



BRIEF

Coalition-Building, Fast and Slow: The Early Childhood Alliance of Onondaga County



In *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman describes how these two speeds or modes of thought work together to help humans make sense of the world. In coalition-building, there is also value in going both fast and slow: the energy that comes from programmatic work and mobilizing existing networks can fuel the slower, more difficult work of structural change, equity, and broadening the range of stakeholders.

In this brief, we see how the Early Childhood Alliance (ECA) of Onondaga County both capitalized on early momentum to quickly unroll a diverse menu of programs, and also started to undertake the slow, difficult work of making sure their efforts include and reflect the people these programs seek to help.

Introduction

As Nancy Eaton recounts, you could see it in people’s faces. The Onondaga Citizen’s League had just released its 2014 report, and the news was dire: only 26 percent of third graders in the county were reading on grade level.¹ In the city of Syracuse, less than 10 percent of students were performing at grade level.²

Eaton, who is now the president of the United Way, which serves as the fiscal agent for the ECA, remembers that afterwards, there was “quite an awareness locally

that more and more families were struggling... more and more kids were coming to school and they just weren’t prepared to succeed.”

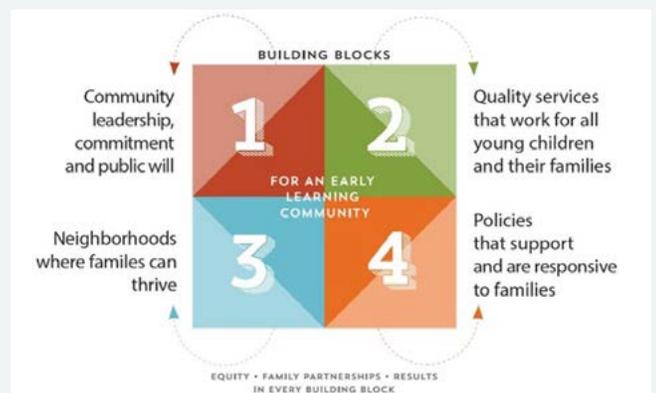
The community leaders, business executives, and county government of Onondaga County took action, forming the Early Childhood Alliance, a coalition of stakeholders dedicated to improving outcomes for young children and their families in Onondaga County. Five years later, the ECA can point to an increased portfolio of programs that support families and early childhood well-being; a burgeoning community involvement program; a robust, bipartisan coalition of stakeholders; and early, modest improvements in third grade reading levels and kindergarten readiness.³

Why did so many different people come together to donate “time, talent, and treasure” to the ECA? Who was invited to the table, and why did they stay? This report will look at the circumstances and conditions that facilitated such rapid coalition-building, seeking to illuminate how one community built their first Building Block: *community leadership, commitment, and public will make early childhood a priority.*

Supporting young children by becoming an “Early Learning Community”

As part of the [Early Learning Nation](#) initiative, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) and the National League of Cities have worked with community representatives to define an “Early Learning Community” as a place where families have all the opportunities and supports they need to nurture and promote their children’s early learning and healthy development. An Early Learning Community is made up of four building blocks (shown on the right), each pointing toward strategies communities can enact to improve how well they support young children’s early learning and development.

Learn more in the [Early Learning Community Action Guide](#) and other resources, and start using the [Early Learning Community Progress Rating Tool](#) to assess your community’s current work and build an Early Learning Community Action Plan.



Part One: Fast

Data as a Wake-Up Call: This Affects Everyone

Crucially, the data in the Onondaga Citizens League Report revealed that low reading scores and school readiness affected all parts of the county. As Peter Dunn, President & CEO of the Central New York Community Foundation, recalls, the report “demonstrated...that suburban schools were hardly better than the city schools.” Although unfortunate, this was key, politically, because it told everyone that here was an opportunity to “lift all boats.”

