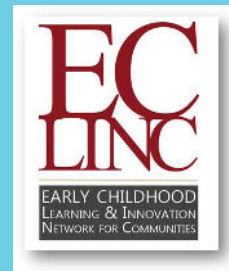




EARLY LEARNING COMMUNITIES: Building Blocks for Success

Revised and updated, April 2017



Early childhood learning, health and well-being are in every sense building blocks for our nation's future. New science on child development points to the lifelong importance of early experiences, relationships and opportunities in building the “architecture of the brain” and creating the foundation for later health and social and emotional well-being. Children's earliest experiences – with their families and in their neighborhoods – establish the foundation for future success. In turn, parents' and caregivers' abilities to provide the best possible experiences for young children are influenced by the communities in which they live.

Leaders in communities across the country are recognizing the importance of ensuring that young children and their families thrive – and understanding that child well-being and thriving communities go hand-in-hand. Elected officials, business and civic leaders, and people from all walks of life are working to create true “early learning communities” – places that promote learning and development prenatally through the early years of elementary school while making sure that the “building blocks” for early and life-long success are in place.

What is an early learning community? It is a place where local leaders, residents and other stakeholders are committed to the goal of all young children reaching their full potential, not just some. It is a neighborhood, city or county that is working to ensure that children and families have access to the opportunities, aligned services and supports they need to make this goal a reality. It is a place that supports neighborhoods where children can grow up safe and healthy and where families can thrive. Finally, it is a place where local policies create a broader framework of support for families with young children.

The vision of a community where all children learn and thrive is an exciting one. Translating it into reality is equally exciting – and a challenge that requires vision, commitment and hard work by many people working together. This is the first in a series of guidance documents that aim to help local leaders move their communities toward this goal.

This guide starts by describing the core results that early learning communities strive to achieve. It then talks about four essential “building blocks,” or community conditions that promote healthy child development and family well-being. Finally, the guide describes how leaders in an early learning community “put the pieces together” so that the opportunities and supports needed by children and families are consistently available, of high quality and accountable for producing the results for which they were intended.

About Early Childhood-LINC and Early Learning Nation

[Early Childhood-LINC](#) is a learning and innovation network for communities – a network of communities that have come together with the [Center for the Study of Social Policy](#) (CSSP) to demonstrate effective approaches to developing local early childhood systems. Together, the participating communities tackle tough problems, test new solutions and accelerate progress toward ensuring that all young children and their families thrive.

This document is informed by structured discussions with leaders from seven cities and counties that are part of Early Childhood-LINC through a Learning Lab convened in late 2015 and early 2016. Additional examples are provided by the [National League of Cities](#) and its cohort of seven cities that have come together to learn more about what it takes to become an early learning community. Both networks are working together to achieve the vision of the United States becoming an early learning nation by 2025.



Ensuring that All Children Thrive: The North Star for Early Learning Communities

The goal of an early learning community is to ensure that all young children get a great first start, setting the foundations for lifelong success and well-being. This means that children are healthy and can learn and thrive in strong families, in safe and stable communities.

Early learning for young children involves development across multiple domains — physical, cognitive, social and emotional — all of which take place in the context of their relationships with their parents and other caregivers. Early learning communities align their efforts toward clear results for young children. Taken to a community level, these include three broad sets of results for young children and their families, the kind of results that every parent wants for his or her child:

- Young children and pregnant women are healthy.
- Children are ready to succeed in school.
- Children live in safe, stable and nurturing families and communities.

These results reflect universal goals that, when achieved, benefit not just individual children and their families, but the community as a whole. Early investments toward achieving these goals pay off, for example, in increased academic achievement, fewer behavioral problems in schools and decreased juvenile and adult criminal activity. An early learning community employs targeted strategies to ensure that all children, families and communities have equitable opportunities to reach these outcomes.

What Do Early Learning Communities Look Like?

While communities vary greatly by history, culture, demographics and geography, early learning communities rest on a foundation of four key “building blocks” — that is, community characteristics and actions that promote healthy child development and family well-being:

- Community leadership, commitment and public will to make young children and their families a priority
- Quality services that work for all young children and their families
- Neighborhoods where families can thrive
- Policies that support and are responsive to families

These building blocks may be configured differently from one community to the next, but certain characteristics are consistent. The building blocks are described below, with examples of how they take shape in cities and counties across the United States.

City leaders see early childhood as critical to city success

“I think children are on the radar of city government now more than ever before in our city’s history.... If you want to build a successful city, you have to have opportunities for everyone to succeed, and that includes everything from prenatal health to support for youth up to age 21.”

