

Building our Future: Supporting Community-Based Early Childhood Initiatives

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Building our Future: Supporting Community-Based Early Childhood Initiatives

Introduction

The first few years of a child's development matter for a lifetime. In these first few years of life, the brain grows rapidly and exhibits its greatest level of flexibility (Fox, Levitt, & Nelson, 2010). Early experiences influence the brain's development in positive ways that set a strong foundation for lifelong success, or in ways that negatively impact later development, health, and opportunities for success (Center for the Developing Child, 2010). A Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2014 brief describes research demonstrating the influence of early childhood experiences on health and well-being throughout life (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission to Build a Healthier America & Center for Social Disparities in Health). Young children's experiences, particularly the interactions they have with adults who care for them, build their brains and strengthen their cognitive, social, and emotional development (Levitt, 2016).

Although many children in the United States have the positive experiences needed for a good start in life, many other children do not. For example, 25 percent of U.S. children between birth and 5 years old live in poverty, while 9 percent of U.S. children under the age of 18 live in extreme poverty (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2016). Compared to the well-being of children from other countries, the United States was rated as one of the 4 worst countries out of 29 on several indicators of child well-being, such as health and safety and education (UNICEF, 2013).

With these two facts in hand—the first years of a child's life are particularly important and the well-being of many children in the United States is not good—community leaders across the country are coming together to change the lives of young children by strengthening the early childhood systems in their communities.

Child Trends, with the support of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the George Kaiser Family Foundation, invited a variety of stakeholders from across the country to attend a meeting in May 2016: *Building our Future: Strategies for Investing in Early Childhood*. The goal of the meeting was to learn more about various types of community-based early childhood initiatives and what is needed to sustain and spread early childhood initiatives in other communities. Over 150 individuals attended, including those from business, philanthropy, state and local government, community organizations, service providers, and research organizations. The meeting was unique in its focus on multiple areas of early childhood; diverse participants (e.g., leaders from business, philanthropy, and early childhood); the inclusion of site visits to Educare,¹ a high-quality early care and education program; and informal opportunities for interactions among speakers and participants.

Featured communities

The meeting focused on three particular communities that exemplify varying levels and definitions of *community*: Tulsa, Oklahoma; Durham, North Carolina; and the state of Oregon. Together, their early childhood initiatives demonstrated community-based coordination efforts at a program level, in a neighborhood, and throughout regions of a state. Each of these initiatives is described in more detail later in this report.

Tulsa, Oklahoma was featured because of its use of Educare and other health and family support services to support young children and their families across the city. As a partner in the convening, the George Kaiser Family Foundation in Tulsa served as host for the meeting and organized site visits to three different Educare early childhood programs.

Key lessons for supporting community-based early childhood initiatives

- It is important to use data to document progress toward goals and to guide decisions.
- The success of a community-based effort relies, in part, on the broader supports and services at a city, county, or state level.
- To be successful, an initiative has to meet the needs of the community.
- Sustaining a community-based initiative requires intentional, ongoing effort.
- Success requires use of evidence-based programs, innovation, and coordination.

¹ For more information about Educare, see <http://www.educareschools.org/>.

Durham, North Carolina was featured because of one neighborhood-based initiative that addresses health, family support, early learning, and education. The work of the East Durham Children’s Initiative (EDCI) served as an example of *community* in the narrowest sense—a 120-block area within the city of Durham. Durham Connects, a universal home visiting program, was featured as one program within the continuum of services available to families living in the EDCI Zone.

Oregon was the third community. In including Oregon, we expand the common notion of *community* by demonstrating the role of state government in supporting community-based early childhood initiatives through its regionally-based Early Learning Hubs. VROOM, a program to support parents’ engagement with their young children, was featured as one of the community-based services that the state is supporting.

Organization of this report

What follows are summaries of the community-based efforts in the three featured communities. We used multiple sources of information to develop the descriptions of community-based early childhood initiatives within the communities:

- we reviewed the panel presentations from the *Building our Future* meeting;
- we reviewed information available on websites and conducted follow-up interviews with key leaders from each of the three communities; and
- we used the ideas of early childhood, business, and philanthropy leaders for supporting and spreading community-based early childhood initiatives.

The report concludes with a summary of cross-cutting themes about community-based early childhood initiatives gleaned from the community examples and diverse stakeholders and experts.

