assumptions along the way. “There really was no research to support this,” says Judith Jones, the national program director, who brought many years of work with disadvantaged communities and children to her leadership. “We knew we were going to have to wait until the Head Start kids were teenagers to see if any of this works.”

The first phase got under way in 1994 with two-year grants of about \$300,000 each to six Head Start programs in urban and rural settings chosen to develop models to test Free to Grow’s prevention theory. By 1996, five of the sites showed sufficient promise to be awarded three-year implementation grants of approximately \$600,000 each. The sites were Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico; Compton, California; Colorado Springs, Colorado; Washington Heights, New York; and Owensboro, Kentucky, where Foust Elementary School is located.

The sites came up with various strategies to strengthen families and communities. Strategies to strengthen families included assessment and case management, referral as needed to counseling or treatment, parent education classes, peer mentoring and support groups, and transition assistance

for families moving from Head Start, which is very hands-on, to elementary schools, which are less so. Strategies to strengthen communities included organizing residents and existing groups to survey neighborhood needs (as opposed to bringing in outsiders to do the job), working together on solutions, building leadership skills, and fostering partnerships among existing local agencies. The partnerships were crucial, since Free to Grow by itself has no services to offer. From the outset, program leaders wanted to avoid the pitfall of many grant-funded programs that serve poor people for a while and then disappear when the money runs out. As a consequence, collaborations in this pilot phase varied tremendously from site to site, depending on available local resources and the quality of existing relationships. Across sites, however, two partners jumped out from the pilot phase as critically important assets: schools and police. The schools weren't surprising, since they share Head Start's education mission. But the interest and the enthusiasm of police was unexpected. As the program played out, police would surpass local educators as Free to Grow's strongest allies and advocates. The finding in the pilot phase was strong enough for the Foundation and national Free to Grow leaders to require police and school representatives as "core partners" in planning, governance, budget allocation, and implementation of demonstration projects.

The Foundation solicited applications for phase 2—the "demonstration phase"—in early 2000, with grant awards made to the selected Head Start programs in June 2001. Conceptually, Free to Grow now had more rigid guidelines. Besides requiring schools and police on the governance team, the call for proposals "strongly recommended" that applicant Head Start agencies recruit their local substance abuse treatment agency. In addition, these partners were suggested:

- Family guidance agencies
- Mental health agencies
- Community-based prevention coalitions and community action groups
- Employment training programs
- Local youth service organizations

Winning applicants were to receive roughly \$200,000 from the Foundation over four years, and the grant money had to be matched by \$50,000 annually from local sponsors or extra Head Start dollars. The first year of the demonstration phase was to be spent in training, developing action plans, and networking with residents and partners. The next three years (2002–2005) were to be devoted to implementation. To channel the potential range of activities to be carried out by grantees, the call for proposals summarized effective interventions from the first-phase pilot sites, and required demonstration sites to select from these models and adapt strategies to their localities.

One hundred twenty-five Head Start agencies sent letters of intent to apply, and forty-seven of them followed up with full applications. Of these, the Foundation selected eighteen applicants to receive one-year development grants to be used for capacity building, community assessment, and program start-up. In June 2002, the Foundation selected fifteen sites for funding of the implementation stage: Phoenix, Arizona; Orange, California; New Britain, Connecticut; Delray Beach, Florida; Wailuku, Hawaii; Jenkins, Kentucky; Franklin, Louisiana; Lexington Park, Maryland; Lincoln, Nebraska; Laguna, New Mexico; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Hermiston, Oregon; Dallas, Texas; Barre, Vermont; and Wausau, Wisconsin.