– Dan Gilman, City Councilman, Pittsburgh

Quoted in [“City’s new lactation rooms part of Gilman’s vision for a family-friendly Pittsburgh”](#), May 1, 2016

Building Block #1: Community Leadership, Commitment and Public Will

What does it look like?

• **Raising awareness and building public will in Vermont.**

In the Lamoille Valley region of Northern Vermont, local partners work with the statewide [Let's Grow Kids](#) campaign to grow public awareness and public will around action for young children. The partners organize campaigns to sign pledges of support for early childhood issues, staff informational tables at local farmer's markets and fairs, train volunteer speakers at Rotary Clubs and Chambers of Commerce and write letters to the editor. Let's Grow Kids and their partners across the state also use local advertising outlets and locally driven social media campaigns to emphasize the importance of the early years, and to rally support for high quality early care for the children of the region.

• **Voters choose to invest in children's services in Palm Beach.**

In 2014, 86 percent of voters in Palm Beach County, FL, chose to reauthorize the independent taxing authority of the Children's Services Council, which develops, funds, and evaluates programs and promotes public policies to ensure that Palm Beach County's children grow up healthy, safe and strong. The overwhelming majority of votes for reauthorization reflected a sense of community pride in valuing and supporting young families. The local newspaper, the **Palm Beach Post**, backed the reauthorization, telling its readers, "A 'no' vote on reauthorization would mean the demise of the council, and an abrupt end to programs that make Palm Beach County a safer, more humane, more compassionate place to raise families." The reauthorization was also supported by political and civic leaders on both sides of the aisle.

At the heart of an early learning community is a common understanding that children and families are a priority – a community commitment to valuing and supporting families, and public will to back up that commitment with funding, volunteerism and neighborliness. This commitment is what makes a community a place where parents want to raise their children. While it may seem intangible in many ways, some hallmarks of this community commitment include:

■ **Community members support and understand the importance of early childhood health, learning and well-being.** Public will is built in part through efforts to share knowledge about the science of early childhood with parents and other members of the community in a way that is relevant to their lives, and to help people see why supporting early childhood development is important for the future of their community and their own well-being. Special campaigns may focus on literacy development, promoting parent-child attachment or understanding the importance of early childhood as a critical period for brain development.



■ **The community invests in young children and families.** The difference between an early learning community and any other community may come down to a sustained, visible and broadly supported investment in the early learning and healthy development of young children and their families — a commitment that shows up in actions by elected officials, civic leaders, neighborhood activists and voters.

Building Block #1: Community Leadership, Commitment and Public Will

■ **A rich network of informal supports is available for all families.** All families need support, to varying degrees at different points in their lives. Many families get a lot of the support they need through their social networks, extended families, faith community and/or neighbors, who may watch their children when they need a break, bring a meal at the birth of a child or lend money when finances are tight. However, some families lack these informal supports, and may be more dependent upon formal services unless they have opportunities to build their social networks. Early learning communities encourage and facilitate informal supports for all families by ensuring access to safe public spaces where families can meet and build relationships, including facilities such as public libraries, museums and playgrounds. They also recognize and celebrate the role of informal supports in the community. In some neighborhoods where many families are isolated, as is often the case in high-poverty areas, intensive efforts may be needed to weave a stronger social fabric. Similarly, communities may need to tailor supports and outreach to families that are marginalized due to disabilities, language barriers or immigration status.



■ **Community resources for children and families are well-known, accessible and easy to use.** Communities can also invest in ensuring that families and other community members are aware of the services and resources available in the community, and able to access them when needed. When this is working well, a family needing support will know where to turn – or their neighbor will know and give them a number to call. For example, up-to-date referral resource centers can help connect families to ongoing services in real time, and hotlines can provide immediate support for families under stress.

What does it look like?

- **Connecting parents to resources and events in Pittsburgh.** [Kidsburgh](#) is an online resource that serves as not only a calendar of family-friendly events but also a place for advocacy around making Pittsburgh a more child-friendly place to live – or, as the community leaders, child advocates and educators who launched the effort put it, to make the Pittsburgh region “the best place on earth to raise a kid.” Kidsburgh partners with the local public television network and the local tourism promotion agency to publish timely content. It is sponsored by two foundations and has an advisory board representing a variety of organizations serving children, youth and families. They are also in the process of launching an online directory of child-serving organizations.

- **One stop to meet back-to-school needs in Dallas.** In Dallas, Texas, the annual Mayor’s Back to School Fair is an opportunity for children and their families to begin the new school year with many of their school-related needs already met and to receive information about available community resources. Participants include the City of Dallas, Dallas-area schools, public health department, state agencies, non-profits, corporations and hundreds of volunteers. As a “one stop” destination, the fair helps prepare economically disadvantaged children get ready for the new school year through services provided by community agencies that specialize in helping children. The fair also includes free health, dental and vision screenings, immunizations, haircuts and information on education, health and social services.

