

## **KIDS COUNT: *Partners for Children's Health and Learning***

### ***Introduction***

What do a street-proofing program for grade-schoolers, a fitness competition for families, a Halloween pumpkin-carving night and a literacy program have in common? They are all creative neighbourhood initiatives developed by KIDS COUNT – a unique, community-wide partnership to improve the health and learning opportunities of children and families in neighbourhoods in London, Ontario.

KIDS COUNT brings together parents, children, educators, businesses and community organizations to identify and implement ideas to address the health and learning needs of children. The initiative is particularly notable for the breadth of its partnerships and its focus on neighbourhood-generated solutions.

### ***Improving opportunities for children***

The idea for KIDS COUNT was developed in 1992 when Darrel Skidmore assumed the job of Director of Education for London's public school system. In learning about the community, he became concerned that children from less affluent areas of the city faced serious obstacles to learning. A Compensatory Education Task Force was formed to investigate these obstacles and suggest possible solutions. This Task Force included a cross-section of representatives from the public school system and the

community – teachers, principals, trustees, superintendents, social service workers and parents.

Looking at data from censuses, social service organizations and city-wide school tests, the Task Force found that a significant number of children faced economic and social disadvantages that were affecting their ability to learn. Nutritional deficiencies, a lack of resources for books and other tools, and a variety of other factors were contributing to poor readiness to learn. "Information from sources like the census and the United Way showed obvious disparities," says Darrel. "In some areas, 90 percent of homes had computers, while in others fewer than three percent did."

The Task Force surveyed parents and children in less advantaged neighbourhoods on ways to make change, and the result was the KIDS COUNT concept of neighbourhood groups developing their own solutions. Based on the Task Force's recommendations, the public school board approved a Compensatory Education policy to reallocate resources from the organization's operating budget to support collaborative neighbourhood programs.

### ***Building support***

The next step was to involve other organizations. According to Darrel Skidmore: "We began to

realize that what we needed were prevention strategies, not intervention strategies. Intervention strategies are the responsibility of schools, but prevention strategies are the responsibility of social service agencies, the health ministry and others. We realized that we needed to involve all three levels of government – municipal, provincial and federal – as well as the private sector.”

Darrel embarked on a series of one-on-one meetings with representatives of organizations that he believed were key to the success of any Compensatory Education initiative – people like the Director of Education for the Catholic school system, the head of the United Way, the Director of the Children’s Aid Society, hospital presidents and the Director of Community Services for the city.

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*- Darrel Skidmore*

Three organizations agreed to commit a modest amount of core funding for KIDS COUNT: The City of London, Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, and Human Resources Development Canada each contribute about \$45,000 per year. A variety of other organizations agreed to participate in a Resource Steering Committee to help KIDS COUNT groups locate and access resources.<sup>1</sup> The London Investment in Education Council, a coalition of public and private-sector organizations with a mandate to enrich learning environments for children, agreed to share office space (donated by AVCO Financial Services), equipment, administrative personnel, financial administration and its charitable number with KIDS COUNT.

Darrel stresses the importance of the involvement of these various organizations, and the fact that both the public and Catholic school boards have been actively involved in KIDS COUNT from the outset. “The degree of interaction is evident when the person now championing the initiative as head of the Resource Steering Committee is Patrick Dunne, the Director of

Education for the London District Catholic School Board,” he says.

Graham Clyne, who was hired in 1994 to coordinate KIDS COUNT, was involved in helping to persuade organizations to be part of the Resource Steering Committee. “We said we wanted them to help neighbourhoods do more for kids. When they said, ‘What will we be doing?’ we said ‘We don’t know – but are you in?’ Asking organizations for this kind of open-ended buy-in was new and somewhat risky, but it worked.”

Eleven neighbourhoods were selected for a pilot project based on an assessment of risk to children. This assessment was based on five criteria: low income status, single-parent families, low parental educational attainment, the percentage of newcomers (immigrants and refugees) and rental housing. In June 1994, school representatives, parents and key service providers from these neighbourhoods were invited to help develop KIDS COUNT groups.

### **Key principles**

While the issues and approaches vary in each of the neighbourhoods, KIDS COUNT is based on four key principles.

First, it is *neighbourhood-driven*. Each neighbourhood group identifies the issues and ideas that it wants to address. KIDS COUNT believes that the adults and children who live and work in a community have the best understanding of what can be done to improve the health and learning opportunities of children in their neighbourhood.