Community-Based Early Childhood Initiatives

Tulsa Educare and community partnerships

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (Felitti et al., 1998) documented the relationship between harmful experiences in childhood and later life problems in health and well-being. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists high-quality early care and education and family support, including enhanced parenting skills, as two of the key strategies for preventing child abuse and neglect (Fortson, Klevens, Merrick, Gilbert, & Alexander, 2016). These two critical pieces of information—that early harmful experiences matter for a lifetime and that there are early childhood strategies that can help prevent some of these experiences—have informed the George Kaiser Family Foundation’s (GKFF) work to support young children and families in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

In 2004, GKFF established Tulsa Educare, Inc. as one of its major initiatives. Educare provides high-quality, evidenced-based care and education to infants and children and their families, serving children ages 6 weeks to 4 years.² Since then, GKFF has helped open two other Educare sites in Tulsa and has worked to expand services so that Educare not only provides high-quality early care and education but also health and family support services for children and families. These partnerships to support young children and their families are highlighted below.

We refer to the **early childhood system** in this report. We use the Early Childhood Systems Working Group (2011) definition of the term and its description of the core functions of the system:

An *early childhood system* includes the health, family support, and early learning and development services needed to ensure that children and their families thrive.

There are six core functions of an early childhood system: 1) define and coordinate leadership, 2) finance strategically, 3) enhance and align standards, 4) create and support improvement strategies, 5) ensure accountability, and 6) recruit and engage stakeholders.

² See <http://www.tulsaeducare.org/> for additional information.

Tulsa Educare: Services for children and families

Tulsa Educare has several partnerships, briefly described in this section, that have helped expand its services and support for children and families across the city (Tulsa Educare, 2015).

Educare Family Health Project. The Educare Family Health Project focuses on four main goals, ensuring that Educare families: have a medical provider, are enrolled in affordable health insurance, have access to health education, and have access to chronic disease prevention services and management. The project is supported by a number of local partners, including the GKFF.

Family advocates. Family advocates at Tulsa Educare engage families through regular home visits, in which they help with things such as parenting skills and stress management. The advocates also help support children’s development by strengthening the connection between the classroom and home experiences.

Beyond the Walls. Through the Beyond the Walls program, Tulsa Educare provides targeted services to families who are not currently enrolled in Educare. The Beyond the Walls team works with key parent advisors in the community (e.g., pediatricians, preschool teachers, and pastors) to provide parenting tips and strategies. They also host community events, like family reading nights.

Reach Out and Read. Tulsa Educare partners with Reach Out and Read,³ a nonprofit organization that combines health and early literacy promotion. Pediatricians who participate in Reach out and Read provide books to children during well-child exams and talk to parents about the importance of reading.

Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing. In 2014, GKFF partnered with Too Small to Fail to launch the Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing campaign. The mission of this public awareness campaign is to “make small moments big” by encouraging families to talk, read, or sing with their child during routine daily activities. For instance, leaders have placed prompts on equipment at local playgrounds with ideas about talking with children. Tulsa Educare promotes the Talking is Teaching campaign materials in all of its Beyond the Walls outreach.

Implementing and sustaining Tulsa Educare

Five organizations worked together to form Tulsa Educare: GKFF, Community Action Project, the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa, Tulsa Public Schools, and Family and Children’s Services (Tulsa Educare, 2011). Although private funds were used to build the Educare sites and offer some continuing support, Educare relies primarily on local, state, and federal funds to sustain its ongoing operations (e.g., Head Start, pre-K, child care subsidies).

Cross-sector collaboration has been critical to sustaining Tulsa Educare and the health and family support services it provides. GKFF has been a central leader in identifying and bringing together the necessary partners. They have also helped maintain the community’s shared focus on the importance of early care and education. GKFF recognizes that sustaining Educare and related services for young children and their families in Tulsa will require stronger coordination and the development of a continuum of services to support all families.

Evaluation

Researchers at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa, in partnership with the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, are conducting a multi-year evaluation of Educare.⁴ Tulsa and Oklahoma leaders are also working to strengthen their data systems to collect key pieces of information on an ongoing basis to help document the implementation and impact of various programs and services.

Advice for other communities

Focus on high quality. Programs for young children and their families have to be of high quality in order to produce results. Rather than focusing on what is doable with existing resources, communities should work to bring together the needed resources to fund high-quality programs. Communities should also ensure that they fund programs with evidence that they are effective, and do not fund programs that are not high-quality or cannot document their effectiveness.

³ See <http://www.reachoutandread.org/> for additional information.

⁴ See <http://eln.fpg.unc.edu/> for additional information about the Educare evaluation.