What does it look like?

- **Access to medical home for all children in nine regions of Michigan.**

The Community Healthcare Access Program coordinated by HealthNet of West Michigan provides a medical home for children and adults with public or no insurance. It provides supports for doctors and medical practices who increase the numbers of vulnerable children that they add to their caseloads. It also provides transportation and other supports to families. The Michigan Association of United Ways has expanded the model to eight other counties/regions under the name [Michigan Children's Health Access Program](#) (MiCHAP), and developed a "Virtual CHAP" service accessible through the 2-1-1 telephone helpline.

- **Centralized resource and referral for parents and providers.**

[Help Me Grow](#), now a national model being implemented by affiliates in 25 states, was developed in Hartford, Connecticut, to connect at-risk children to the services they need. Parents, health care professionals and other service providers can call a centralized helpline to receive appropriate referrals to address developmental concerns and meet other needs for the child or family.

- **Birth hospitals screen new mothers in Orange County, CA.**

Through [Bridges Maternal and Child Health Network](#), birthing hospitals in Orange County conduct a bedside screening for new mothers to identify needs and risks; provide additional support to promote bonding and attachment; ensure families have access to health care; and refer to services such as home visiting as appropriate. With funding from California's Proposition 10 (tobacco tax) administered through the Children and Families Commission of Orange County, the hospitals also distribute a "Kit for New Parents" designed to help parents manage their infants' health at home and understand when medical attention is needed.

Families living in an early learning community have access to high-quality services for their children and themselves, aligned in a way that makes them easy to use to meet their needs. Some combination of these services and supports are available in all communities. Progress toward better outcomes for the population as a whole come about when communities coordinate services; ensure that all children and families who need services are able to get them; focus on improving quality; and assess from a system level where there are gaps or unnecessary duplication. Communities can then use current services as a springboard for innovation and customization of services and supports to meet families' needs.

The continuum of quality services include:

- **Access to high-quality, basic services that proactively promote and support health, learning and family strengths.**

Residents of an early learning community have access to basic, high-quality services in the areas of health, early care and education and family support. This is necessary to build health and early learning and ensure that families are able to provide safe, stable, nurturing environments for their children. These basic services include a medical home for all children; access to quality early care and education; and playgroups and other informal settings where parents can build their social networks, gain knowledge about parenting and child development and interact with professionals who can answer questions and connect them to other services as needed. Universal supports also include outreach materials and information shared with all new parents, which might be delivered through birthing hospitals or through universal home visits.

- **Routine screening, identification, referral and linkage for risks/needs.**

One of the markers of an early learning community is a coordinated (if not centralized) approach to screening for developmental concerns in young children, such as hearing problems, autism spectrum disorders and trauma responses; family risk factors such as maternal depression and parental substance abuse; and school readiness at entry to kindergarten. These screenings take place in the context of the basic services described above, such as hospitals and clinics, early care and education programs and family resource centers, in order to reach the greatest number of children and families. This works best when providers have access to a centralized point of intake for referrals when they identify a need for more rigorous assessment or specialized services.

■ **Timely access to more intensive services for children and families at risk and those with identified needs.**

For families facing increased risk of poor outcomes, more intensive preventive services and early intervention can help them to overcome or manage those challenges and, in many cases, keep them from needing far more expensive services later. Whatever a family's needs are, intervening as early as possible is critical, whether in health care, developmental services or family support. The coordination of these services in an early learning community can be particularly beneficial for families facing multiple challenges, who often struggle trying to navigate several systems. Interventions also include the work of the child welfare system when abuse or neglect is alleged to have occurred.

■ **Families and parents who are actively engaged as partners.**

In an early learning community, service providers recognize and honor parents and make families a high priority. They understand parents as the experts on their own children and families. Whether at their child's six-month check-up or at preschool drop-off, parents experience respect and a feeling of partnership from the professionals they encounter. As a critical part of this relationship, providers value and respect the cultural practices of the families they serve; they also take a "no wrong door" approach to connecting families to the services they need, regardless of what part of the early childhood system they first contact.



What does it look like?

• **Developmental screening in early care and education settings in Rochester, NY.** The City of Rochester contributed funding to a developmental screening initiative that reaches children in places where they already spend their time. The initiative trains local early care and education providers to conduct developmental screenings with accuracy and consistency. In addition, the training includes Tips for Talking with Families, with sample scripts and suggestions on what makes for successful reciprocal conversations, such as starting with the child's strengths, offering information on developmental milestones, discussing why developmental screening is important and having an open format that allows for ongoing questions and support when additional assessments or services are necessary.