Themes and Variations

Even though phase-two sites were required to adapt model interventions from phase one, the sites still had considerable latitude. It could hardly be otherwise with an undertaking aimed at encouraging and providing tools for poor families and communities to “take ownership” of their destinies, in the oft-used phrase of Free to Grow leaders. Moreover, the conditions Free to Grow has sought to alleviate differ from one community to another. Evidence of this abounded at the program’s 2004 annual meeting, at which grantees showed videos of project undertakings ranging from housing code enforcement campaigns to community picnics to a unique campaign in Wisconsin to overturn a state law that permits children accompanied by parents to drink in taverns. The limitless possibilities of environmental improvement in deprived families and communities seem to

infect the participants, leading to field operations that expand in ever-widening concentric circles around the target problem. How that plays out is best seen in the experiences of individual sites. Three examples are offered, one from the 1994–1999 pilot phase and two from the current 2001–2005 demonstration phase.

Owensboro, Kentucky

Owensboro's Head Start program, a department of Audubon Area Community Services, was one of the original grantees in Free to Grow's pilot phase. Although Free to Grow officially wrapped up here in 1999, Owensboro has since found the means to incorporate some elements into the local Head Start infrastructure while sustaining several of the partnerships developed under Free to Grow.

Audubon Area Head Start has a bigger operation than most Free to Grow grantees, with a total of 1,702 preschool slots in fifty-six centers. Its headquarters are in Owensboro, which is western Kentucky's largest city (population 54,000), but jurisdiction extends well beyond the city limits into many of the towns of surrounding agricultural counties as far south as the Tennessee border. Tobacco is the local crop and a major source of employment on farms and in processing facilities like the huge, windowless U.S. Smokeless Tobacco Company plant in Hopkinsville, a two-hour drive from Owensboro, in rural Christian County.

The mayor of Hopkinsville, Rich Liebe, speaks proudly of landing big companies like U.S. Smokeless Tobacco, saying the move from a purely farming base to an industrial and agribusiness economy has enabled Hopkinsville to respond better to the residents' needs, particularly those of poor families who depend on public services. Colorful evidence of this is found in the playgrounds of local housing projects and community parks: new, crayon-bright swings and slides and climbing equipment dominate what once were litter-strewn congregating spots for lowlifes, according to officials and local residents. As a result, tobacco doesn't receive the disapproval here that it might at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation or Free to Grow's national headquarters in New York City or a Free to Grow site where tobacco has no impact on livelihood and the tax base. But if tobacco

quietly drops out of the group of anti-substance abuse initiatives here, it in no way diminishes local officials' enthusiastic embrace of partnership with the Owensboro Free to Grow project, which chose Hopkinsville to test community-strengthening strategies.

It was in Hopkinsville that getting the four-way stop began changing attitudes in a part of town where local government and police were rarely seen as the residents' allies. East First Street and Greenville Road had for years been a murderous intersection bordering the Rozell housing project, a tidy, two-story, clapboard complex for low-income families, most of them African American. Diagonally across Greenville Road is a small convenience store where children from the project buy snacks after school, and where elderly residents without cars get their groceries. Because Greenville Road is a major thoroughfare in Hopkinsville, crossing on foot was always a breathless experience. Trying to get across or to turn into Greenville from East First was equally tough in a car.

"My best friend was in a car wreck there," says Arma Jean Rawlins, a Head Start classroom aide who lives in the Rozell project. Through Free to Grow, Rawlins got involved with a neighborhood group that was formed to work with police and city officials on several festering neighborhood issues, among them the intersection and the dilapidated playgrounds. "I didn't know what to expect, but we learned to stick together and keep pushing," says Rawlins, whose Free to Grow community work led to her appointment to the Hopkinsville Housing Authority.

Rawlins credits Mary Lester, Free to Grow's community outreach worker, with keeping her residents' committee focused when setbacks and bureaucracy sapped their energy and their confidence that "powerful people" would respond. Lester herself is a Free to Grow success story. A single mother of four and a Head Start parent, she never envisioned herself in the job she's still doing, six years after Free to Grow officially expired here. "Oh, no, I did not speak in front of people, no way," she says, recalling her reaction to being chosen for the outreach worker job.

