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What's Black and White and Goes "Vroom, Vroom"? An Innovative Teaching Site

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Abstract: Using old school buses retrofitted into mobile classrooms and painted on the outside to resemble black and white Holstein cows, the Classroom on Wheels (COW) buses "vroom" around the Las Vegas valley offering parenting and preschool programs to at-risk families taught by Extension professionals. Many families lack the resources and transportation to drive their children to and from a preschool, so the COW buses deliver the preschool to the families.

Introduction

Using old school buses retrofitted into mobile classrooms and painted to resemble black and white Holstein cows, the Classroom on Wheels (COW) buses offer an innovative teaching site in Las Vegas, Nevada for Extension preschool and parenting programs (Figure 1). The seven buses travel to 13 different sites in Clark County. Reverting back to when Extension was first established and Extension agents took researched-based education to the farmers in the field (Mayberry 1991; Rasmussen, 1989), the COW bus method is letting Extension take education to parents in their own back yards.

Urging children, with the support of their parents, to attend preschool so that the children will acquire the necessary skills for success in kindergarten and beyond, the COW buses provide an avenue for prekindergarten education by traveling to different sites. Many parents do not have or cannot afford the transportation to drive their children to and from a preschool, so the COW buses deliver the school to the children and their parents. This presents an opportunity for Extension faculty and staff to address and present the Nevada Prekindergarten Standards to preschoolers and their parents as well as parenting classes for the children's parents.

Figure 1.

A Classroom on Wheels (COW) Bus That Is a Contained Classroom Delivers Educational Programs to Families in Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada



Background

The Classroom on Wheels program in Nevada was implemented in 1992, modeled after a 25-year-old preschool program in rural Tennessee. The Nevada program is supported by the Nevada State Board of Education and the Clark County School District. It has received operating grants from the United Way of Southern Nevada and the Children's Trust Fund. The COW bus program quickly became a pioneer in the child education field, establishing innovative programs for which there were no local models. It was the first in its geographical area to provide a preschool program for at-risk children. COW, with the assistance of Extension programming, provides free, bilingual (English and Spanish) class for at-risk families with children ages 3 years to 5 years in underserved communities throughout Clark County and Southern Nevada.

Curriculum and Methods

University of Nevada Cooperative Extension (UNCE) provided one faculty and four Community Based Instructors III (CBI III) to present educational programs on the COW buses. They used curriculum that had been developed by UNCE, the State of Nevada Department of Education, and Office of Early Care and Education for Pre-Kindergarten Standards to address the needs of parents and preschoolers.

The most important partnership in the program was with the Clark County School District (CCSD). Like many school districts, CCSD is often overwhelmed with requests from various organizations to present programs in the classrooms and cannot accommodate all the requests. After meeting with the CCSD Board of Directors and introducing the Prekindergarten Standards while emphasizing the importance of school readiness, Extension was given permission to work with the at-risk families via the Cow Busses. The goal of the program, using mainly family literacy (Weigel, Behal, & Martin, 2001; Russ et al., 2007), was to help children, with the assistance of their parents, to improve upon the following prekindergarten skills:

- Language skills
- Critical thinking skills
- Counting skills
- Social skills
- Pre-reading skills

- Creative thinking skills

- Perceptual skills

- Fine motor skills

- Gross motor skills

- Other life skills necessary for a healthy lifestyle

Workshops were presented in 1- or 2-hour segments on the buses 4 days a week. The buses traveled to various sites, according to a prearranged schedule, to different parts of the county so all children and parents had an equal opportunity to participate. Workshops included Fun to Play, Anger Management, Music is Magic, Follow My Lead, Family Storyteller/Libros de Ninos Para Familias Saludables, and five sections of Nevada's Prekindergarten standards.

Data of classes and contacts for the last three years are included in Table 1.

Table 1.
COW Bus Classes

Year	Number of Classes	Adult Attendees	Child Attendees
2005	179	2,866	3,123
2006	232	3,395	3,079
2007	262	3,787	3,884
Total	673	10,048	10,086

Evaluation

Evaluations were administered as pre and posttest as well as a 6-month follow-up telephone interview survey. Results included the following.

- A significant increase in parent/child bonding was accomplished.

- 96% of parents read to their child(ren) every day.

- 62% of parents took their child(ren) to a library

- 61% of parents increased their knowledge of using book-extended activities.
- Parents had a significant increase of knowledge of Prekindergarten Education Standards.
- Parents increased their knowledge of incorporating Prekindergarten Standards into everyday activities.

Conclusions

All education does not have to occur in a formal classroom setting. Needs of families at-risk can be addressed at inventive sites using non-traditional methods. Extension personnel need to be flexible and available to try something new and "out-of-the-box" and willing to be creative.

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