• **Extending the reach of community schools in Grand Rapids, MI.** The Grand Rapids Public Schools support a community school model, placing human services, a medical clinic and a system of support within neighborhood schools. When they realized that families with young children were not accessing the services offered at the community schools, the school district and First Steps made concerted efforts to reach parents and early care and education providers. Play & Learn playgroups and other early childhood services are now co-located in the schools, serving the parents and caregivers of young children in the neighborhoods where they live. This work is also tied to Michigan's Quality Rating and Improvement System for early care and education providers, as registered, licensed and family, friend and neighbor care providers all have the opportunity to receive training credit for attending Play & Learn groups right in their neighborhood.

Building Block #3: Neighborhoods Where Families Can Thrive

What does it look like?

- **Connecting isolated neighborhoods to jobs, child care and transit in Atlantic County, NJ.** Through the South Jersey Strengthening Families Initiative, the Pascale Sykes Foundation has dedicated resources to building up public transit options in the largely rural counties they serve. The foundation partnered with the County of Atlantic, the South Jersey Transportation Authority, the Family Service Association, NJ TRANSIT and the Cross County Connection Transportation Management Association to start the [English Creek-Tilton Road Community Shuttle](#), based on community meetings where parents identified transportation as one of their greatest needs. Launched in 2012, the community shuttle runs regularly 14 hours a day, seven days a week to connect a number of apartment complexes, shopping centers, medical centers, office locations and a local shopping mall. Of passengers surveyed after the shuttle services were in operation for one year, 55 percent said they used the shuttle to get to and from work and 45 percent use it to connect to a NJ Transit bus, a service from which many residents were isolated prior to the community shuttle service.

- **Preventing family homelessness in Orange County.** The [Children and Families Commission of Orange County, CA](#), partners with [HomeAid Orange County](#) to develop transitional and emergency shelter facilities for homeless children and their families. Between 2000 and 2015, in addition to adding 500 shelter beds to meet emergency needs, the Commission and HomeAid worked to help the county achieve a 35 percent reduction in the number of children that were unstably housed or at risk of homelessness.

Children’s development and well-being are affected by all aspects of the neighborhoods where they live — from whether they have access to healthy food and green spaces, to how safe their community is and whether residents have a sense of hope for their future. While these issues are beyond what we typically think of under the heading of “early childhood,” these social determinants of health are critical. Early learning communities are increasingly turning their attention to neighborhood living conditions, ensuring that all young children grow up in neighborhoods where they and their families can live safe, healthy lives. Neighborhoods that are safe and healthy foster the sense of belonging and networks of informal supports that are so critical for families to thrive.



- **The built environment promotes safety and allows families to access basic services in their neighborhoods and beyond.** Communities designed with ample green space and walkable routes between housing, schools and retail areas — with safety ensured in those public spaces — are neighborhoods where families can thrive. Neighborhoods should be free from violence and from environmental hazards such as lead, and polluted air or water that cause and aggravate health conditions. In early learning communities families also have access to basic services nearby, including an adequate supply of safe and affordable housing, nutritious and affordable food and reliable public transportation that connects families to jobs, child care, schools and the community. Other types of infrastructure, including opportunities to connect to the internet, are also critical for families to be full participants in their community.

Building Block #3: Neighborhoods Where Families Can Thrive

■ **Economic and employment opportunities are available to all.** Children are more likely to thrive when their parents have access to a diversity of economic and employment opportunities where they live. Implementing two-generation strategies that consider both child and parent well-being can improve economic opportunities for families. Whether in the neighborhood or easily accessible by public transportation, parents need access to jobs that pay a living wage and offer family and medical leave and paid sick leave, as well as access to education and job training services. In addition, in family-friendly neighborhoods, banks and credit unions are available to meet families' financial needs and give them opportunities to build credit — rather than institutions that drain resources from the community and harm families through financial practices such as predatory lending.

■ **Residents feel a sense of belonging and hope within their neighborhoods and connection to the broader community.** Ideally, families will feel a sense of belonging and ownership of their neighborhoods, a sense of kinship with their neighbors and a connection to the surrounding city or county. In neighborhoods where families can thrive, residents tell a story of hope about their neighborhood and feel they have power to shape their community. They feel that their neighborhood is connected to the broader community and that city or county leadership cares about them — that they matter in the eyes of elected leaders and fellow residents. Community leaders can contribute to these intangible aspects of a neighborhood, both in words and actions, by focusing on and investing in a neighborhood's assets, and by listening and responding when residents organize and speak up to effect change in their neighborhoods.

What does it look like?

