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A POWERFUL CONVERGENCE: COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

By David Jacobson | Jan 22, 2018 | Feature Article



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The most successful elementary schools partner with community organizations to support young children and their families beginning in early childhood.

In many cities and towns across the United States, elementary schools are forging deeper partnerships with families and community organizations well before children arrive at kindergarten. The aim of this work is to improve children’s experiences and family engagement and support along the entire continuum from prenatal care through grade 3 and beyond.

This potent combination of educational supports and family services is the single best strategy we have to address pernicious opportunity gaps and raise achievement for low-income children. Communities such as Cincinnati, Ohio; Omaha, Neb., and Multnomah County, Ore., are embracing this approach to tackle persistent poverty, family instability, the hollowing out of the middle class, and the demand for a more highly skilled workforce.

Updated model, new movement

The Chicago Child-Parent Centers, one of the most successful educational interventions of the past half century, began with Title I money in 1967. Children experience four to six years of high-quality learning and care that starts at a preschool center and continues through 3rd grade at a nearby elementary school. The original model included structured curriculum components, high teacher-to-child ratios, and staff development opportunities along with home visitations, health and nutrition services, and extensive activities to promote family engagement (Reynolds et al., 2011).

Research done by University of Minnesota professor Arthur Reynolds shows the stunning progress of children who attended the centers in the mid-1980s — they had reached age 28 by the time of the study. Compared to children in a control group, they exhibited significantly higher academic achievement through high school, advanced further in their education, and had higher earnings as adults. They were less likely to need special education services, be involved in the juvenile justice system, commit crimes as adults, or experience abuse, neglect, or depression. A cost-benefit analysis of the program yielded a return on investment of \$10 for every \$1 invested (Reynolds et al., 2011).

Several years ago, Reynolds and his team updated the child-parent center model as a school reform strategy. Becoming implementers as well as researchers, the University of Minnesota team now supports 35 sites in three Midwestern states with tools, guidance documents, and technical assistance.

Child-parent centers combine a strong academic program, extensive family engagement, and coordination with community organizations to promote both child and parent development. It is a community school model that also creates an aligned continuum of teaching and learning across early childhood and early elementary education. In doing so, the child-parent centers bring together two reforms, one bridging education and health and social services, the other bridging early childhood and K-12 education.

Several other communities have embarked on similar strategies:

Cincinnati, Ohio

All schools in the Cincinnati Public Schools district are community schools, known as Community Learning Centers (CLCs), and most have full-time resource coordinators. The district's devotion to this strategy came in response to declining enrollment and an exodus of families in the 1990s. Ensuring that all partner supports are targeted toward meeting each school's specific academic goals is central to the district's approach to CLCs, as is an emphasis on community engagement and input. Since implementing CLCs, Cincinnati has gone from being one of Ohio's worst-performing districts to becoming the state's first urban district recognized as "effective." It is now regarded as a national leader in community schooling.

Cincinnati's CLCs have expanded to serve also as hubs for children and their families before they enter kindergarten. First, the district has begun increasing the number of preschool programs housed in elementary schools, giving younger children access to the same supports as K-12 students, including health clinics and vision and dental services. Second, a nonprofit has begun piloting early childhood resource coordinators at CLCs, assigning them to reach out to families with young children and organize networks of early childhood providers that are anchored by an elementary school CLC. These networks share instructional practices and work on transitions, resource referrals, and hosting joint events for children and families.

Multnomah County, Ore.

The Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) Service System supports 86 community schools across six districts in Multnomah County. The county is the managing partner for the system and, in that role, contracts with nonprofit agencies that hire and support full-time site managers at the community schools. The site managers work with school staff and community partners to align resources, including afterschool programming, with the school's academic and social-emotional goals. They support family engagement and advocacy and coordinate resource referral for family basic needs and other services.

