



**Leadership Asheville 29**  
**Leadership Learning Team (LLT) Project Description**  
Child Poverty Reduction Initiative

In Buncombe County, 1 in 4 children live in poverty, and half of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Children First/CIS is a nonprofit organization that advocates for Buncombe County's children while providing innovative programs for vulnerable children and engaging the community in creating a better future for all children. In 2008, Children First/CIS realized that addressing and eliminating child poverty had to move beyond the status quo, taking bold action to realize a future of opportunity and prosperity for all children.

Collaborative models in U.S. cities are revealing unprecedented success at overcoming entrenched social problems; showing that a similar approach is required to tackle the complex issue of child poverty. The Child Poverty Reduction Initiative began as a way to inspire and sustain a local movement to reduce the incidence of poverty and its impact on children in Buncombe County. Through education, collaboration, and public policy advocacy, the initiative seeks to find solutions to reverse the devastation caused by child poverty for both short and long-term success.

The LA 29 LLT project worked with Children First/CIS to gather community input and create a marketing/messaging campaign to raise awareness of the Child Poverty Reduction Initiative and its kickoff event in May of 2011. From October of 2010 to May of 2011, the LA 29 class immersed themselves in the issue of child poverty, conducting community focus groups and creating marketing products to promote the initiative.

During the first phase of the project, the LA 29 class split into eight small teams. Each team conducted a focus group session with representatives from sectors across the community, including healthcare, small business, education, public safety, environmental/conservation, mid-to-large business, arts/culture, and LA Program graduates. Each team gathered data on the diversity of opinions and views on child poverty in order to help steer Children First/CIS' efforts toward a solution. Participants in each of the focus groups shared and debated viewpoints about perceived causes of and resolutions for poverty, highlighting both misconceptions as well as deep insights. One area of common ground among the total 70 focus group participants was that children should never be blamed; they are innocent victims of poverty dependent upon their communities to help them find their way out.

The second deliverable of the LA 29 LLT project was the delivery of a message that dispels the myths of poverty, balances real life stories with concrete numbers, encourages people to attend the community summit, and ultimately gives concrete options for how to get involved in the Child Poverty Reduction Initiative. The following four communication vehicles were developed:

1. Radio Ads
  - a. [Disneyland](#)
  - b. [If She Didn't Have Me](#)
  - c. [It's a Crime](#)
  - d. [Trying to Find a Job](#)
  - e. [When I Grow Up](#)
2. [Newspaper Editorial](#)
3. [Viral Video](#)
4. Flyers, Banners, Signage
  - a. [Billboard](#)
  - b. [Rack Card](#)

Each of the communication vehicles synthesized poverty data and human stories in order to make a compelling case for action to attend the summit and get involved with the initiative. The marketing and messaging vehicles fostered awareness in audiences across the community about the impact of child poverty. Moreover, the LA 29 Class built a case for cross-sector collaboration for the initiative, spanning from government, business, faith, health, environment, arts/cultural and human services.

An excerpt from the May 8, 2011 editorial letter of the second deliverable emphasizes the importance of community collaboration in the initiative's success.

Child poverty is a community problem that requires a community solution. Each of us has talents that can prove helpful. In fact, the only chance for success is to mobilize a diverse and passionate volunteer workforce working collectively.

Children's poverty is not just a problem for schools, local nonprofits and government agencies to fight. No, the poverty of children in our communities impacts our entire society. A recent Princeton University study found that each high school dropout costs society \$260,000 on average. This reflects a loss of future earning potential that will never go to our local businesses or provide a sustainable tax base to provide basic services like education and transportation. As one focus group participant noted, "Child poverty robs our community of the ability to access their potential."

Helping students in poverty succeed in the same manner as those who are better off financially will take more than just a few local nonprofits and schools. It will take collaborative effort across all sectors. Nonprofits (and their funding sources) necessarily focus on one segment of a highly complex web of needed services. Too often, they unknowingly duplicate their efforts in a quest for funds while overlooking other viable community partners.

After 8 months of primary focus group research and producing marketing and messaging vehicles, the LA 29 LLT projects helped Children First/CIS bring more than 125 attendees together for a two-day event on May 19 and 20, 2011 titled "The Success Equation: Thriving Children = Families + Community + Commitment<sup>2</sup> ." The event connected concerned citizens and community leaders to imagine the best way to eliminate child poverty as well as inspire the collaborative and bold approach needed to implement the action plan over the next 5, 10, and 15 years. The summit also created opportunities for new voices to have input and to help make positive change for children.