• **Creating an Early Childhood Hub in the Castlemont Corridor in Oakland.** A group of community organizations, including First 5 Alameda, worked together to create an Early Childhood Hub in a neighborhood facing a number of challenges. The hub, called Room to Bloom, is located at a youth center called Youth UpRising, adjacent to a new charter elementary school. Families with young children have access to a variety of parent and child activities, services and/or programs there at various times throughout the week. Families are also connected to leadership opportunities and additional community resources, including Play & Learn groups, parenting education, Parent Cafés, and referrals to community resources such as entitlement programs, mental health and public health services and economic self-sufficiency programs. The services of the Early Childhood Hub are guided by CSSP's [Strengthening Families](#) framework of family protective factors.

• **Eliminating the digital divide in Davidson, NC.** [Eliminate the Digital Divide](#) (E2D) has provided homes with school-aged children in Davidson a computer and access to the Internet at home. Mayor John Woods also named every second Saturday in May “E2D Lemonade Day” to support grassroots fundraising efforts, and has helped organize digital literacy classes for the community. The Town of Davidson has supported E2D every step of the way. The mayor initially helped the organization conduct a community needs assessment related to computer use in the home. The town has also helped open fundraising doors and raise awareness about the organization's work.

Developed by the Prevention Institute with support from the Office of Minority Health, [“THRIVE: Community Tool for Health & Resilience in Vulnerable Environments”](#) provides a set of 12 community “THRIVE factors” that correspond to community determinants of health.

A Tool for Community Assessment

Building Block #4: Policies that Support and Are Responsive to Families

What does it look like?

- **College savings accounts for newborns in Oakland, CA.**

[Brilliant Baby](#) is a two-generational approach spearheaded by Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf. Through this program, launched as a pilot in Fall 2016, babies born into poverty in Oakland will have a college savings account of \$500 opened in their names. New parents can also receive parenting support, financial coaching and the opportunity to earn financial awards as they take steps to promote their children's well-being. Brilliant Baby will serve 250 families in the first year, with a goal of reaching all of the most vulnerable families in Oakland within the next decade.

- **Child impact statements that shape legislation in Memphis.**

Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee used a decision aid designed specifically to put children first in policy planning and decision-making. The web-based application known as SHELBY (Safety, Health, Education and Land Use decisions on Behalf of children and Youth) was used for researching, drafting, sharing, and publishing/distributing child impact statements. It was used by the governments of Memphis and Shelby County to draft approximately 150 child impact statements from 2009 to 2014, helping elected officials, county administrators, boards, and agency staff investigate the connections, or conflicts, between child well-being and the legislation they considered. The application's prompts, examples, and information resources helped users identify disparities, plan new initiatives, consider the risks and benefits of proposed actions and develop alternatives throughout the policy planning process.

The conditions in which young children and their families live — the building blocks already described — are all influenced by policy at the local, state and federal levels. In early learning communities, attention is paid to how local policy can support children and families, particularly those most vulnerable.

■ **Policies that govern child and family services.** The clearest link to policy in an early learning community are the policies that govern services for children and families — the continuum of services described above. Federal, state and local policies affect the quality, effectiveness and availability of these services. Many of these policies are made at the state or federal level, but local administration of those policies can determine how they affect families. For example, child care subsidies are critical to ensure access to quality care for the lowest-income families, but how those subsidies are administered — including eligibility rules, where and how families can apply for services, how the intake process takes place, how data is collected and reporting requirements — can have positive or negative effects on continuity of care and family stress. Similarly, local discretion in an early learning community can pave the way for families to have greater access to health care and early intervention services, as well as more positive experiences in systems such as early intervention or child protective services. This is not just a question of how many programs and services are available, but of how responsive they are to families' needs.



Building Block #4: Policies that Support and Are Responsive to Families

■ **Workplace and other policies that directly affect families.** Beyond governance over child and family services, a number of other policies directly influence families' lives. Policymakers in early learning communities enact policies that support families in raising children. In many cases, local ordinances can promote, require or incentivize family and medical leave, paid sick leave, flexible work schedules and other family-friendly employment policies and practices. Leadership and incentives may be particularly necessary to get these benefits extended to workers in low-wage jobs, where the market may not push employers to provide them but where workers need them the most. Local policies can also determine how well families are connected to the services they need and how easily families can navigate those systems. While these policies are often aimed at the entire workforce, or at all health care consumers, for example, parents of young children are an important subset of these groups and the impact on them as parents should be taken into consideration.