Secondly, it *uses existing resources*. KIDS COUNT groups focus on how best to mobilize and use the resources that already exist in their communities: churches, schools, libraries, community and day care centres, and businesses. In fact, the vast majority of the local initiatives proceed using the neighbourhood’s own resources (i.e., volunteers, space and materials). At the same time, the project challenges its partner organizations to rethink creatively how they might help neighbourhood groups.

Thirdly, KIDS COUNT concentrates on bringing about *sustainable changes*. The neighbourhood groups seek to develop approaches and ideas that can be supported and sustained over time.

Finally, the organization builds *local leadership*. Neighbourhood KIDS COUNT groups identify the kinds of leadership, training and development opportunities that will better enable them to work on behalf of their children and their communities. These activities include leadership development opportunities for the children themselves.

### ***Focus on the neighbourhood***

The structure of KIDS COUNT reflects its key principles. The focus is on the neighbourhood where parents, children, service professionals, educators and other community members identify activities that can be undertaken locally to provide greater opportunities for children.

Initially, all the groups were mediated by volunteers drawn from a variety of community and public organizations. These facilitators have gradually been phased out of a direct role as community members have taken on more responsibility for their KIDS COUNT groups. All of the local groups are now facilitated by neighbourhood volunteers.

Groups also can call on the current Project Director, Jan Lubell, to help them assess how to access resources to support their programs. If resources from outside the neighbourhood are needed or if the request represents a systemic issue, the Project Director involves the Resource Steering Committee and other community organizations in seeking solutions.

Another staff member, Community Programs Manager Susan Gorlick, works with KIDS COUNT groups to engage community members, assists youth groups to become established in schools, helps find support for projects and organizes programs to develop leadership skills among group members.

Graham Clyne speaks of how a focus on the neighbourhood requires a new way of doing things.

“Half the kids in some of these neighbourhoods couldn’t afford to pay to swim in the community pool in the summer,” he says. “This sends powerful messages to kids about where they are in the community. Under the old model, we would have found a corporate sponsor to pay for them. This is the wrong approach, because the neighbourhood people would have had nothing to do with it, and would have had no more control over their lives. As Coordinator, I would be the artificial intervention, and if I weren’t there to bridge the relationship, it would fall apart. The Parks and Recreation Department wouldn’t have changed the way it did business, and wouldn’t see that it had an obligation to get those kids into the pool.”

“We argued that from a values-based perspective, these kids should be in the pool because the city’s community services said that everyone should have access to these facilities. So we got everyone together with people from the community and strategized as to how to do this. Different neighbourhoods came up with different ways – in some, kids earned passes, in others parents could register their kids at school.”

“The point is that if we want kids and their families to be healthy and engaged, we have to get out of the ‘programs for problems’ framework. We have to have community involvement,” Graham concludes.

### ***Making the most of existing resources***

The Resource Steering Committee provides a strong underpinning for the KIDS COUNT initiative. Its members are senior representatives of their organizations and this high-level involvement has translated into significant organizational support for KIDS COUNT. The senior-level support also facilitates creative problem-solving, policy changes and innovative approaches to meeting resource needs. Committee meetings are held in participating neighbourhoods so its members get a feel for the process and the projects, and small ‘resource teams’ within the Steering Committee often work directly with neighbourhood groups and KIDS COUNT staff on particular issues.

From the beginning, the philosophy of KIDS COUNT has been to make the most of existing resources by keeping overhead costs to a minimum and creatively leveraging available resources. Susan Gorlick explains: “Rather than rely on government funding, the philosophy is to seek existing resources in the community from all sectors, thus making programs and projects sustainable.” These resources might include anything from unused office equipment and computers to professional expertise to funding from an existing program that can be applied to a KIDS COUNT project. Graham Clyne notes that for every dollar of funding that KIDS COUNT has received, it has leveraged six or seven dollars’ worth of other resources.

### *A tapestry of neighbourhood initiatives*

KIDS COUNT communities have developed an impressive range of initiatives, often supported through a partnership with a local agency or a member of the Resource Steering Committee. The following are just a few examples of their activities.

#### *i. youth groups*

When KIDS COUNT neighbourhood groups were first formed, local children expressed concerns and ideas about their communities. “The development of the youth groups was a natural, wonderful outgrowth of KIDS COUNT,” says Linda Carmichael, who replaced Graham Clyne as Coordinator in 1998. “The youth and neighbourhood groups support one another, and we’re working to strengthen the voices of the youth. We want to hear the children because that’s who we’re trying to serve.”