Make it as easy as possible for families to access services. Locating multiple services in the same place, as Tulsa Educare has done with some of its health and family support services, makes it easier for families to use the services. Also, Tulsa community representatives note that it is important to offer services in safe, convenient places that families regularly visit for other reasons.

Develop partnerships with public and private sector leaders. Funds from public and private sources are often needed to support early childhood initiatives, so leaders of community-based early childhood initiatives should work to develop and maintain strong partnerships with leaders in both the public and private sectors.

East Durham Children’s Initiative

The East Durham Children’s Initiative (EDCI) is a place-based initiative focused on a 120-block area in Durham, North Carolina. Established in 2010, EDCI’s vision is for all children in the EDCI Zone to graduate from high school ready for college or career. EDCI used a *hybrid* collective impact approach in its work. A collective impact approach brings partners together to identify and work toward shared goals, using an agreed-upon set of shared measures to monitor progress in reaching the goals.⁵ This approach requires an organization to serve as the *backbone* or *convener* of the group, and this is the role that EDCI plays. This is a hybrid model, though, because EDCI also provides some direct services when there is an important service gap that needs to be filled.

An array of partners and services

To accomplish its vision of having each child in the Zone ready for college or career by the time they graduate from high school, EDCI works with over 40 partners to ensure that a continuum of services are offered from birth through high school. Partners in implementing these more than 50 programs and services include, for instance, city and county government agencies (i.e., health, social services, public schools, parks and recreation), colleges and universities, and community and nonprofit organizations (e.g., Durham’s Partnership for Children, YMCA).

Some examples of EDCI’s early childhood services include Durham Connects, a universal nurse home-visiting program for all families of newborns in the community, and the EDCI LEAP Academy. The EDCI LEAP Academy is a half-day bilingual preschool program for children ages 3 to 5 who would not otherwise have a formal preschool experience before entering kindergarten.⁶ Additional early childhood supports include EDCI Early Childhood Parent Advocates, prioritized childcare subsidies, Healthy Families Durham home visits, story hour groups, and kindergarten readiness initiatives.

Initiating and sustaining EDCI

David Reese, president and CEO of EDCI, describes EDCI as “the perfect storm,” (in a good way)—a rare event where multiple pieces come together at the right time. There was strong community interest, spurred in part by a county commissioner who recognized the need and helped found EDCI. Durham Public Schools leadership also firmly supported the effort, and faculty from Duke University, located in Durham, served as thought partners and evaluators. EDCI leaders began their work by hosting focus groups with community members and families living in the Zone to talk about what they wanted for their children, the community’s strengths and challenges, and their dreams for future possibilities. EDCI leaders encouraged everyone to be innovative so that they were not just continuing programs and strategies that had been tried in the past and were unsuccessful.

EDCI primarily relies on foundations and individual donors for its funding; it does not receive any federal, state, or county funds at this time. However, the neighborhood-based initiative benefits from a strong early childhood system present across the entire city of Durham,⁷ as well as strong state programs for young children and their families. EDCI’s work is

⁵ See <http://collectiveimpactforum.org/what-collective-impact> for more information.

⁶ See www.edci.org/en/services/early-childhood for more information.

⁷ North Carolina has local early childhood partnerships (sometimes referred to as Smart Start) that work to strengthen the early childhood system for children birth to age 5 and their families. Durham’s Partnership for Children serves this system-building role for Durham County.

Durham Connects

Durham Connects is a universal nurse home-visiting program that offers health assessments to all Durham mothers and their newborns. In addition to health assessments, nurses have in-depth conversations with new parents and connect them with local resources. Durham Connects, a program of the Center for Child and Family Health, is supported by the Center for Child and Family Policy, Durham County Department of Social Services, and the Durham County Department of Public Health. Findings from a random assignment evaluation of Durham Connects suggest that the program has a positive impact on parenting practices, maternal mental health, the quality and safety of home environments, participation in high-quality child care, and decreased use of emergency health care for infants (Dodge & Goodman, 2012).

For more information, visit <https://www.durhamconnects.org/>.

layered on top of an existing early childhood system, meaning that sustaining the initiative requires sustaining the larger system as well as EDCI's neighborhood-focused work. For instance, Durham offers a range of health, family support, and early care and education services for young children and their families. The families in the Zone have access to these services plus the specialized programs developed through EDCI.