Like elsewhere in the U.S., there can be a divide in Onondaga—racial, economic, and political—between the city and the rest of the county. Suburban and rural citizens, along with their elected officials, can be reluctant to address problems perceived as solely “urban,” with all of the race and class connotations often carried by that term. But Onondaga’s poverty is not only urban: United Way characterizes a large portion of the population, evenly spread through the county, as ALICE: Assets Limited, Income Constrained, but Employed—that is to say, one paycheck away from financial disaster.

Much later, when the new County Executive, Ryan McMahon, was urging his legislators to support funding for the ECA’s programs, it helped immensely that they weren’t only focused on the city. “Every legislator could point to something that would happen in their own district,” he said. “The need for investment was across the board.”

Using data to underscore that the need for investment in early childhood crossed geographic, racial, and socio-economic boundaries engendered an understanding that this was a collective problem that must be addressed together.

Optimistic Beginnings

But it takes more than bad news to make people band together. In Onondaga, talented leaders, a tight web of connections, and earlier success with improving graduation rates all meant that the various players assembled for early ECA meetings with a healthy dose of optimism.

One of the greatest strengths of Onondaga County was its close-knit network of agency leaders. Kara

Williams of the Allyn Family Foundation says, “we’re a small enough community that most of these players already know each other...There’s a long history of established relationships.” This network also had its disadvantages, particularly when it came to the ECA’s inclusivity and diversity initiatives, as detailed below.



Furthermore, many local foundations and non-profits were already working on education and related fields, leading to a sense of common interests. There was comfort with alliances, too, as evidenced by earlier Onondaga networks around literacy, lead-free homes, workforce development, and homelessness.

The charisma and social capital of the ECA’s leaders was also key for making people want to join the Alliance. “Laurie [Black] had the drive,” Lori Schakow, the Executive Director of Child Care Solutions, a Child Care Resource and Referral agency (CCR&R), who sits on the ECA Leadership Council, says of Black.

“She had some great connections with the right people, and where she didn’t have the connections, she found the ways to make them.” Bethany Creaser of Catholic Charities, who has served on many ECA committees, calls Black’s leadership “exceptional” and key in engendering the passion and natural collaboration essential to the Council’s success.

Black, in turn, credits Meg O’Connell, the Executive Director for the Allyn Family Foundation and chair of the ECA. “Meg brings people to the table,” she says. Lisa Fasolo Frishman, a freelance consultant who sits on the leadership council, praises O’Connell’s vision. “Meg, Kara [Williams], and Laurie are the key players,” Frishman says. “They built a movement.”

Building Fast and Slow

But how do you build a movement? More specifically, how do you build a cross-sector coalition, where business executives, early childhood experts, the child health care community, service providers, and county legislators all stay at the table?

Coalition-building, as Black sees it, is a balancing act. Some groups get stuck on making very visible, yet incremental, improvements, and others endlessly debate larger policy and systems change without ever moving into action. As Black led the ECA through its first five years, she sought to integrate programs and public relations campaigns with the slower work of structural and policy change—always understanding that people need “to see movement and progress” if they are going to keep giving their time and energy.

Those on the foundation and non-profit side are more accustomed to moving slowly. After the OCL’s report, O’Connell and the Syracuse 2020 Education Committee, a Civic Leadership Committee that O’Connell chaired, and a partner in the OCL study, spent a full year delving into the data more closely and fortifying relationships among stakeholders in order to launch the new ECA in 2015. As Schakow recalls, “It was a lot of relationship-building up front, and helping people understand the connections you’re talking about.” Trust is essential, she says, and trust takes time. That first year of the ECA, there were no outcomes, only discussion about terms and goals.

Gina Iliev, who leads the ECA’s work on parent and community engagement, states that she doesn’t expect her work to show a return on investments for another five years. “You have to go slow, have these conversations, [and] expand what people mean by poverty,” she says; “If we’re going to build a house, we want to put the basement in first, so we don’t have to go back and do it later.”

However, in these early years, the ECA also developed a public awareness campaign. They urged parents to talk, read, and sing daily to their children, using the national model ‘Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing.’