After a leadership conference in November 1996 brought together 150 students from Grades 6 to 8, the number of youth groups increased significantly. There are now 20 youth groups in which students from Grades 6, 7 and 8 work to address community issues specific to their age group. With the assistance of volunteers (local parents and university students), these youth groups have undertaken projects, such as

collecting donations for local food banks and identifying improvements needed to local parks as well as a variety of social and recreational activities. Every year, ten youths from each KIDS COUNT school are selected by the school principals to attend a Leadership Camp.

#### *ii. safety*

Many KIDS COUNT communities have addressed safety issues that affect children. One group recruited new Block Parents, ran a street-proofing program for grade-schoolers and mounted a campaign to warn children about playing on railroad tracks. Various pathways throughout the city have been identified by children as unsafe places, and KIDS COUNT neighbourhood groups have worked with the city to improve the lighting in these areas and keep the natural growth trimmed back. Several communities have brought together the London Police Chief and local experts for open-table discussions about children’s safety. Public gatherings have been organized to focus on summer safety for kids.

#### *iii. academic needs*

KIDS COUNT activities support children to realize their full potential in all areas, including academics. For example, one community started a ‘Love of Books’ program, in which preschoolers borrow books from a donated collection.

Several groups give children ‘buddy bags’ filled with books for the child and magazines for the parents to take home so that families can read together. Skill-building efforts, homework rooms, special reading initiatives, computer learning and field trips are important Kids Count activities which have an impact on academic achievement. With a community portable donated by a London company, parents and educators in one neighbourhood have a quiet space to undertake a variety of special programs. A summer ‘Community Coffee Break’ drop-in centre for parents and young children is one of the latest uses of the portable. Homework rooms have been established in various neighbourhoods, managed by local volunteers with supplies donated by London public libraries and community organizations.

#### *iv. breakfast programs*

Several groups have established breakfast programs, supported by local volunteers, school staff and community organizations. Parent groups have been started in some neighbourhoods so parents can get together and learn about a variety of topics including parenting, nutrition and community safety. These meetings are sponsored by local organizations and facilitated by staff of the Middlesex-London Health Unit and KIDS COUNT.

#### *v. family events*

Community social events have been hosted in many KIDS COUNT neighbourhoods with families getting together to enjoy activities such as line dancing, basketball and movie nights. In three neighbourhoods, an annual Halloween pumpkin-carving night is held in a school gym, with pumpkins donated by local farmers. Many of the families would otherwise be unable to afford the luxury of buying a pumpkin. The annual 'Jingle Bell Walk,' at which group members skate, sing carols and enjoy hot chocolate, is another popular seasonal event. Family movie nights and neighbourhood barbecues are also well-attended and help build community spirit.

#### *vi. KIDS COUNT bus*

The London Transit Commission has decorated a bus with KIDS COUNT graphics to build recognition of the project throughout the broader community. The bus also helps address the transportation barriers that prevent access to community facilities and events for many children.

Each KIDS COUNT school has access to the bus and a driver for two hours per year at no charge, and the bus is also available at a discounted rate for neighbourhood initiatives. Other organizations, such as CIBC and the staff group of the Children's Aid Society, have donated funds to help sponsor trips on the bus. The London Transit Commission also contributes buses and drivers to transport KIDS COUNT members to group events.

#### *Outcomes and evaluation*

KIDS COUNT places considerable emphasis on evaluation. With funding from The Trillium Foundation, three aspects are being evaluated.

##### *i. process*

KIDS COUNT brings together local people, the public and Catholic school systems, and service organizations to facilitate the sharing of ideas and resources, and to improve the level of communication and understanding among the groups participating in each neighbourhood.

An evaluation at the end of the second year of the program indicated that 27 new partnerships had been developed, and found a relatively high level of commitment, involvement and satisfaction among the organizations engaged in the project.

##### *ii. programs*

The evaluation is tracking the accomplishments of KIDS COUNT by looking at the implementation of neighbourhood projects, learning indicators, health indicators and parental information. The various initiatives undertaken by neighbourhood groups also contain an evaluation component. Linda Carmichael says: "The focus is not so much on marks as on whether children have healthier, happier and safer learning environments. The children in youth groups may not necessarily be high achievers academically, but they are community-oriented and they're learning that they have leadership skills."