In thinking specifically about sustaining EDCI, flexibility and maintaining a long-range view are key. The team has spent time identifying and building community assets, developing innovative programs to meet families' needs, and tracking EDCI's progress. The community has changed over time—such as through a large influx of Latino families—which means the initiative has had to change to meet new needs. Having data to guide implementation and decision-making is also important, though some stakeholders have expected to see quick results. It is important to temper expectations so that everyone understands an initiative like EDCI is a complex system and part of a larger community change effort that will take years to demonstrate its effectiveness. EDCI leaders anticipate that using shared outcomes, defined measures, and data will show stakeholders that EDCI and its partners are tracking successes and challenges—and adjusting their work as needed to reach their ultimate goal of children being ready for college or career.

Evaluation and data-driven decision-making

In 2011, EDCI contracted with Duke University's Center for Child and Family Policy (CCFP) to conduct an evaluation of EDCI programs and services. CCFP helped establish systems to regularly collect data and also developed a plan to independently evaluate key aspects of the initiative. Although the Duke evaluation team has focused its initial efforts on evaluating implementation and outcomes of particular programs, they have also begun to assess the early impact of EDCI on child and community outcomes (Duke Center for Child and Family Policy, 2016). According to CCFP's Year 5 evaluation report, EDCI has engaged over 1,000 children and 700 families in its pipeline since 2011, 65 percent of whom are still enrolled in programs. The evaluators also note that greater participation in EDCI programs over time was associated with better academic outcomes (Duke Center for Child and Family Policy, 2017).



CCFP's evaluation report also describes how EDCI and its partners use data to inform continuous quality improvement and program design. For example, the team used data about program implementation, buy-in, and outcomes to inform their decision to discontinue a particular literacy program and explore alternative interventions. EDCI provides data to its partners so that everyone can track progress, celebrate successes, and reconsider options when there are failures or challenges.

Advice for other communities

EDCI leaders shared reflections and insights based on their experiences:

Community commitment comes first. Any type of change effort, including a neighborhood-based one, is a massive endeavor. Recognize that one group cannot do everything at once. The most important piece to address first is community input. Does the community want to be part of a neighborhood-based initiative? What do community members view as their strengths and successes on which to build? What do they see as the challenges to overcome? Developing a shared understanding between initiative leaders and community members takes time and ongoing communication. Community members must also be heavily involved in decisions about what particular services are provided and how they will be implemented. Success in a particular location does not necessarily translate into success everywhere. Community input is an important component for success for neighborhood-based initiatives.

“Think blue sky.” EDCI president David Reese encouraged stakeholders to dream big during planning. He believes that any community considering a neighborhood-based initiative like EDCI should do the same, without putting up parameters or limitations.

Embrace innovation. Community stakeholders may identify challenges or gaps in services. If the old strategies and programs have not demonstrated success, try something new. If a new service or support is desired but not available, work with partners to create it. For example, EDCI observed that some families in the Zone were eligible for—but not receiving—subsidies to help cover the costs of child care. One of EDCI's partners, Durham County Department of Social

Services, which oversees several subsidies in the community, decided to prioritize child care subsidies for Zone families. In another instance, EDCI worked with the Durham Parks and Recreation Department to use one of its buildings to house a preschool program during the school year—at no cost to EDCI (the building is only used during the summer months by the city).

Identify outcomes and measure progress. Early on, identify goals or intended outcomes and the data to measure progress in reaching those outcomes. If the data are not currently collected or available, begin developing systems to gather the information in the future. Share data regularly with partners and use it to inform decisions about whether to continue, revise, or stop particular programs or efforts.

Partner with parents. Every parent wants his or her child to succeed, though their definition of success may vary from that of initiative leaders. Initiatives are more likely to succeed if they meaningfully partner with families to support their goals as parents and support them in advocating for their child’s needs.

Early Learning Hubs in Oregon

In 2013, Oregon established 16 regional Early Learning (EL) Hubs, bringing together multiple community partners to address three main goals related to school readiness: 1) create an early childhood system that is aligned, coordinated, and family-centered; 2) ensure children arrive at school ready to succeed; and 3) ensure Oregon’s young children live in families that are healthy, stable, and attached (Oregon Early Learning Council Strategic Plan, 2016). The EL Hubs use a collective impact approach, with the Hub serving as the backbone organization that supports collaboration of partners from multiple sectors in the community, rather than providing any direct services (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Oregon demonstrates the important role that state government plays in supporting community-based early childhood initiatives, and we highlight, in this report, their role in supporting local EL Hubs. We gathered information from state leaders in the Early Learning Division as well as the executive director of the Marion & Polk Hub to learn more about the work of the Hub, the connections between the state and smaller communities, and lessons learned from both the state and local perspectives.

