

Early Learning in Promise Neighborhoods



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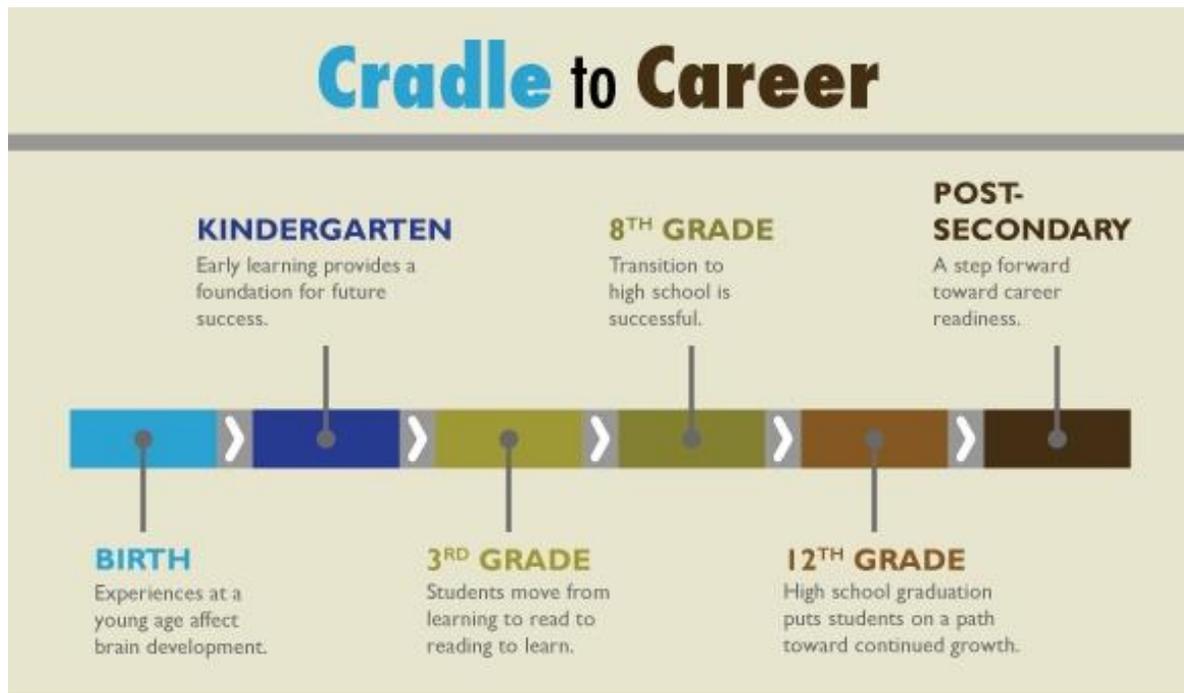
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Early Learning in Promise Neighborhoods

Introduction

About Promise Neighborhoods

With the success of the Harlem Children's Zone as its inspiration, the federal [Promise Neighborhoods](#) program seeks to support community-driven, place-based efforts to improve educational and developmental outcomes for children in distressed communities. The founding vision is that "all children growing up in Promise Neighborhoods have access to effective schools and strong systems of family and community support that will prepare them to attain an excellent education and successfully transition to college and career" [1].



The Promise Neighborhoods program supports the implementation of innovative strategies that improve outcomes for children in the nation's most distressed communities. This is accomplished by building a cradle-to-career continuum of supports and by increasing the capacity of community leaders and organizations to plan, implement and track progress toward 10 results (including students entering kindergarten ready to succeed in school, graduating from high school and feeling safe at school and in the community) and 15 indicators (including attendance, graduation and student mobility rates and participation in daily physical activity).

Education Outcomes & Indicators



1. Children enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school.

1. # and % of children birth to kindergarten entry who have a place where they usually go, other than an emergency room, when they are sick or in need of advice about their health.

2. # and % of 3-year-olds and children in kindergarten who demonstrate at the beginning of the program or school year age-appropriate functioning across multiple domains of early learning as determined using developmentally appropriate early learning measures.

3. # & % of children from birth to kindergarten entry participating in center-based or formal home-based early learning settings or programs, which may include Early Head Start, Head Start, child care or preschool.



2. Students are proficient in core academic subjects.

4. # & % of students at or above grade level according to state mathematics and reading or language arts assessments in at least the grades required by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (third through eighth and once in high school).



3. Students successfully transition from middle school grades to high school.

5. Attendance rate of students in sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth grade.



4. Youth graduate from high school.

6. Graduation rate.



5. High school graduates obtain a postsecondary degree, certification or credential.

7. # & % of Promise Neighborhoods students who graduate with a regular high school diploma and obtain postsecondary degrees, vocational certificates or other industry-recognized certifications or credentials without the need for remediation.