When this program caught fire, it made it easier to take on bigger, longer projects. Since then, the ECA has launched Help Me Grow, ParentChild+, a new Child Care Quality Improvement pilot, a new strategy aimed at unintended pregnancy called “Layla’s Got You,” and a new initiative aimed at families called, “Parents & Communities THRIVE”—all funded by a diverse array of philanthropic partners.

“Tackle something easy first,” Schakow urges, “something easy to yield results.” Dr. Steven Blatt, the Director of Upstate Medical University’s Pediatric and Adolescent Center and co-chair of the Onondaga County Pediatric Society, agrees, recalling how he was won over by the ECA when he saw how something as simple as sharing his center’s data aided the ECA in their work.

Dunn concurs, saying that the early success of “Talking is Teaching” created a “self-generating flywheel.” Suddenly, it became much easier to see the ECA as a mechanism to host different scopes of work. Crucially, this early success also made the ECA more attractive to the business community.



“Mission with a Margin:” Engaging the Business Community

“If there’s anything that really shook me,” Steve Gorczynski, the Business Council Chair and Administrative Vice-President at M&T Bank, recounts, it was realizing that third grade reading outcomes are correlated with adult outcomes, and that too many students in Onondaga County were not on the right trajectory to a thriving adulthood. Reading the Onondaga Citizen League’s report, Gorczynski thought, “This is not the community in which I want to live.”

M&T Bank has a long history of sitting on community boards and supporting local non-profits. There is high demand for their help, and Gorczynski must be discerning about where he puts his energy; however, swayed by scientific evidence that shows the overwhelming importance of the first five years of life, and motivated by evidence that early interventions often paid for themselves, Gorczynski agreed to chair the ECA's Business Council.

The strong economy of the 2010's also meant that Central New York employers were confronting perennial labor shortages, and business leaders recognized that investing in early childhood would help them hire the employees they needed down the road. As Schakow notes, "Business leaders are starting to recognize the impact of not getting kids off to the right start. It has an impact on, later on, finding employees."

This labor shortage also led to another alignment of interest between the business and child care sector. Even before COVID shone a light on the importance of child care for the economy, business leaders recognized that employees, especially those asked to fulfill flexible shift work, needed access to high-quality, affordable child care.

Business leaders, then, offer an important perspective on pursuing "a mission with a margin," as Gorczynski says. However, perhaps their most important contribution to the ECA has been their advocacy with the county government and representatives of the local New York State delegation.

The Road to Public Funding

McMahon, the County Executive for Onondaga since 2018, has centered his agenda around PIE: addressing Poverty, Infrastructure, and Economic Development. Early Childhood is a prominent pillar of the poverty program: in 2019, he dedicated public funds to the ECA for the first time; in 2020, he more than doubled the funding to \$1.5 million to continue and expand upon the ECA's early childhood programs and initiatives.

McMahon used a lot of his political capital to secure this funding. When asked why, McMahon mentions the business community's support, saying, "Recognition from the private sector brings credibility with politicians." Of course, it was not only the advocacy of the business community that influenced McMahon. He is also the father of young

children and seeing the positive effects of the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, which provides a book each month to zero to five year-old children in participating communities, convinced him that meaningful, relatively quick change was possible.

There was one other significant factor in McMahon's decision to fund this work: the presence of dedicated funding from foundations and other sources. Black says that it was not a deliberate choice to wait for public funding, but clearly finding a fiscal home and dedicated funding stream for the ECA and her position bought credibility. For instance, in the case of ParentChild+, the ECA's home visiting program, there was some anxiety within the ECA and at the Allyn Foundation about how to fund the two-year, twice-weekly model they had chosen. County representatives worried they'd be responsible for funding. Sensitive to this, the ECA found a "hodgepodge" of funding sources, which reassured the county, who then came through with their own money.

Another key source of government support came from the public servants behind the scenes, who make lots of decisions about how funding is deployed and how programs and services are delivered. With the Deputy County Executive's active engagement in the leadership of the ECA from the beginning, it soon became clear to the Commissioners of Health, Social Services and the Department of Children & Family Services, as well as to their entire workforces, that the County was "all-in" on supporting the work of the ECA. Having access to top leadership in the County has been critical to Black's ability to get things done. She reflects, "I can't overstate how incredibly important it is to have the County leadership a hundred percent behind this work. It gives me access to data, to expertise, and to the partners to do the work."