Mayor Liebe calls Lester "a circuit-rider preacher" for community action. "I began to think she was working for me, she was popping into my office so often with this idea or that," he says. "There's a genuineness in Mary to help which I responded to." Lester acted as the communication

link between Rawlins's neighborhood group and the mayor's office. She also helped residents figure out who, for example, they needed to petition at the Kentucky Highway Department for the traffic light they wanted at First and Greenville. She showed them how to research such questions, using the Internet to locate the relevant branch of state government, addresses, phone numbers, and procedures for filing requests. It seemed that victory was imminent when state engineers showed up one day to survey the intersection. But celebration turned out to be premature. In their report, the engineers said traffic volume wasn't sufficient to meet the state threshold for stoplights. Mayor Liebe was as irate as residents of the Rozell complex. More letters and petitions, backed by the mayor's office and the police department, went out in the mail—this time addressed to county officials. It was the residents who came up with this strategic end run, having discovered in their research that while red-yellow-green traffic lights were controlled by the state, county government ruled stop signs and blinking lights. Today, four stop signs and a blinking light have improved perceptions of safety in the neighborhood, and stand as evidence to residents that they're not as powerless as they once believed.

Similar organizing efforts in Owensboro led to improvements in the city's West End, where crack cocaine brought mayhem in the early 1990s. A surge in violent crime, with four drug-related murders in a city accustomed to no more than a single murder a year, brought many calls for action. Under the banner of Free to Grow, West End residents welcomed a community policing program to rid the neighborhood of drug dealers and their customers. The shared objective provided an opportunity to ease long-standing tension between West End residents and local police, according to Lieutenant Ken Bennett, who headed the community police unit. "It was an eye-opener," he says. "As law enforcement officers, we have zero tolerance for drugs, of course, but we found out there were other issues the community was concerned about that are quality-of-life issues, like cracking down on boom boxes and cars roaring through at two in the morning, getting action on abandoned buildings to board them up, getting the trash picked up."

Two lessons emerged from the improved dialogue between police and residents. Police officers discovered that most West End residents were

law-abiding. The residents learned that they had to be part of the solution; police couldn't do it all. This led to vital communication. Residents monitored license plates and confided to police officers where they believed illegal activity was taking place. Police followed up, showing residents that they were genuinely concerned about their welfare. It is interesting that it was traffic control tools and enforcement that brought noticeable improvement. These included speed bumps and yellow no-parking paint on curbs within housing projects so drug dealers could be ticketed for doing business out of their cars, and customers driving in from elsewhere could be rousted. "We knew we weren't going to completely stop the drug trade, but we were not going to allow an open-air marketplace in Owensboro," Bennett says.

The fact that Free to Grow offers no services and presents itself solely as a liaison between Head Start's families and the larger community helps cement partnerships with agencies that otherwise might not have collaborated because of turf or other competitive concerns, says Aubrey Nehring, director of Audubon Area Head Start and a member of Free to Grow's national advisory committee. In implementing the Free to Grow pilot project, Nehring needed to hire new staff members, such as Mary Lester for community outreach, because traditional Head Start doesn't extend that far. But the other part of Free to Grow, family advocacy, has been part of Head Start's structure since the program began in 1965. So all Nehring had to do was train existing staff members in the theory of risk and protective factors, and in Free to Grow strategies for strengthening families. This led to a significant revision of Head Start's family assessment questionnaire; the model questionnaire developed in Owensboro is one of the phase-one strategies that has largely been adopted by phase-two sites. Head Start caseworkers now ask pointed questions about alcohol and drug use in the home, violence, child abuse, and mental illness, and also look at family strengths that can be built upon. "The mentality of Head Start here before Free to Grow was that every child and every family was equal and got the same level of service," Nehring says. "We'd always done family needs assessments, but we never had an objective scale to quantify different levels of need and then tailor services to that need." Where some Head Start parents need relatively simple referrals for job

training, perhaps, or English classes, others might be overwhelmed by problems so severe—homelessness, substance abuse, depression or other illness—that they need urgent attention from multiple agencies and frequent caseworker visits.