Early Learning Hub partners

In creating the EL Hubs, Oregon acknowledged that there are many great services currently available to children and families and that building a collaborative network focused on a shared set of goals could improve the impact of the individual services. The state required each Hub to bring together partners from five different community sectors: health, human services, K-12 public education, early childhood, and the business sector. The state also encouraged each Hub to include community leaders, such as elected officials or other individuals who are well-known in the community. The EL Hubs bring the partners together to develop and implement a community plan related to school readiness. Each EL Hub employs at least one staff person and manages multiple state funding streams.

The Marion & Polk EL Hub serves as the connecting Hub for Marion and Polk counties. According to Lisa Harnisch, its executive director, the Hub has partnered with over 30 local agencies to “coordinate, collaborate, and catalyze action” to meet their shared goals. As part of their work, they have developed a website to help connect families with various local services. They have also partnered with Vroom (see text box) to help provide consistent messages for families about how to support their child’s development. The consistent messages are included in materials, activity suggestions for families, and a mobile app for families.

As a connecting organization, the Marion & Polk EL Hub has worked to strengthen relationships among community partners and to find ways of improving service coordination. As one example, the health professionals and early care and education professionals who are part of the collaborative partnership have each learned more about the work and services offered by the other. Through their discussions, the health professionals learned that many early care and

Vroom

Vroom is a national initiative, funded by the Bezos Family Foundation, that focuses on empowering parents to use everyday moments as “brain-building” moments. Vroom is based on research suggesting that rich interactions in early childhood are key to healthy brain development. Vroom partners with community-based “trusted messengers” who regularly interact with young children and their families to encourage interactions with their children. They also offer providers resources to share with families. *Daily Vroom* is a personalized app for families that offers activity suggestions with supporting research.

For more information, visit <http://bezosfamilyfoundation.org/vroom>.

education providers regularly conduct developmental screenings of children. The two groups worked together to create a mechanism that allows screening information from early care and education providers to be appropriately shared with medical providers to better serve children.

Initiating and sustaining EL Hubs

The Early Learning Hubs were established in state legislation, and the particular communities were selected through a competitive grant process. The Hubs receive state dollars (and previously some federal funds from the Early Learning Challenge grant).

Improving administrative efficiency and effectiveness were two reasons for moving to a Hub structure. Before the Hubs, funding was distributed to Commissions in each of Oregon's 36 counties. Because some counties are very rural and include few children, state leaders thought that it would be more administratively efficient to move to a regional Hub approach. Commissions also varied widely from county to county in their goals and activities. As part of moving to a regional Hub approach, the state identified a few specific goals for all Hubs to address and has worked to identify a few common metrics to track Hub progress over time.

The Oregon Early Learning Division has implemented various structures to support the EL Hubs. They have hired four regional facilitators to help hubs with their work and to strengthen communication between the state and local communities. They have also hosted a learning collaborative meeting to bring all of the Hub leaders together twice a year. The agenda is developed jointly by state and local leaders to ensure that it meets everyone's needs. Additionally, the Early Learning Division holds monthly webinars to provide information and updates to Hubs. Finally, Hubs within each of the four regions meet twice a year.

The Oregon leaders we talked to noted several factors, listed below, as being important for the long-term sustainability of the Early Learning Hubs:

- **Funding.** EL Hubs primarily rely on state funds, so maintaining state funding is critical to their long-term sustainability.
- **Community commitment.** Sustainability also requires a continued commitment among community members in striving to reach the three overarching goals, and an interest in working together.
- **Communication.** At the state level, Sue Parrish from the Early Learning Division noted the importance of “maintaining the integrity and vibrancy of the communication and network of the Hubs” in sustaining the work. Communications between the Hubs and state leaders as well as among the Hubs is critical to ensuring long-term success.
- **Staffing.** Funds specifically to support Hub staff are also needed. Having only one staff person may not be enough to ensure that the Hub is functioning well, particularly because it may be very difficult for one person to have the diverse set of skills needed for a Hub to be successful (e.g., manage budgets, encourage others' ideas versus generating their own solutions, and help partners stay focused on the overarching goals).
- **Collaborative leadership.** Collaborative leadership is important at both the state and local levels to ensure that the perspectives of different stakeholders are considered. Such leadership also encourages various agencies and organizations to work together and problem-solve productively to accomplish their shared goals. At the Hub level, a collaborative leader must also know when to lead and when to let others lead. She or he must also develop and maintain strong relationships with each partner and foster similarly strong relationships among the various partners. Oregon has offered leadership institutes to support the development of collaborative leadership skills and is developing an orientation for all new EL Hub leaders. At the state level, leadership is important for supporting state-level changes that better align and coordinate the early childhood system and respond to the challenges faced by the EL Hubs.