McMahon is proving himself to be a stalwart champion of the ECA. Facing an \$80 million shortfall in the 2021 budget, McMahon nonetheless didn't cut any ECA funds. Looking to the years ahead, he expects to increase funding for the ECA—if the data backs up its efficacy. Here too, we see the tension between going fast and slow: systems change can take years, if not decades, but elected officials need to show results to their voters every four years.

Part Two: Slow

Recognizing the Need for Equity

The ECA is rightly proud of its coalition of service providers, local foundations, the United Way, and business and government leaders. However, the ECA has also come to understand that as strong as this coalition is, it is also primarily White and professional, and thus does not fully reflect the people of Onondaga County.

Everyone involved in the ECA, from the County Executive to the funders to Laurie Black, feels strongly that diversity, inclusion, and racial equity must be top priorities for the ECA, an understanding that the events of 2020 only accelerated. However, Black, who has been influenced by her involvement with other early childhood leaders through networks convened by CSSP, acknowledges that the ECA still has far to go with equity. “We haven’t given this the priority it deserves nor built the staff capacity needed for change,” she says. However, she is dedicated to changing this. To her, incorporating racial equity into the ECA is one of the main tasks of the next five years.

Earlier, we saw that part of what allowed the ECA’s rapid formation was the close-knit network of leaders in Onondaga County. However, almost everyone in this network was White.

If she could do it again, Black would definitely do it differently. “Looking back, we should have expanded the definition of leadership,” she says. But now she’s committed to diversifying the leadership council as part of a broader equity action plan.

Obstacles to Tackling Systemic Change

Too often, Frishman and her colleague, Gina Iliev, former Pritzker Fellow and Director of the ECA’s THRIVE initiative, feel that there is a tendency among organizations to focus on programmatic initiatives—that are often aimed at changing parent behavior—rather than spend energy on addressing systemic inequities. As Iliev sees it, most parents want to read to their children, but two hours on the bus to head home from work cuts into family time. Rather than urging books on parents, she wonders: why not fix the bus system?



As Frishman says, “How do we train the people in positions of power to understand the decisions they make in funding and processes prevent the people receiving services from thriving? People in decision-making positions often do not understand and cannot empathize with people they serve because they don’t have first-hand experience navigating the systems and don’t see the roadblocks.”

In Syracuse, as in so many other American cities, the maps detailing redlining, lead poisoning, low education scores, and eminent domain evictions all overlap. The same historically Black neighborhood, thriving in the 1950s and early ‘60s, has been targeted again and again, carved into pieces by highways and other “urban renewal” projects, perennially neglected, or worse.⁴

Addressing the structural racism in Onondaga means, in part, addressing this history of broken trust and outright racism. Communities of color might be wary of collaborating with White-led organizations. Iliev urges collaborators not to see community work as “Black and brown person work.” Iliev urges, “You need to get out of your chairs,” and go to the communities and spend time in their meetings. She also adds, “seeing equity is a skill, which should be valued.”

In the years to come, many of the ECA's public-facing efforts will likely be about programs addressing school-readiness. But behind the scenes, Black intends to focus ECA on the bigger systems change that will allow the county to “more aggressively target resources to our most vulnerable families” harmed by systems of oppression and address these systemic inequities.

Foundation as Thought Partner

Obviously, tackling systemic change is a tall order for an organization that, until very recently, only had one member on staff. Black credits the Allyn Family Foundation, and in particular their staff member Kara Williams, for helping her grow the ECA. Williams emails with Black daily and meets with her weekly, exchanging observations, offering new perspectives, and often connecting her, and the ECA, to newer initiatives, other foundations, state and national opportunities, and activities outside early childhood, relevant to their work. Williams works with other community partners in a similar capacity, even writing grant applications on their behalf if they lack the capacity or staff to do so themselves. “We’re really in it with them,” she comments.