As a preschool program, Head Start's relationship with needy families lasts at best two years. This is a short period to turn around addiction or mental illness, so changes to the family assessment questionnaire led logically to more dynamic partnerships with local agencies that could help. In Owensboro and elsewhere, Head Start employees and personnel at partner agencies repeatedly talk of discovering job overlap and mutually useful services that they never knew existed. These collaborative relationships exist both at the individual level—between a special education teacher at the local elementary school and a Head Start family advocate, say—and among agencies. In Owensboro, one lasting result is a dynamic collaboration between Head Start, local schools, and River Valley Behavioral Health, a federally funded mental health and substance abuse treatment agency serving seven western Kentucky counties. "Pre-Free to Grow, those relationships were tangential," says Gary Hall, River Valley's executive director. "Post-Free to Grow, they've become more formalized. We're more invested in each other's programs because we see a common mission."

New Britain, Connecticut

Forty years ago, New Britain was widely regarded as the jewel of Connecticut's Precision Valley—so-called for the many factories and skilled metalworkers who turned out machine and hand tools, springs, bearings, and other products for the world market. It was a destination for immigrants and post-World War II refugees seeking the American Dream. Many of them realized it, building single- and multifamily homes in New Britain and using generous blue-collar wages to send their children to college.

The factories of that era are mostly shuttered today, victims of new technology and outsourcing to countries with cheaper labor. Better-paid skilled work has been replaced by minimum-wage service jobs. The boom years of the 1990s largely bypassed New Britain, and residents and community leaders see few prospects on the horizon. They're surrounded

instead by the evidence of economic decline: derelict buildings, bare-bones city services, and overcrowded schools. Fewer than half of New Britain children attend preschool, compared with Connecticut's average of 75 percent, and school achievement significantly lags behind state and national norms, according to Merrill Gay, executive director of the New Britain Discovery Collaborative. Within this context, the local Head Start program has been fighting to add preschool spots.

New Britain continues to attract immigrants, however. Hispanics have moved into neighborhoods once inhabited by Polish and other Eastern European refugees. With the new demographics come some worrisome trends. "Half the kids under age five are growing up in one-parent homes, and 62 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch at school," Gay says. Families in New Britain's poor neighborhoods are also moving more than they used to, causing stress on children and making it difficult for schools, social agencies, and even programs like Free to Grow to establish protective beachheads. "If children are moving every six months because the family is getting evicted, they lose even the stability of being in a consistent school setting," Gay says. On top of this dislocation is the isolation that comes from not being able to speak English, further separating these families from the larger community and its resources. Compared with Owensboro, Kentucky, which has a stronger economy and a relatively homogeneous population, New Britain's Free to Grow program has had to build its framework almost from scratch. In 2004, for example, two years into the implementation period, Head Start and local school officials were still working on a system to share information on Head Start children so that the results of developmental assessments routinely performed at Head Start, such as vision, hearing, and cognitive tests, could inform the next set of teachers. Owensboro already had this in place when the Free to Grow pilot was launched there in 1994.

Nevertheless, Head Start staff and residents in New Britain credit Free to Grow networking strategies with quality-of-life improvements that they say could not have been accomplished through Head Start alone. For one, the North Oak neighborhood targeted by Free to Grow now has a police substation as well as a community center, which opened in 2003 in what was an abandoned Ukrainian social club. After extensive renovations, two

new Head Start classrooms recently opened in the community center. This is a boon in a neighborhood where mothers were taking buses to get children to more distant Head Start facilities. The community center is seen as a safe venue for neighborhood gatherings and a convenient location for recreational and educational programs for adults and children. Two new Girl Scout troops hold meetings there.