■ **Land use and community development policies.** In an early learning community, local leaders pay attention to how a wide range of decisions will affect families. Similar to the “Health in All Policies” movement, early learning communities examine the effect of all policies on young children and their families. For example, many aspects of community design, such as housing regulations and public transportation systems, can encourage or hinder healthy child development and family well-being. These decisions should be made with the impact on families with young children in mind. Again, family-friendly local administration of state and federal policy can be a marker of an early learning community.

What does it look like?

• **Master plan for early childhood development in Pasadena, CA.** Pasadena, CA released [a policy framework](#) for early childhood in 2015 that was developed by the city's human services commission and approved by the city council. This report includes background on early childhood-related policy in Pasadena, local context of the city, and an eight-part master plan. Part of the master plan includes creating an independent Office of the Young Child, and [hiring a coordinator](#) for early childhood development to implement the master plan in the community.

• **Cradle to K Cabinet in Minneapolis.** In Minneapolis, Mayor Hodges' [Cradle to K Cabinet](#) is explicitly focused on eliminating race- and place-based disparities. The cabinet focuses on early experiences, stable housing and quality early care and education. After a series of meetings and community forums, the Cabinet published the [Cradle to K Cabinet Plan to Address Early Childhood Disparities in Minneapolis](#). The mayor now makes a point to circle back to the Cradle to K framework when making policy decisions across the city. Whether it is a plan for public housing or working with the sanitation department, the mayor emphasizes the importance of considering the implications of decisions on the city's youngest residents.

• **Family-friendly workplace policies in Kansas City, MO.** In Kansas City, MO, Mayor Sly James hosted a [screening](#) of the documentary *Raising of America* with the local chamber of commerce, United Way of Greater Kansas City and the local Women's Foundation. This screening launched a discussion and [a call to action](#) to promote family-friendly workplace policies in businesses across the city. Prior to the public screening, Mayor James was personally inspired by the film to push for paid parental leave for city employees, and at the event, the city manager announced a new policy to provide city employees with six weeks of paid parental leave.

Putting the Pieces Together to Build an Early Learning Community

The building blocks described above come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and can be put together in many different ways at the community level. In an early learning community, the building blocks are aligned, bolstered and assembled by design, in a way that builds on the strengths of the community and recognizes the challenges families face. The infrastructure of the early childhood system includes:

- Effective leadership
- Sustainable financial backing
- Use of data to drive change
- Support for providers

Effective Leadership

What does it look like?

Catalyzing early childhood work in Dayton, OH. Mayor Nan Whaley established the [City of Learners Committee](#), which is comprised of more than 70 community leaders who have committed to ensure that children in the City of Dayton receive a high-quality education. Over seven weeks, the Committee met with almost 450 people across the city in 11 “Listening Sessions.” These community conversations led to the creation of five priority areas for the committee; 1) ensure all children attend a high-quality school, 2) ensure high-quality preschool is offered to all children, 3) increase business partnerships with schools, 4) provide mentors to more children and 5) expand sites for afterschool and summer learning. These “Listening Sessions” captured the rich diversity of Dayton. The City of Learners Committee and the city’s commitment to expanding preschool was the main focus of Mayor Whaley’s 2016 [State of the City](#).

Championing the transition from preschool to kindergarten in Denver. Mayor Hancock has been a champion for early childhood, particularly through his [Countdown to Kindergarten](#) (C2K) program, a part of the city’s larger [Education Compact](#). C2K is a program in Southwest Denver designed to improve third-grade reading scores through improvement of the transition from child care and preschool to kindergarten. Mayor Hancock launched the initiative in fall of 2013 and even held a transition summit that brought together stakeholders from across the city. The city also published a transitions best practices [report](#).

■ **Committed Local Leadership.** Building and strengthening the infrastructure for an early learning community requires leadership from key people and offices. Depending on whether the early learning community is defined at the city or county level, that leadership might include elected officials (such as mayors or county executives) and city or county staff, or may be driven by leaders in the non-profit sector. In some cases, statewide systems or the leadership of federally-funded initiatives have played an important role in initiating early childhood system building with incentives for communities to take action.

■ **A Trusted Convening Entity.** Critical to the success of an early learning community is an individual or organization that brings stakeholders together, facilitates conversations and decision-making, keeps the group focused on the vision and builds relationships with and among stakeholders in the community. This convener needs to be a trusted individual or entity and should be knowledgeable about the community and preferably of the community. The convener (referred to as a “backbone organization” in the collective impact framework) ensures that the right people are at the table, makes connections across systems and develops trust in the group so that stakeholders are comfortable sharing resources and data with one another. The convener is also in a position to reduce duplication by understanding what is happening in different systems and programs. When the convener is also a funder or has influence with funders in the community, there may be opportunities to write alignment of services into contracts.