Indeed, the role the Allyn Family Foundation has played in the ECA highlights the more non-traditional ways foundations can support the formation of an early childhood learning community. Beyond funding, a foundation can function as a thought partner, provide extra staff, and work to connect an early childhood alliance to larger networks. Of the Allyn Family Foundation, Black says, “There’s a willingness to co-create with us.”

Parent and Community Leadership

Iliev, the Director of Family and Community Initiatives for the ECA, never expected to work in early childhood. Before coming to the Early Childhood Alliance as a Pritzker Fellow, she worked with Planned Parenthood and as an activist seeking to directly address problems of equity. But early childhood, with its committed agencies and stakeholders, piqued her interest. She remembers thinking, “I want to change [the early childhood system] so that it works for the community.”

Charged with building out the ECA’s family and community engagement, Iliev has spent the past year looking at different sectors and surveying local agencies, striving to take a structural, rather than

an individual, approach. With Frishman and Karen Kaplan, another freelance consultant, Iliev adapted CSSP’s Parent Engagement and Leadership Assessment⁵ to survey local non-profits, striving to understand how they conceptualized parent leadership.

Iliev and Frishman surveyed 16 agencies and interviewed seven, mapping the competing ways family and community involvement were understood and implemented. This surveying revealed “the commitment, but not the capacity,” to involve families. By engaging agencies first, she is seeking to “make sure agencies change, rather than making families do the work of changing because there is a design flaw.” As she underscores, “Families in the community want to be involved. It’s just about how we invite them, and how we treat them once they’re there.”



Conclusion

“Everything in life is timing,” McMahon muses, thinking through why public funding for the ECA became politically feasible. “Things have to align,” O’Connell concurs, speculating on how the combination of public and private partners, a committed County Executive, and the wake-up call from the dismal data were all key for the ECA’s success.

Other communities may not replicate the exact conditions that led to the ECA’s success, but if there is one lesson that jumps out among the others, it is this need to balance short-term wins, which are usually programmatic, with the long, slow work of structural

change. Collect the “easy win” that generates momentum, but don’t forget about the slow work of relationship-building, inclusion, and addressing structural inequities. As Black says, “We’re not going to program our way out of the disparities in our community. We have to go back to basics and address root causes that are driving inequities in early childhood outcomes.”

Endnotes

- ¹“Onondaga County Grades (3) ELA Assessment Data.” New York State Education Department. Available here: <https://data.nysed.gov/assessment38.php?county=42&year=2014&subject=ELA&grades%5B%5D=3&prof24=0>
- ²“Syracuse City School District Grades (3) ELA Assessment Data.” 2020. Available here: <https://data.nysed.gov/assessment38.php?instid=800000040902&year=2014&subject=ELA&grades%5B%5D=3&prof24=0>
- ³“ECA Data Tracker Dashboard.” May 18, 2020. Slide 3.
- ⁴For more details, see: Gordon, Aaron. ‘Syracuse Reckons with Past Sins as it Figures Out Interstate 81’s Future’ by Aaron Gordon. July 30, 2019. by Jalopnik.
- ⁵Parent Engagement & Leadership Assessment Guide and Toolkit. (2019). Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy. Available here: <https://cssp.org/resource/parent-engagement-and-leadership-assessment-guide-and-toolkit/>

Acknowledgements

Kyle McCarthy is the primary author of this brief, with support from Steve Cohen and Cailin O’Connor. We are grateful to all of the partners in Onondaga County’s Early Childhood Alliance for their time being interviewed for this brief, and for their work to make early childhood a priority in their community.

Thanks to the Bezos Family Foundation for their generous support of CSSP’s work in support of the US becoming an Early Learning Nation.

Suggested citation: “Coalition-Building, Fast and Slow: The Early Childhood Alliance of Onondaga County,” Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), February 2021. Available here: <https://cssp.org/resource/early-childhood-onondaga-brief/>

This report is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce is not necessary provided proper citation of CSSP is made.