Three blocks up from the community center is the police substation, a one-story clapboard cottage that is easily the prettiest property in the neighborhood, with fresh paint, a well-trimmed lawn, and attractive landscaping. This handsome substation is a source of pride to local residents and a symbol of the city's commitment to their well-being. Officers assigned to the North Oak substation hope to become a familiar presence, both as reassurance to residents and business owners and as a warning to potential lawbreakers. A prominent Free to Grow partner is New Britain Weed and Seed, part of a national program established in 1991 by the U.S. Department of Justice as a multi-agency approach to crime prevention and neighborhood improvement. Its long-range goals are remarkably similar to those of Free to Grow, although framed in the language of law enforcement rather than that of family and community empowerment. A government brochure describing the program reads:

The goals of Weed and Seed are to control violent crime, drug trafficking, and drug-related crime in targeted high-crime neighborhoods and provide a safe environment free of crime and drug use for residents. The Weed and Seed strategy brings together federal, state, and local crime-fighting agencies, social service providers, representatives of the public and private sectors, prosecutors, business owners, and neighborhood residents under the shared goal of weeding out violent crime and gang activity while seeding in social services and economic revitalization.⁴

With Weed and Seed focused on the same New Britain neighborhood as Free to Grow, partnership is a given, says Weed and Seed coordinator MaryAnn Drury. "If you look at three-, four-, and five-year-olds in poor inner-city families, they often aren't eating," she says. "Teenagers are having babies. The parents often have no education themselves so they can't

really help their child with homework.” Weed and Seed workers turn to the partnership when they come across problems police don’t have the time or the expertise to handle, such as vermin-infested housing. “You go into some of these homes, they’ve got bread stapled to the walls so the cockroaches won’t bite the kids,” says Officer Steven King, who works out of the North Oak substation and is also the New Britain Police Department’s representative to Free to Grow and Weed and Seed, as well as a DARE officer in city schools.

Partly because King wears so many hats and partly because community improvement work doesn’t fit neatly into a nine-to-five schedule, his workday routinely stretches into the evening—a common experience for Free to Grow activists and their partners. King attends neighborhood gatherings to keep up with what’s happening as well as to put himself where residents shy of police might open up. One evening last fall, he stood for two hours in the community center hallway, relegated there because of an overflow crowd in the center’s main meeting room. The occasion was a visit by Representative Nancy L. Johnson, a Republican congresswoman from Connecticut’s fifth district, who was on a swing through her hometown and wanted to see the community center and meet her newest constituents. She’s also a fan of Free to Grow, seeing it as an interesting experiment in bringing coordination and efficiency to disparate social services. “I am interested in a far more integrated system to deliver services to families that are struggling,” she says. “To deliver services effectively, you have to think about health care, education, job training, substance-abuse treatment, everything all at once.”

Despite Johnson’s enthusiasm for Free to Grow, the project director, Elizabeth Donnellan, had fretted about turnout for the congresswoman’s visit. Many North Oak residents work several jobs. Others are afraid to venture out after dark. For weeks beforehand, Donnellan had talked up the meeting with Head Start parents and assigned Elena Trueworthy, the project’s bilingual community worker, to spread the word to Spanish-speaking families. Twenty minutes before the scheduled start time, Donnellan paced up and down the hallway, worried that no one would come. In the meeting room, volunteers laid out platters of rice and beans and shredded pork for those who might arrive directly from work. People

began to trickle in, some holding babies and trailed by school-age children too young to leave at home. The trickle became a stream. By the time Johnson arrived, the center was so crowded she could barely get through the doorway of the meeting room. One by one, people stood up to tell Johnson why Head Start and Free to Grow were important to them. The father of two young elementary school boys made his presentation in halting English, aided by people sitting near him who suggested words when he faltered. “I proud because my son, he earn, how say it, certificate, Student of Month, in school, and he was Head Start kid.” Donnellan slid out of the room, taking refuge in the hall so she could cry unnoticed. “This is Free to Grow,” she sobbed happily to Officer King. “I’ve been with Head Start for twenty-five years and I never could have imagined this, all these people coming here, coming together.”