Family & Community Support Outcomes & Indicators



6. Students are healthy.

8. # & % of children who participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily.

9. # & % of children who consume five or more servings of fruits and vegetables daily.



7. Students feel safe at school and in their community.

10. # & % of students who feel safe at school and traveling to and from school, as measured by a school climate needs assessment.



8. Students live in stable communities.

11. Student mobility rate.



9. Families and community members support learning in Promise Neighborhoods schools.

12. # and % of parents or family members for children birth to kindergarten entry who report that they read to their children three or more times per week.

13. # and % of parents or family members for children in kindergarten through eighth grade who report encouraging their children to read books outside of school.

14. # and % of parents or family members for children in the ninth through twelfth grades who report talking with their children about the importance of college and career.



10. Students have access to 21st-century learning tools.

15. # & % of students who have school and home access (and % of the day they have access) to broadband Internet and a connected computing device.

Grantees focus heavily on collaboration, breaking down silos among agencies and working with local programs to implement, scale up and sustain solutions that help students learn, grow and succeed.

About This Guide

A number of Promise Neighborhoods grantees are well into the implementation phase and adopting different approaches to achieve the common result that all children enter kindergarten ready to succeed. In 2012, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) authored a report with snapshots of the early learning work taking shape in the first cohort of Promise Neighborhoods grantees [2]. As current grantees continue building their cradle-to-career pipelines, it is useful to examine what strategies some of these pioneer neighborhoods are adopting and why, how neighborhood stakeholders are implementing these strategies and how they are measuring progress and tracking results. This promising practices guide builds on the original 2012 report and offers a more in-depth and behind-the-scenes look at the experiences of three Promise Neighborhoods grantees.

What Early Learners Need

In order to ensure that students and families start off ready for school success, Promise Neighborhoods grantees work to strengthen and to streamline the front end of the cradle-to-career pipeline. Research evidence is clear that the earliest years of life are a critical time for children's growth and development [3]. Early life experiences shape the developing brain architecture and set a course for educational and health outcomes during an individual's lifetime. From birth, children need consistent, nurturing and responsive relationships with caring adults (including parents and others in primary caregiving roles). They need safe and stable home environments and a consistent medical home for preventive care and treatment. All children need proper nutrition and access to screening and treatment for developmental delays (such as language and speech, motor, social-emotional and cognitive). Young children need to engage in high-quality early learning experiences at home or elsewhere from birth to kindergarten entry, and they and their families need support during the periods of transition at that age (e.g., from the home to the child care environment or from preschool to kindergarten) [4]. Conversely, chronic exposure to high levels of stress, malnutrition and other adverse conditions impair healthy development and can result in lifelong challenges and poor outcomes. Fortunately, research evidence shows that key

Protective Factors

CSSP's research-based Protective Factors Framework calls attention to five protective factors that have been shown to make positive outcomes more likely for young children and their families and to reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect: (1) parental resilience, (2) families' social connections, (3) their access to concrete support in times of need, (4) parents' own knowledge of parenting and child development and (5) the social and emotional competence of children. Field research shows that there are many formal and informal opportunities to help any family build and sustain these protective factors.

Through the Strengthening Families initiative, CSSP and its national partner organizations helped more than 30 states to shift systems, policy and practice to help programs working with children and families focus on protective factors. States have applied the Strengthening Families approach in early childhood, child welfare, child abuse prevention and other child and family serving systems.

For more information, visit <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies>.

[protective factors](#), when robust in a family, can buffer against the impact of external stressors and reduce the likelihood of poor outcomes even in the face of multiple risk factors [4].

Understanding the Early Learning Landscape

Because so many factors contribute to school readiness, the Promise Neighborhoods program is tasked with implementing a mix of solutions that touch multiple programs and services (such as maternal and child health, home visiting, child care, pre-kindergarten [Pre-K], Head Start and family support), which are not always connected through a seamless system. In fact, early childhood supports and services are typically scattered across multiple systems. They are funded through a patchwork of local, state and federal sources that serve different populations and come with different rules, regulations and requirements. At the same time, America's rich geographic, economic, cultural and linguistic diversity demands local solutions that are responsive to the unique needs of families at the community level. There is no single solution to ensuring school readiness. Finally, measuring indicators and outcomes for very young children is complex. Children learn and grow at different rates and in different developmental domains during the first years of life, which makes the assessment of young children a particular challenge. There is a wide range of screening and assessment tools available that are valid and reliable for specific purposes and populations, so choosing the appropriate tools and collecting comparable data across programs can be a challenge [5,6]. Children attend a variety of formal and informal early care and education arrangements before they enter school, making it difficult to track their experiences before school entry. High mobility rates of families in some low-income communities add to this challenge.