■ **A Champion.** In a crowded field of issues facing cities and counties, early learning needs a champion to keep leaders and stakeholders engaged in this work. In some cases, the champion may be the same as the committed leader described above (e.g., a mayor who builds a platform around early learning) and often the champion may be employed by the convening entity for the early childhood system. However, in some early learning communities the champion emerges from the community — a parent, a faith leader, a business owner — and organizes others to push leaders and systems, keep attention on early learning and transform their community.

■ **Engaged Stakeholders.** Stakeholders that should be working together in an early learning community include all agencies with public funding for early care and education, family support and home visiting. It is also important to involve other systems with a goal of infusing an understanding and support of early childhood learning and development in all systems that serve families. Community members, especially parents and families of young children, should be at the table at all stages in the development of the early childhood system. Faith leaders, business owners and other community institutions are also critical to families’ experiences of their communities and should be engaged.

Early childhood systems function best when data is consistently used to drive change — to keep stakeholders focused on the outcomes of their efforts, improve progress toward those desired outcomes and increase effectiveness of various programs and of the systems itself. A process of continuous quality improvement is a hallmark of an early learning community.

One critical element of using data to drive change is that a set of common outcomes are agreed upon by many players in the community, which may include government agencies, public and private funders, intermediary organizations like United Way, a wide range of programs and residents. Even the process of determining a set of common outcomes, and indicators that will be used to measure progress toward those outcomes, can build understanding between partners.

When partnerships are strong and characterized by mutual trust, programs and systems can go beyond common outcomes to share data showing how well the families they work with are doing on the agreed-upon indicators. Beyond reporting data to funders, this entails sharing data across funded programs, and in some cases even making the data publicly available. Some communities have adopted “data dashboards” that allow a core set of indicators to be tracked, at the community, neighborhood, system and/or program level.

It is important to note that gathering data for the community overall will not tell the whole story of whether children and families are thriving. Disaggregating data by race, ethnicity, disability, immigration status and socioeconomic status may reveal disparities and highlight areas of need. Tracking those disparities over time is another important way to gauge the progress of an early learning community.

Finally, using data to drive change also means assessing how well the early childhood system is functioning — for example, whether families are more likely to receive the services and supports they need, whether services are better integrated to improve quality and reduce duplication and whether public understanding of and support for early childhood is growing. Attention to these “performance measures” for the system can ensure that continuous quality improvement is applied to the system itself — the infrastructure described here — as well as to the programs and services that make up the system.

What does it look like?

Common outcomes across funded programs in Palm Beach. The Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County, FL (CSCPBC) uses a Pathways approach that identifies a set of four goals for their work, with outcomes and strategies related to each of those goals. The countywide programs they fund report to CSCPBC on indicators and measures related to the Pathways outcomes and goals, which CSCPBC can then aggregate to assess progress toward the goals. In collaboration with program providers, and based on research, CSCPBC has identified measurement tools to use for a specific set of indicators. In other cases, grantees implementing evidence-based programs may use specific tools and measures specified by their program model. In order to assess the collective impact of CSC funded programs, robust internal and external data systems are utilized by both grantor and grantee to monitor progress toward goals, and support accountability. The data-driven Pathways approach allows CSCPBC to assess gaps in service and align programs to ensure that resources are supporting progress toward all of the goals.

Assessing patterns of program participation to increase family engagement in Boston. An analysis of service utilization by Thrive in 5 in Boston identified a significant number of families who enrolled as members, but did not participate in additional activities beyond the initial engagement with Boston Children Thrive. As a result, evaluators conducted targeted interviews and engaged in community conversations about where families were being reached and how activities might be modified to be more appealing and lead to more sustained engagement.

Sustainable Financial Backing

Stable and ongoing financing is essential for an early learning community. Some of the most successful early learning communities are those where a tax base has been established to provide services and supports to young children and their families as well as to support a convening and coordinating organization. For example:

- In California, Proposition 10 established a tax on tobacco products which funds “First 5” agencies in every county.
- Nine Florida counties have established an independent taxing authorities for Children’s Services Councils, allowed by state law and administered through property (millage) taxes.

Establishing an independent tax base is not always a possibility. Other communities have found innovative strategies for funding early childhood work by combining public funds in a way that promotes more seamless services and continuity of support by blending public and private financing. Public school funding for K-12 education can sometimes be set aside for early childhood programming, depending on how much control school districts have. Some communities have had success seeking private funding from the local business community.

What does it look like?