Wailuku, Hawaii

The government seat of Maui, Hawaii, is situated at the northern end of the island in the town of Wailuku. County offices are here, as are headquarters for many agencies, including Maui Economic Opportunity, the parent organization of the island’s Head Start program. Also in Wailuku is Kahekili Terrace, a fifty-six-unit public housing project for low-income, mostly native Hawaiian families. Children growing up here experience the underside of the world-renowned paradise that draws millions of tourists to luxurious beachfront resorts, golf courses, and all manner of waterfront recreation. There are no ocean vistas at Kahekili Terrace—just an irrigation ditch running along the project’s access road. Before Free to Grow, that road was choked with cars, some of them abandoned, some serving as temporary shelter for vagrants, while others served as the business offices of dealers in crystal methamphetamine, known locally as ice. Ice has swept through Hawaii in recent years, with devastating consequences. Officials at the Maui Community Correctional Center estimate that 90 percent of the inmates have drug habits, and many are incarcerated for drug-related crimes.

Ernie Ramos, a Kahekili resident, says he lost his brother to ice. Having watched his brother’s decline, Ramos was upset to see drug dealers

operating under the windows of project residents. Still, he questioned what he personally could do about it. The dealers were known to have weapons; Ramos's brother had been shot to death. Ramos kept these feelings to himself until one night at a meeting of project residents, when they surged into the open and into a call for action. The trigger was a suggestion by the housing project manager that residents didn't care about the deteriorating conditions at Kahekili. "I told him it was insulting to say that we didn't care," Ramos recalls. His friend Sharon Fernandez was upset, too, but more about the fact that residents were so cowed. "If we are going to be afraid, it is only going to get worse," she told the group. This was the beginning of the residents' patrol at Kahekili Terrace, an effort spearheaded by the Maui Police Department and the local housing authority and supported by Free to Grow. Fernandez and Ramos were the patrol's first members. "We're not vigilantes," Fernandez explains. "We just observe and let the police know what's going on. It's peer pressure sometimes, like saying to people sitting outside and drinking and being loud, 'These are your neighbors, why're you acting like that?'"

Residents say the patrol has led to significant improvement at Kahekili. Thanks to an aggressive ticketing and towing campaign by Maui Police Sergeant Jamie Becraft and Officer Craig Bajadali, the community policing team assigned to Kahekili, cars no longer park along the access road, and graffiti and litter are gone as well. Residents say the project feels safer now, and the improvements have given them an impetus for new projects. One is a computer lab—the computers have already been donated—so that children from the project don't lag behind more affluent classmates in computer skills required for success in school. Another is an after-school homework program, sponsored by the Boys and Girls Club, called "power hour," which Kahekili Terrace will have on-site. Children participating in the program earn points toward rewards; the Maui version is an airplane trip to Big Island for diving and spear fishing. Kahekili Terrace also has its own Head Start classroom, opened as part of Free to Grow's community-strengthening investment.

Getting the OK to open that classroom, however, illustrates the difficulties that can arise in adopting what seems like a straightforward Free to Grow strategy. The problem at Kahekili Terrace was fire truck access.

The classroom was too far from existing hydrants to get a school occupancy permit. Clearing the regulatory tangle took two years, according to the Head Start director, Lyn McNeff. In the end, Head Start paid for the installation of a hydrant close enough to the classroom to satisfy safety requirements.

Maui's Free to Grow project also sponsors programs to enable children and incarcerated mothers to spend a day together outside the prison setting—an undertaking that requires partnership with the Maui Community Correctional Center. The project is also working to address the lack of affordable housing for island residents. These are all efforts to address environmental stresses on children, in the hope of reducing their risk of substance abuse in years to come.

—w— **Conclusion**

Free to Grow eludes tidy definition, though its premise is simplicity itself: children are more likely to succeed in life if they grow up in homes and neighborhoods that are safe, stable, nurturing, and optimistic.