Evaluation

Oregon leaders noted the importance of evaluating the impact of the Early Learning Hubs in reaching the three overarching goals related to school readiness. They have developed metrics (e.g., measuring the degree to which each Hub has contributed to an increase in percent of children who receive a developmental screen before 3 years old) to track over time and continue to review and refine these metrics (Early Learning Division of Oregon, 2015). Each EL Hub completes a quarterly report that describes the work they are doing, using the various funding streams. Once a year, Hubs complete an annual report that includes a combination of state-level data and self-reported information to describe their progress in meeting the common metrics.

Advice for other communities

Start somewhere, not everywhere. Coordinating and aligning the early childhood system is a major effort. Oregon leaders encourage others to think carefully about priorities and needs to determine the starting point—and to start with one thing, not everything. The *one thing*, though, might vary from community to community based on the unique needs of each community.

Address some state-level coordination and alignment issues before asking locals to do it. State agencies tend to be slower at changing than local community agencies. Oregon leaders noted that, ideally, the state would address a few state-level coordination issues that would make it easier for local communities to coordinate and align their work. This could be something as simple as coordinating the release of requests for proposals for various funding opportunities so that local communities would not have to work on multiple proposals at the same time.

Be transparent about expectations. This seems especially important for an effort like Oregon's, in which the state is supporting local, grassroots efforts. State leaders should be very clear about their expectations for local efforts (e.g., work must focus on the three overarching goals, report on particular data elements annually to track progress) and equally clear about the areas in which local leaders have the flexibility to make their own decisions.

Stay focused on the big goals. It is easy to focus on the day-to-day issues at hand and lose focus on the big picture. Regularly remind partners of the overarching shared goals that drive the work, and frequently review and revisit data to ensure that you are making progress toward those goals.

Take the time to listen. Ask questions of community stakeholders and partners and listen to what they have to say. In a collective impact model, listening is a particularly important role for the convener organization to play to facilitate strong collaboration, recognize concerns, and highlight possible solutions.

Build a strong communication structure. State-local efforts like Oregon's Early Learning Hub initiative require strong communication structures. Structures need to be in place to support various types of communication: a) communication among state agencies and division, b) communication between state leaders and EL Hub leaders, and c) communication among EL Hub partners. Ideally, these structures would be developed and in place before the initiative is implemented.

Consider various factors when determine the funding allocation. Community needs vary, and a straightforward funding formula like a per-child cost may not always work equally well for every community. In Oregon, for instance, there are a few counties where most of the young children and their families reside. Other, rural counties may have only a few children (e.g., less than 1,000) dispersed across a wide geographical setting. The amount of funding need to support services for children in an urban setting may not be the same amount needed to support services in a very rural setting. Home visitors, for instance, have to travel further to visit families and there may be fewer child care centers in rural areas compared to more densely populated areas of the state. If possible, consider flexible funding allocation models to appropriately address the different needs of communities.

Considerations for Supporting and Spreading Community-Based Initiatives

The closing session for the *Building our Future* meeting included a panel of stakeholders from the business community, state governments, and the media, who were asked to reflect upon the information they had heard during the meeting and their own experiences to provide insight on the conditions that are critical to support, sustain, and spread early childhood initiatives. Below is a summary of the key points from these important stakeholders, which are further exemplified in the case study examples from Tulsa, Durham, and Oregon.

Engage diverse community-level stakeholders, especially families, in developing a unified vision

Community coalitions may have the ability to solve their own problems, but community leaders should first strive to identify the most pressing needs. The initiative should aim to fix something about which people are deeply concerned. Getting a diverse group of community stakeholders together to define and address critical issues is what makes for a successful and sustainable early childhood initiative. It is especially important to include families meaningfully throughout the planning and implementation of an initiative, to ensure that their needs and interests are considered. Both Durham and Oregon leaders talked about the importance of bringing together a wide array of community partners, with the East Durham Children’s Initiative noting that it began its work by talking with families and community members about their dreams and wishes for their children.



Have a clear focus and plan

The diverse perspectives of stakeholders should be integrated into a common early childhood focus for the community or state. It is important that the initiative have clear goals and a strategic plan so that people understand how the pieces fit together and can see the “road map” for achieving the common goals.