Key Early Learning Strategies

The Promise Neighborhoods program is designed to help guide communities through the complex early childhood landscape by asking them to focus on specific key early childhood indicators related to children's access to a medical home; children's developmental status (school readiness) at age 3 and at kindergarten entry across multiple domains; children's participation (from birth to kindergarten entry) in early learning settings or programs and the extent to which parents or family members read to their children at least three times per week.

These required progress measures, along with the program's flexible funding, allow grantees to pursue a range of innovative strategies that address the children's developmental health and early experiences, strengthen the capacity of parents and help families build protective factors. The strategies that one neighborhood adopts may look very different from those of

Early Learning Indicators

Promise Neighborhoods track progress on specific early learning indicators:

and % of children birth to kindergarten entry who have a place where they usually go, other than an emergency room, when they are sick or in need of advice about their health.

and % of 3-year-olds and children in kindergarten who demonstrate at the beginning of the program or school year age-appropriate functioning across multiple domains of early learning.

and % of children from birth to kindergarten entry participating in center-based or formal home-based early learning settings or programs.

and % of parents or family members for children birth to kindergarten entry who report that they read to their children three or more times per week.

and % of parents or family members for children in kindergarten through eighth grade who report encouraging their children to read books outside of school.



another, depending on the needs of its families, the available resources and the existing capacity within the community and other factors. However, across the Promise Neighborhoods grantees, early learning solutions tend to fall into four categories:

1. Promoting healthy births and young children through strategies such as prenatal care and home visiting.
2. Providing parenting support and education through parenting classes, coaching and other approaches.
3. Monitoring and promoting age-appropriate functioning by screening children at regular intervals to ensure they are on track and to intervene as early as possible when delays are identified.
4. Expanding families' access to affordable high-quality early learning opportunities (ELOs) through financial assistance, quality improvement initiatives and support during the transition to kindergarten.

Given the role of parents as their children's first teachers, Promise Neighborhoods grantees also pursue strategies that bolster parents' capacity to be decision-makers and leaders at home and in the community. Paying attention to parents' own strengths and their educational and professional needs and goals are an important part of this work, as is helping families achieve stability through affordable housing, regular employment and food security. Promise Neighborhoods grantees are testing the theory that these two-generation approaches promote children's kindergarten readiness and drive long-term, sustainable change in the community. Most importantly, they are doing so with intentional sensitivity and understanding about the culture and life experiences of neighborhood residents and by communicating in the native language of non-English speakers.

Lessons from Early Implementation

The following case studies present three very different neighborhoods and approaches, identify lessons learned and explore the implications for others seeking to replicate their successes. The Northside Achievement Zone in Minneapolis; the Berea College Promise Neighborhood, which includes the Clay, Jackson and Owsley Counties in Kentucky and the Hayward Promise Neighborhood in the San Francisco Bay Area of California are representative of the rich diversity of America's neighborhoods. Each features a unique demographic and cultural mix, geographic characteristics, economic conditions and institutional infrastructure that inform their approaches to promoting kindergarten readiness. Each case study describes the defining attributes of the Promise Neighborhoods grantee, showcases its current early learning efforts and the results that are beginning to emerge, identifies challenges and discusses lessons learned as well as implications for other neighborhoods.



Profile: Northside Achievement Zone

The [Northside Achievement Zone](#) (NAZ) seeks to end multigenerational poverty within north Minneapolis, using education as a lever. African American families comprise the majority of NAZ's residents, but the neighborhood is also home to many Hmong, Latino and Somali families and a smaller number of Caucasians. Because data show that the achievement gap has hit African American students the hardest, NAZ leaders first sought to target recruitment and enrollment efforts to reach this demographic. However, the initiative is now reaching out to other groups [7].

Data show that most children living in NAZ lack formal early childhood education and begin school already behind academically. Relatively few infants and toddlers (16 percent) and only slightly more than half of preschoolers (53 percent) attend formal family- or center-based early childhood programs. Only 29 percent of entering kindergartners living in and near the Zone meet literacy benchmarks, compared to 71 percent of children in the entire Minneapolis School District. To address these problems, NAZ leaders laid out three critical goals for their early learning work:

1. Strengthen parent intent and action to navigate the complex, myriad child care resources available.
2. Ensure a sufficient number of slots in high-quality early learning programs while helping families to access those slots.
3. Conduct or refer young children to early screenings to identify needs and drive supports.