Most parents intuitively understand this—and want it for their children. Most social and political institutions understand it as well. This fundamental logic of Free to Grow breeds a contagious level of enthusiasm among its many partners—parents, neighborhood groups, police, social service agencies, and others drawn into the collaboration. It's certainly an easier sell than substance abuse education or treatment programs aimed at those already ensnared by alcohol, drugs, and tobacco. Efforts to safeguard the innocent young consistently draw broader public support than those aimed at helping already troubled teenagers or adults escape the consequences of bad choices. This popular—and political—bias toward the still undamaged young is not cynicism so much as human nature. It colors public policy well beyond the substance abuse field. In this context, Free to Grow's environmental interventions easily win converts. Things like better housing-code enforcement, neighborhood cleanup, traffic safety, and supervised after-school programs have obvious benefit to children, families, and communities, even if the stated long-term goal of Free to Grow—less drinking, drug taking, and smoking—remains elusive.

Implementing Free to Grow, however, isn't simple at all. Even in the relatively controlled environment of a demonstration project, Free to Grow quickly ballooned to encompass a dizzying array of interventions. Evidence of this abounded at the program's 2004 annual meeting, where phase-two grantees presented videos showing Free to Grow in action in their communities. One could pick out a common theme or technique here and there, but the larger impression was of a kaleidoscope of approaches, many of them unique to the conditions and the resources of a specific community. This decentralized program structure is consistent with Free to Grow's goal of empowering families and communities to effect *their* goals rather than imposing standards and priorities from the outside. The latter structure offers efficiency and a better shot at measurable results, especially in the context of a short-term, grant-funded experiment. Free to Grow seeks to plant the seeds for self-improvement in a way that continues to bear fruit after grantmakers withdraw.

That has proved to be the case in Owensboro, Kentucky, where the local Head Start program permanently incorporated the Free to Grow family assessment, in which caseworkers aggressively probe for drug addiction and other problems and direct parents to helpful community resources. The impact on this phase-one project six years after Free to Grow funding ended also is evident in continuing robust partnerships among agencies that previously worked on parallel—and sometimes competitive—tracks. Local leaders describe Free to Grow's role as similar to that of case managers for patients with complicated illnesses requiring the attention of many specialists working in concert. "You have all these systems in play: the police department does its thing, the schools do their thing, social services do their thing, but no one talks to the other agencies all working in the same neighborhood and sometimes with the same people," says Owensboro Police Lieutenant Ken Bennett. "With Free to Grow, we acted in a lot of ways like brokers for services from other city departments, like the housing-code enforcement or traffic enforcement."

In Kentucky and elsewhere, however, questions linger about the effectiveness of specific Free to Grow interventions, how best to deploy limited resources at the community level, and how to track impact. There's also discussion about whether Head Start is the best vehicle for such a

wide-ranging social change project. The national evaluation is expected to shed light on many of these questions, but it's not designed to address the cost-benefit question—a key one for policymakers as well as budget-minded agency directors. At this writing, it's also unclear whether phase-two Head Start test sites will have the means to incorporate Free to Grow when Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funding runs out this year. Sarah Greene, the National Head Start Association's president and CEO, says the program is strapped for cash. Now budgeted at \$6.1 billion, it has suffered a sharp decline since 2000 in appropriations for innovation, staff development, and other enhancements. Most Head Start agencies, according to Greene, are scrambling simply to sustain core services against rising costs. "It is a lot of work and it is costly, especially the family service part and intensive case management," Greene says of Free to Grow.

Free to Grow's costs go beyond dollars and cents. Local Head Start directors say it also exacts a human toll. This suggests yet another loose end as the demonstration project draws to a close: how to sustain the passion that everyone involved in Free to Grow—from national program leaders to local foot soldiers—says is necessary to sell the message of self-improvement, community building, and interagency cooperation. Carmen Nicholas, Head Start director in Palm Beach County, Florida, a phase-two Free to Grow site, says she has had to deal with burnout, especially among family service workers. Traditionally, these workers have come from the ranks of Head Start mothers. Nicholas and other directors say Free to Grow imposes quasi-professional duties on people who live in the same impoverished communities and may be friends, neighbors, or relatives of the very people they're obligated to question about drug use, domestic violence, and other family dysfunction. Beyond the awkwardness of uncovering these problems in a social peer is the sometimes long and frustrating road to alleviating them.