Use research and data

Research and data are critical for developing, implementing, sustaining, and spreading community-based early childhood initiatives. It is important that solid research on the importance of early childhood be the foundation of any early childhood initiative or policy. For example, Dr. Pat Levitt, co-scientific director of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, has discussed the concept of “serve and return,”⁸ which highlights the importance of reciprocal interactions in the development of infants’ brain circuitry and ultimately in the development of constructive stress responses, social competency, and communication. This type of research can galvanize people to take action.

Research is also needed when selecting the particular programs to include in the initiative. Ideally, communities should identify and consider for inclusion programs with the strongest research evidence of their effectiveness. Finally, data and research are needed to help community leaders understand the implementation and success of the particular components of their initiative. As the EDCI case study demonstrated, with data in hand about the programs and initiative, leaders are better able to make data-based decisions about the ongoing work.

Use the media and public awareness campaigns

Even if a community has engaged diverse stakeholders and insured their initiative is research-informed, the initiative still may not be sustained, or expanded, if others do not know about it. David Bornstein—a panelist and journalist with *The New York Times* as well as co-founder of Solutions Journalism Network—noted that ideas do not diffuse themselves naturally. Media can be critical in spreading and sustaining early childhood initiatives by talking about the evidence and

⁸ For more information, see <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/>.

sharing stories. In Bornstein’s view, journalism is like “bee pollination for people to learn from each other” about things that are happening in a nearby community or in a different state. Stories in the media can create the conditions to allow ideas to spread by “making visible what’s possible.”

Media can also be useful to increase public awareness of key issues. Both Tulsa and Oregon rely on public awareness campaigns as part of their initiative. Tulsa leaders use the Talk Sing Read media campaign to encourage families to talk with their children. Oregon uses Vroom to support brain-building interactions between parents and children. Community or statewide efforts can help improve the public’s understanding of the importance of early childhood and how adults can positively impact children’s development. The initiative is likely to have greater support if more people in the community understand the importance of the work.

Engage business leaders

Business leaders can be critical in spreading support for community-based early childhood efforts. Business leaders lend their support not only by providing critical funding to an early childhood initiative, but also by being important messengers to other business leaders in the community about the importance of early childhood. Chet Cadieux, a Tulsa native and the chairman and CEO of QuikTrip Corporation, noted that business leaders are impressed when a respected colleague takes valuable time to talk with them about what they should consider to be a priority for their community. The trick, he says, is figuring out “what’s going to cut through the noise” to focus attention on early childhood and convince others that early childhood investments should be a priority among the many causes that are jockeying for potential community funders’ attention.

Business leaders can also have wide-ranging influence on community-based and statewide initiatives through their communications with policymakers. Specifically, business leaders can help advocate for public policy and public funding of early childhood initiatives by talking with legislators and other key decision-makers. They can also help by being early adopters of best practices. Sara Watson, a *Building our Future* panelist and global director of ReadyNation at Council for a Strong America, noted Home Depot as an early adopter when they began reminding employees of the importance of reading to young children on their employee website. Through financial support, advocacy, and their own practices, business leaders can help spread successful early childhood initiatives.

Target the message

The message matters. The most effective message is one that is targeted to a particular individual or stakeholder group. Chet Cadieux noted that, for him, the early childhood message about stopping the cycle of poverty was convincing. “You can either keep writing checks your whole life to multiple causes,” he said, “or you can invest in the only thing that will deliver the long-term outcomes.” While focusing on the long-term benefits may be useful, it may also be helpful to provide data about short-term benefits.

The messenger also matters. The person delivering the message needs to do so in a convincing and charismatic way. The messenger should be concise, able to deliver the key message in 5 to 30 minutes and be clear about the request.

Secure funding

Political will and social capital are both important, but funding is absolutely necessary to the success of a community-based initiative. While local business leaders can do their part in financially supporting such efforts, state government also has a role to play in enabling communities to be successful in solving community-based problems. Karen Ponder, an early childhood consultant who has worked with several community-based early childhood initiatives, noted that many local initiatives begin as the result of a small grant. Sustaining an initiative beyond a one-time grant, though, requires ongoing support (e.g., staff, data systems to track progress), possibly from state funding. Building a network of support from the state level down to the community and even program levels is critical to the success of a community-based initiative. For example, the neighborhood-based East Durham Children’s Initiative recognizes the importance of the strong early childhood system in Durham to which it can add its own layer of services. Having multiple high-quality early care and education programs in the community, for example, makes it easier for them ensure that all children in the Zone have access to high-quality learning opportunities. Because other resources have been used to support high-quality programs, EDCI can use its funds for other efforts. As another example, CAP Tulsa received start-up funds from the George Kaiser Family Foundation but now relies primarily on state and federal funds to sustain the program.