Very early on, NAZ leaders prioritized efforts to ensure that the Promise Neighborhoods initiative, through its staff, activities and investments, reflects and [values families as leaders of transformation](#) in the community. The first step, and perhaps the key to NAZ's success, was to hire NAZ Connectors from within the community whose job it is to cultivate relationships with enrolled families, guide them through the NAZ program and develop an individual plan for each family member (parents as well as children). From the start, NAZ was very intentional about hiring NAZ Connectors who reflect not only the demographic make-up, but also the life experiences of the families enrolled. NAZ attributes its soaring enrollment and retention numbers to this strategy [8,9]. Initially focused on the African American community, NAZ recently hired two Spanish-speaking and two Hmong-speaking NAZ Connectors and anticipates recruiting staff from the Somali community in the near future.

NAZ Connectors are also supported by a team of NAZ Navigators who are specialists in specific program areas (e.g., housing, academic support, etc.). For example, NAZ Early Childhood Navigators provide specialized support to ensure NAZ families access high-quality early childhood education

NAZ Connectors & Navigators

[NAZ Connectors](#) are “family coaches” who enroll families into NAZ and remain their partner until their children graduate from high school. They are either from Northside or have lived in similar circumstances as the families they support. NAZ Connectors help parents set family Achievement Plans — a focused growth process designed to bring out the best in each NAZ scholar, accelerating academic and college-going success — and connect them with the right programs to reach their goals.

[NAZ Navigators](#) are specialized to help families reach their goals in specific areas.

Early Childhood Navigators provide specialized support to ensure NAZ families access high-quality early childhood education resources.

Behavioral Health Navigators use observation and assessment to determine which mental health services would be beneficial for those parents and children who have experienced trauma and need extra support.

Other Navigators include Academic Navigators, Housing Navigators and Career & Finance Navigators.



resources. In addition to supporting more than 100 individual scholarships annually, NAZ Early Childhood Navigators connect families with home visiting and additional center-based services to ensure young children meet developmental milestones toward kindergarten readiness.

NORTHSIDE ACHIEVEMENT ZONE’S EARLY LEARNING NETWORK

NAZ tapped the Early Childhood Action Team, a 20-member network of all the major early childhood centers in northern Minneapolis and representatives from city and county government and intermediary organizations, to serve as its Early Learning Network. Its co-chairs are members of the NAZ management team. The Early Childhood Action Team developed an [Early Childhood Solution Plan](#) [10] to guide NAZ and its partners as they worked collaboratively to achieve two goals:

1. Prenatally through age 3, children’s age-appropriate development toward kindergarten readiness will be monitored, and services and supports will be provided as needed.
2. NAZ-enrolled children ages 3–5 are making adequate progress toward developing literacy, numeracy and other skills that contribute to kindergarten readiness.

One of the essential ingredients identified in the plan is organizational commitment among NAZ partners to active collaboration and NAZ values. The Early Childhood Solution Plan identifies what partners can do to intentionally embed NAZ values into their institutional culture through policies, procedures and training.

ESSENTIAL EARLY LEARNING COMPONENTS

Healthy births and young children

NAZ Connectors and partners reach out to find and enroll pregnant families living in the Zone and refer them to prenatal services and intensive home visiting services. Women are referred to the [Twin Cities Healthy Start](#) program for prenatal supports, including help finding a doctor and applying for insurance; information about pregnancy, nutrition, childbirth and delivery, the baby’s growth, breastfeeding and parenting and help getting supplies to care for the infant. Pregnant women living in the Zone also receive home visits from public health nurses beginning in the first trimester of the pregnancy and continuing until the child is 2 years old. Teen moms are a particular priority. In Year 1, approximately a dozen pregnant women from NAZ received prenatal supports and home visits. NAZ reports that 92 percent of children ages 0–5 in the Zone have a medical home [2].

Parenting support and education

[Family Academy](#) is a foundational component of the NAZ cradle-to-career pipeline. It empowers parents with education targeted to their children's specific development stages. All NAZ families enroll in the particular Family Academy program that fits their goals. The program design bridges content expertise with the peer expertise of an Engagement Team to deliver high-impact strategies that parents use to build a culture of achievement at home. Parent education is targeted to children's specific developmental stages. For instance, one set of classes is for families of infants and toddlers. The class is held in 3-hour sessions once per week for 13 weeks. Children are welcome, and transportation, a meal, stipends, sibling care and early learning supplies are provided. NAZ adapted a curriculum called "The Incredible Years," to fit the language and experiences of NAZ families. In the first year, 57 families graduated from two infant/toddler classes, with an 85 percent completion rate [2].