"It's hard work, and not all of these problems are quickly or easily solved, so my staff sometimes suffers heartache over failures," Nicholas says. "There's also an element of danger in questioning people about drug use. As director, I have had to do stress management in a number of ways, such as rotating people to lighter duties when I see them struggling with too many cases involving families with overwhelming needs." Finally, she

must continually refresh her own passion for Free to Grow in order to sustain the vision in her staff of 300, who are spread among thirty preschool sites in Palm Beach County. “Free to Grow requires continuous training of workers,” Nicholas says. “And some of them can’t handle it or leave for better paying jobs, so there is constant staff turnover as well.”

Head Start and Free to Grow aren’t inseparable. Just as Free to Grow’s community partners have found common ground, so might the program find another platform for its family- and community-strengthening strategies. The Justice Department’s Weed and Seed program comes to mind, as do outreach projects of community development agencies. Indeed, the principles of collaboration and shared expertise that underpin Free to Grow ultimately lead back to the research world. The amazing performance of Foust Elementary School’s fourth-graders provides a tantalizing illustration.

Half of the children who contributed to the rising test scores started out as Head Start preschoolers targeted by Owensboro’s Free to Grow program since 1996. Interventions were guided by a body of research on risk and protective factors for substance abuse, and improved school performance was a hoped-for by-product. But what about the other children who show up each fall for kindergarten streetwise and very tough to settle down, in the words of Principal Jeff Gray.

This is where Gray’s research mentors come into play, all from the field of early childhood education, but, like their counterparts in the substance abuse field, focused on risk factors for school failure among disadvantaged children and strategies for improving their chances of success. Gray put this research into practice by restructuring the system shortly after he took over as Foust’s principal in 2000. “We had disruptive, disrespectful behavior, fighting, and so on,” Gray says, “an unruly environment that interfered with everyone’s ability to learn and intimidated many of the children.”

Foust today has a strict disciplinary code that involves parents directly in goal setting and the enforcement of school standards. There’s also a reward system for conduct, attendance, and academic achievement through which youngsters can earn “Foust dollars” to spend at the school store. Teachers are encouraged to expect performance as high as they would for

their own children. “We read a book on all the excuses people make for not educating the poor: the testing materials are too hard, their parents don’t care, they come to school with an empty belly,” Gray says. “All these excuses were invalid, according to the research.”

The restructuring activity at Foust was independent of Free to Grow. Where they intersected was Hager Preschool, a Head Start site on the Foust campus that had little interaction with Foust’s kindergarten faculty before the inception of Free to Grow but now works in partnership on student assessments and curriculum planning. Even if the two camps arrived by different routes, laboring at the cutting edge of independent theories, they now share excitement over the achievements of children they collectively helped to rise above their circumstances.

And there’s another buzz building—this time over a group of Foust third-graders who’ve been quietly working above grade level, so much so that they’re poised to qualify for the school district’s gifted and talented program. That would be another first for Foust—and for the children of Owensboro’s West End.

Notes

1. Campbell, J. “Most Schools Performing Well but Some High Schools Need Work.” *Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer*, Oct. 14, 2004, p. 1.
2. Catalano, R. S. “Free to Grow and Prevention Science.” Presented at Free to Grow annual meeting, Maui, Hawaii, Nov. 10, 2004.
3. Hawkins, J. D., Catalano, R. F., and Miller, J. Y. “Risk and Protective Factors for Alcohol and Other Drug Problems in Adolescence and Early Adulthood: Implications for Substance Abuse Prevention.” *Psychological Bulletin*, 1992, 112(1), 64–105.
4. The Weed and Seed Strategy. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Topical Publication Series NCJ #189318.