Dedicate staff

Sustaining an initiative requires paid staff who are dedicated to working on the initiative. Karen Ponder stressed that an initiative will not sustain itself over time unless you have dedicated, paid leaders and staff who will coordinate the effort and solve problems. “Spreading community-based initiatives is not volunteer work,” she said. Oregon leaders also highlighted the importance of having enough staff with the right skills to effectively lead the Early Learning Hubs.

Marshall state and national networks

Finally, the role of large networks at state or national levels is as an important support for community-based early childhood initiatives. Some community coalitions start with philanthropic funds but have no ongoing support for long-term sustainability. Karen Ponder recommended having a state-level entity whose job is to support community-level success and track statewide progress. Oregon is a prime example of how a state organization, the Office of Early Learning, can support local early childhood community efforts by identifying funds and improving state-level policies and procedures.

Sara Watson from ReadyNation noted that every major sector of our society (e.g., banks, agriculture) has large national and/or state infrastructure because we understand that these sectors are important to our overall economy. We need similar systems to support early childhood, because early childhood is also important for our economic growth and well-being as a nation. Analyses by the Partnership for America’s Economic Success (2010; now called ReadyNation) estimated that 2.9 percent of gross domestic product⁹ (GDP) is devoted to raising young children from birth to age 5 (this includes the cost of housing, health care, and early care and education). This means that the early childhood sector represents about the same proportion of GDP as transportation or utilities. The most recent annual report of the Council of Economic Advisors provides a summary of the research that shows the critical importance of investments made in the years before children enter school and notes that “the benefits of early investment accrue not only to individual children and their families, but also to society. The public benefits include: higher tax revenue from a more productive workforce; lower rates of criminal activity; reduced inequality; and reductions in public spending on medical care, remedial education, incarceration, and transfer programs” (Council of Economic Advisors, 2016, p. 154). Given such strong and cumulative evidence of the benefits on early investments, state and national early childhood networks should support early childhood initiatives at the national, state and local levels.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Although each community is unique and approached its work differently, we found a few cross-cutting themes in their work and in panelists’ comments.

It is important to use data to document progress toward goals and to guide decisions. Leaders from every community talked about the importance of having clear goals and outcomes, as well as of gathering data to determine whether progress is being made. Some communities had data available, whereas other communities are developing the systems needed to gather the data.

The success of a community-based effort relies, in part, on the broader supports and services at a city, county, or state level. Communities (e.g., neighborhoods, cities) exist within larger ecosystems (e.g., counties, states) and can build on the existing efforts of the larger ecosystem. For instance, a neighborhood-based effort is more likely to be able to help families of children at risk for later school failure enroll in high-quality early care and education programs if there are enough high-quality programs and adequate child care subsidy resources in the county to meet the needs of these families.



⁹ The gross domestic product reflects the national value of goods and services and is often used to reflect the health of an economy.

To be successful, an initiative has to meet the needs of the community. Each community has its own strengths and challenges. What works for one community may not work for another. Thus, early childhood initiatives that are grounded in the community must include families and community leaders.

Sustaining a community-based initiative requires intentional, ongoing effort. Sustainability requires aligning the effort with broader goals of the community, city, county, region, or state. It also requires building a coalition of leaders, partners, businesses, and families to guide the work and communicate its importance. (See Ponder 2015 for more on sustaining local early childhood initiatives.)

Success includes evidence-based programs, innovation, and coordination. To reach the outcomes of interest, these communities implemented evidence-based programs whenever possible, created new strategies to fill gaps when needed, and coordinated across various programs. A collection of programs will not necessarily lead to success; coordination among the programs and partners is important to ensure that everyone remains focused on the shared goals and understands how their particular piece of the work affects others' work.

Final Considerations

In his closing remarks at the *Building our Future* meeting, James S. Marks, executive vice president of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and former assistant surgeon general and director of the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion at CDC, expressed a sense of urgency that we act now. “The science is clear, and the need is great,” he said. “We may not know all we wish we knew but we need to act now. If we wait 5 years, we lose a generation.”

The *Building our Future* meeting was unique in bringing together a range of stakeholders (e.g., business, philanthropy, early childhood) to discuss how best to support community-based early childhood initiatives. We hope that the examples of Durham, Tulsa, and Oregon help other communities strengthen their early childhood systems. The advice of business and state and national leaders can help communities engage a broader group in this work. Finally, the lessons relayed in this report are intended as guidance for communities to consider as they do their work, recognizing that because communities differ, not all strategies will apply to all communities.



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