In recent years, Multnomah County has also extended its work to include early childhood programs. In addition to increasing the number of preschool classrooms in its schools, the county implemented a highly regarded three-week summer early kindergarten transition class across many of the community schools, launched a vigorous kindergarten registration campaign, and supported home visits by kindergarten teachers. SUN is also implementing a new pilot project in eight schools. Facilitators in these schools reach out to families with young children before their children start school and engage them in school activities such as play-and-learn groups in school buildings. SUN is now working with these schools on how they will begin collaborating with the family childcare providers located near each participating elementary school.

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The Superintendents' Early Childhood Plan, Greater Omaha, Neb.

Eleven superintendents in the Greater Omaha area have signed on to the Superintendents' Plan, which is financed by a half-cent levy in two counties, while the Buffett Early Childhood Institute provides technical assistance to the participating districts. Currently, 12 schools from across six districts participate in the plan's full model, which builds on the idea of the school as hub and includes three core components:

- **Birth to age 3:** School-based home visitors provide high-quality home visiting services, organize parent-child activities in the schools, and serve as bridges to principals and staff.
- **High-quality preschool:** Family facilitators provide an array of supports to families and guide them through the transition to high-quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds.
- **Kindergarten through 3rd grade:** Family facilitators support families as children transition into aligned, developmentally appropriate kindergarten through 3rd-grade experiences.

In addition to the linkages across home visits, preschool, and early elementary school, schools maintain partnerships with community social service providers, and some have onsite health services.

Fragmentation, quality, and continuity

All of the above examples are responses to a persistent set of problems that characterize early childhood and early elementary education and care in the United States. Most low-income children experience inconsistent education quality, gaps in learning and support, and a lack of coordination at each stage of development, according to a summary of decades of research done by a blue-ribbon panel (IOM & NRC, 2015). In response to this assessment, the Institute of Medicine endorsed creating local partnerships that would bring organizations together to improve quality and align and coordinate their services.

Community schools and other wraparound models address the fragmentation that characterizes our education, health, and social service systems in important ways, especially by connecting K-12 students to the noneducational services and supports students and their families need. Head Start is an example of a program that provides comprehensive services for younger children.

Meanwhile, the Prenatal to Grade 3 (P-3) movement has arisen in response to the need for greater quality in both early childhood and early elementary education, and to align the two stages to ensure that children experience continuity and progression from one year to the next (Kauerz & Coffman, 2013; Alliance for Early Success, 2013).

P-3 initiatives bring together elementary schools and preschool centers along with (depending on the site) libraries, museums, hospitals, early intervention providers, home visiting organizations, and family child-care networks. P-3 partnerships often begin their work by addressing the gap between preschool and early elementary education. This entails aligning standards and expectations and improving the transition to kindergarten. Partnerships deepen their work by providing joint professional learning experiences to early childhood and early elementary teachers on literacy, math, and/or social-emotional skill development. Communitywide campaigns (for instance around literacy or kindergarten readiness) are also common. After establishing a foundation of collaboration between school districts and community-based organizations, the work continues up the age span to include improving children's experiences in 1st through 3rd grades as well as down the age span to home visiting services, screening, and family child care (Jacobson, 2016).

Successful examples of P-3 work include the much-heralded success stories of Union City, N.J., and Montgomery County, Md., each of which has produced some of the best results for low-income children in the country (Jacobson, 2014; Kirp, 2013; Marietta, 2010; Marietta & Marietta, 2013). The National Association for Elementary School Principals has given P-3 a ringing endorsement by defining an effective elementary school leader as one who builds a learning community that includes community-based preschools and other early childhood organizations (NAESP, 2014). Further, state departments of education in Oregon, New Jersey, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts have supported P-3 improvement through state policy, leadership programs, and grant programs to local communities (Jacobson, 2016).

Community schools, related wraparound support models, and P-3 initiatives are part of a broader wave of reform toward what Columbia University professor Jeffrey Henig and his colleagues call "cross-sector collaboration for education" (Henig et al., 2015). This trend includes cradle-to-career initiatives such as the Harlem Children's Zone, which brings together public and private agencies to establish a pipeline of support for children and families

and collective impact initiatives in which community leaders, schools, and social service agencies agree on common goals and targets and implement mutually reinforcing strategies to drive improvement (Henig et al., 2015).