Child care linkage fee raises money and builds facilities for early childhood in Santa Monica, CA. Under a [city ordinance](#) in Santa Monica, CA, developers must either pay a per-square-footage fee to fund new child care facilities, or build a child care facility in or near any new development. A few developers have chosen to build facilities in their developments, providing early care and education access to families living and working in or nearby the buildings, while others have paid the fees which Santa Monica will use to build new facilities in areas of the city with low access to child care. In one development agreement, the RAND Corporation agreed to complete a policy analysis on early childhood development and education, host conferences and a child policy website, and contribute \$500,000 to early childhood programs and early care and education in the Santa Monica Civic Center.

Increasing and analyzing funding for early childhood in San Francisco, CA. With the passage of ballot measure [Proposition C](#) in 2014, San Francisco is building on its current early childhood efforts. Proposition C directs more than \$135 million in annual funding to school and children’s programs across the city for the next 25 years. The measure also established a new council, the [Our Children Our Families Council](#), to create a plan for the city to improve conditions for children and families. The council is led by the Superintendent of Schools and Mayor Ed Lee, and includes community leaders and parents. The Office of Early Care and Education also recently completed a comprehensive fiscal analysis that details current funding streams for early care and education in the city as well as ideas on how to use funds more effectively and opportunities for additional funding.

Support for Service Providers

In an early learning community, attention is paid to the workforce serving children and families. Efforts to strengthen and support the workforce are critical for improving the quality of services and supports provided to families. Continuing education helps service providers stay informed of advances in our understanding of the science of early childhood and align their practice to best nurture and support child development and family well-being. Translating research into action in this way is an important driver of quality services. Communities may provide incentives for gaining certification and participating in continuing education opportunities, as well as coaching and consultation for providers to improve their practice.

Communities can also take action to increase the diversity of the child- and family-serving workforce, by creating pathways to careers for parents and other community residents, providing mentoring and career development support and/or taking life experience into account in hiring decisions. This intentionality around diversity and equity in the workforce can have economic benefits for the community as well as improving outcomes for children and families who can be served by people from their own cultural and/or language group.

What does it look like?

Supporting informal care providers in Denver, CO. In Denver, several partners including the Mayor's Office, Mile High United Way and Making Connections-Denver work together to improve supports for family, friend and neighbor (FFN) care providers. For example, a Play & Learn facilitated playgroup was launched in both English and Spanish for young children from infancy through age five and their caregivers. The city also created a Resource Facilitator Mentor program to help both Spanish and English-speaking early childhood providers improve the quality of care and become licensed. The mentor provides community-based technical assistance, mentoring, social network development, resources and health and safety training to FFN caregivers. Quality improvement funding was used to enhance the mentoring service to be more adaptive to the unique situation of informal caregivers and the cultural and linguistic diversity of the participants. As a result of the program, FFN providers who received coaching were more likely to purchase developmentally appropriate educational materials and curricula, address health and safety needs and improve communication and relationships with families.

Next Steps: Building Early Learning Communities

The vision of an early learning nation where children and families thrive in supportive communities is both inspiring and challenging. This description of the building blocks and architecture of early learning communities is the first in a series of guidance documents for local leaders who want to ensure that all young children in their communities have the opportunity to reach their full potential. Additional materials and tools will help communities take action to become early learning communities, providing concrete guidance on how to develop each of these building blocks, how to put them together at the local level and how to assess progress.

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Related Resources

Both CSSP and NLC have long histories in the field of early childhood. Each organization comes to this work with foundational frameworks that are in use across the country and guide our approach.

Ten Elements of Educational Alignment: Based on a review of the most advanced city efforts to align education for young children from birth through third grade, the NLC Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) developed the Ten Elements of Educational Alignment. Too often local health, child care and education systems operate independently from one another and fail to fully support children in their earliest and most important stage of development. Many city leaders realize that in order to secure the greatest return on investments in early care and education and to ensure that all children grow up healthy and ready for school, cities must develop a system that promotes educational alignment for young children. The Ten Elements of Educational Alignment help cities consider how to support a well-aligned educational system that includes streamlined communication and coordinated services that address the full range of academic, behavioral, health and family issues. Learn more: www.nlc.org/find-city-solutions/institute-for-youth-education-and-families/early-childhood/educational-alignment-for-young-children

Strengthening Families: Strengthening Families is a research-informed approach developed by CSSP to increase family strengths, enhance child development and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect among families with children from birth to age eight. It is based on engaging families, programs and communities in building five protective factors (parental resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, concrete support in times of need and social and emotional competence of children). Using the Strengthening Families framework, more than 35 states and many communities are shifting policy and practice to focus on family protective factors in early care and education, child welfare, child abuse prevention and other child and family serving systems. The Strengthening Families approach and framework are frequently used to facilitate greater collaboration and coordination across and between the systems that serve children and families and to focus cross-systems efforts on supporting families in order to improve outcomes for children. Learn more: www.strengtheningfamilies.net.



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