##### *iii. policy*

Some ideas for improving children's well-being can be successfully implemented only by looking at new ways of operating and addressing systemic barriers. Organizational policy and behavioural changes stimulated by KIDS COUNT are being evaluated based on information from interviews and meeting minutes. Several of the organizations represented on the Resource Steering Committee have made official policy changes due to their participation in KIDS

COUNT, and a number have reported changes in the way they do business. The London Public Library was one of the first organizations to make a policy change as a result of a neighbourhood request: It now allows for a long-term off-site loan of materials to a Parent Resource Centre.

### *Lessons learned*

KIDS COUNT has been a learning experience for all involved. Initially, the identification of neighbourhoods caused some concern about the ‘labelling’ of entire schools and neighbourhoods without community input. Over time, however, most of the neighbourhoods have come to see that KIDS COUNT activities are beneficial to the community at large.

“We don’t want these neighbourhoods to be stigmatized as ‘poor neighbourhoods,’” says Linda Carmichael. “There are people in these communities who are doing well, and they should be involved too. KIDS COUNT should be looked at as a community-building initiative.” As the pilot phase comes to an end and KIDS COUNT partners contemplate the next phase of the program, some consideration is being given to opening the initiative to additional schools and neighbourhoods. While this expansion may not be possible due to resource constraints, Linda believes that all neighbourhoods could benefit from KIDS COUNT. For instance, many high-income neighbourhoods have juvenile crime problems. “If we’re all living in the same area, we need to work together to make it a better place,” she says.

It has been easier to establish KIDS COUNT groups in some neighbourhoods than in others. A preliminary evaluation in 1996 indicated that the three neighbourhood groups that were the quickest to take root and to establish local leadership shared several common characteristics. All three existed in areas where there was little else by way of community groups, organizations or services. All were able to draw on a parent population from relatively stable, income-secure homes and in all cases, school staff were very supportive and adopted a facilitative approach.

Although more time was required, the initiative has taken root in the other neighbourhoods. However, like any volunteer-dependent organization, KIDS COUNT must grapple constantly with how to engage local volunteers and avoid burnout. This is a particular challenge in neighbourhoods where there are fewer people with a tradition of volunteerism. Many of the same volunteers are involved in other parent-school organizations, leading to concerns about overlap. KIDS COUNT has remained open to flexible arrangements with other local groups, and many schools and neighbourhood groups have dealt with the issue by sharing meetings.

A number of volunteers also have moved on to paid employment, in part because of the experience gained through KIDS COUNT. “In the past few years,” says Susan Gorlick, “I have seen a number of women who were not working outside of the home take on the facilitator role in their neighbourhood group, only to move on into the workforce. They have

*“One of the small miracles that came from KIDS COUNT is that principals from the Catholic and public school systems sit down to share ideas rather than trying to solve their simliar problems separately.”*

*- Graham Clyne*

said that participating in this program and having the opportunity to attend various leadership workshops has been helpful to them.” For the KIDS COUNT program as a whole, it is a constant challenge to engage and retain volunteers who are willing to take on a demanding leadership role. KIDS COUNT is also looking at new ways to make use of the participation and expertise of senior executives who are members of the Resource Steering Committee.

Graham Clyne notes that making a partnership like KIDS COUNT work requires effort, creativity and a willingness to provide credit where credit is due. “One reason that many partnerships don’t hang

together is a sense that there is going to be a limited amount of credit,” he says. “Credit is free, there’s plenty to go around and attention to thanking people doesn’t take much time.” He also notes the importance of having a coordinator with varied skills.

Despite many challenges, KIDS COUNT has been able to actively involve a wide range of partners and to leverage impressive levels of activity with only modest funding. In 1997, its achievements were recognized by an award from the Peter F. Drucker Canadian Foundation for Nonprofit Innovation. “I have been involved in education for 30 years,” says Darrel Skidmore, “and in my view, nothing epitomizes the concept of building coalitions for children and families better than KIDS COUNT.”

*Ann Simpson*

#### **Endnote**

1. Organizations represented on Resource Steering Committee include: Children’s Aid Society; City of London Department of Community Services; Human Resources Development Canada; London and Middlesex Housing Authority; London Chamber of Commerce; London District Catholic School Board; London Investment in Education Council; London Police Force; London Public Libraries; London Transit Commission; Middlesex-London Health Unit; Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services; St. Joseph’s Health Centre; Scholar’s Choice; Thames Valley District Health Council; Thames Valley District School Board; United Way of London and Middlesex; University of Western Ontario Centre for the Study of Health and Well-Being.

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