Like these related cross-sector reforms, the community schools and P-3 movements are both premised on the idea that multifaceted problems require multifaceted responses. Addressing the needs of low-income children requires not only improving teaching and learning in schools and preschools, and not only improving health and social services for young children and their families but improving education, health, and social services in a coordinated fashion. These two movements are consistent in principle in that both are place-based initiatives that concentrate services within defined geographic areas to deepen their effect. They both advocate treating schools as hubs that connect children and families to community-based health and social services. And they both set family engagement and support as high priorities. Further, the community schools and P-3 movements are consistent in practice in that they both require new partnerships with the capacity to convene member organizations, coordinate collaborative work, and design and implement a coherent set of strategies that will yield tangible and significant results for young children and their families.

When preschool and kindergarten teachers come together to examine standards, conduct cross-site visits, and plan lessons and units together, they marvel at how right it feels.

Communities have experimented with comprehensive early childhood approaches in the past. However, current P-3 partnerships differ from these previous attempts in several ways — most important are the new structures and roles they are developing to build capacity and support effective on-the-ground implementation.

Building capacity through partnership: The P-3 backbone organization

Common to all of the P-3 plus wraparound examples cited above is an infrastructure of technical assistance and networking support. A university team and local site mentors and coaches support the child-parent centers, and the Buffett Early Childhood Institute supports the Superintendents' Plan in Omaha. In Cincinnati, the school district, networks of school partners, and a number of nonprofit coordinating agencies surround the community learning centers. In the SUN Service System, Multnomah County works with nonprofit agencies and district partners to support school-based site managers and manage systemic initiatives such as the P-3 pilot.

In each case, clusters of schools, preschools, and other partners are supported by a backbone organization, a term made popular by the collective impact approach (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Backbone organizations convene and facilitate community partnerships, help design and coordinate a strategic plan of mutually reinforcing activities, and provide technical assistance and capacity-building support to ensure successful implementation of the plan. As collective impact initiatives have proliferated across the country — one study using a narrow definition counts 182 initiatives — so, too, have a variety of backbone arrangements. Some are led by United Way agencies or other nonprofits; school districts play a leading role in others (Henig et al., 2016).

P-3 partnerships that focus on quality improvement, alignment across age span, and coordination of health and social services require backbone support. At a school or preschool, this could be a site manager or resource coordinator, and at the city and county levels, this will require organizational support of the kind found in Cincinnati and Multnomah County. Cradle-to-career initiatives that want to support P-3 improvement will need to create special units within their organizations specifically dedicated to coordinating services and technical

assistance across the P-3 continuum. Other communities will need to build new P-3 backbone organizations from scratch.

It is hard to imagine another set of reforms that has more potential to significantly raise achievement and social-emotional competence for low-income children, support family stability, and build stronger communities.

The promise of P-3 community partnerships

When preschool and kindergarten teachers come together to examine standards, conduct cross-site visits, and plan lessons and units together, they marvel at how right it feels. It seems strange to them that they have always worked in separate spheres. Preschool teachers feel like they are part of a bigger system and appreciate learning more about how to prepare their children, while kindergarten teachers value collaborating with other early childhood teachers and learning more about the children who enter their classrooms each year. Further, as these collaborations grow, elementary school principals and preschool directors often begin calling each other to discuss specific children and plan transition activities.

Community school principals and site managers tell similar stories, as do home visitors who participate in communities of practice and K-3 teachers who meet in vertical alignment teams. These structural arrangements feel right because they lead to strategies that better meet the needs of children and families. Moreover, they are backed by research on what is best for children, and they address the problems that characterize our existing early childhood and early elementary schools systems of care and learning. By using these strategies, the child-parent centers and a number of communities have achieved some of the best results for low-income children we have on record, and many other communities are now adopting these reforms and designing new structures to deepen and expand this work. It is hard to imagine another set of reforms that has more potential to significantly raise achievement and social-emotional competence for low-income children, support family stability, and build stronger communities. Among the many challenges we currently face, it is hard to imagine many priorities that rank higher than these.

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