Age-appropriate functioning

At the beginning of Year 2, the NAZ Early Childhood Action Team formed a task force to look at child screening and develop recommendations to create an aligned system of screening and assessments. Multiple partners, including Minneapolis Public Schools, Head Start programs and pediatricians were already conducting screenings of children at various ages using a range of tools. While Minneapolis Public Schools already offer state-funded "[Screen at 3](#)" services, NAZ sought to extend developmental screening efforts to all 0–5-year-olds of NAZ-enrolled families. After reviewing the tools in use throughout the community, the NAZ Early Childhood Action Team selected the [Ages & Stages Questionnaires®](#) (ASQ) and the [Ages & Stages Questionnaires®: Social-Emotional](#) (ASQ:SE) as the standard tools, along with the [myIGDIs \(individual growth & development indicators\) Early Literacy+](#) and [Early Numeracy Assessments](#) tools for all 4–5-year-olds.

The goal of NAZ's screening and progress monitoring plan is to promote collaboration among community partners to

- Monitor children's progress toward the goal of kindergarten readiness.
- Identify areas where scholars are excelling and areas where scholars may need additional support.
- Provide information to determine what opportunities will best help scholars stay on track for kindergarten.

Through collaborative screening efforts, NAZ and its partners will promote a common understanding within the community about growth and support for its youngest scholars. The intent is to screen all NAZ children twice per calendar year (in the spring and fall) in order to closely monitor children's developmental progress and ensure that families are connected to supports as soon as any needs are detected.

NAZ used a two-pronged approach to reaching families with young children. Early care and education centers screened NAZ-enrolled children, who comprise about 30 percent of the total NAZ population of 0–5-year-olds. To support early care and education providers in their adoption of the common screening methods, NAZ purchased the screening tools, offered training and worked with the providers to ensure that NAZ-enrolled children were screened and referred for services as needed.

NAZ also hosted two screening events in the community for NAZ-enrolled children ages 3–5. NAZ Connectors invited the families in their caseloads to participate using a common script that made the case for why screening is important and how it will help their children. Families were also offered a \$20 gift card as added incentive. Turnout was much higher than NAZ partners expected, and many of the hardest-to-reach families attended. Close to 150 children received screenings through these two events. NAZ partners and staff were very intentional about structuring follow-up communication and referrals with families so that they heard first from a trusted and familiar connection (such as a NAZ Connector, Early Childhood Navigator or Behavioral Health Navigator).

NAZ estimates that approximately 30 to 40 percent of the children ages 3–4 in the Zone have received a developmental screening [2]. The ultimate goal is to screen all 400 NAZ children ages birth to 5 twice per year. NAZ is partnering closely with the Minneapolis Public Schools Early Childhood (MPS EC) Screening as they offer two programs: 3–5 Early Childhood Screening for all children prior to kindergarten entrance and Birth–2 Central Intake for families who are concerned about how their child is developing.

MPS EC Screening leaders work on collaborative, cross-sector, quality improvement projects to screen children for possible health or developmental concerns that may impact learning. The process includes a check of vision and hearing, child development and a review of the child's health. The program helps families access services for their children that will help them to be ready for kindergarten. MPS ECS launched a School Readiness Follow-Through Initiative to ensure that each child who is screened by MPS who needs an early learning experience has the opportunity to attend a program before kindergarten. The model developed includes a protocol for family interviewing, referral to additional resources, documentation of outcomes in the student record and in a data tracking system.

Helping families afford high-quality early learning programs

Because there are a number of public and private Pre-K and Head Start classes in and near the Zone, NAZ decided to focus its initial efforts on helping more families (who otherwise could not afford these programs) to enroll their children. NAZ was fortunate to receive federal Race to the Top money from the state as one of four high-need communities in Minnesota working to increase the number of children ages 0–5 enrolled in early learning programs.

The funds — approximately \$2.9 million for NAZ — became available in October 2012, and NAZ decided to use it for full scholarships of up to \$15,000 per family. To qualify, families have to live in the Zone, have a child age 3 or 4 and agree to send their child to one of the accredited early learning partners that has attained at least a 3- or 4-star rating (out of a possible four stars) from Parent Aware, the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) for early care and education programs. NAZ targeted children within 2 years of entering kindergarten. Of this group, priority was given to children who had not been attending formal child care or early learning programs. To date, NAZ was able to award 150 children with scholarships from the grant money, many of whom were able to use their scholarship to be enrolled in high-quality programming for 1–3 years before transitioning to kindergarten.

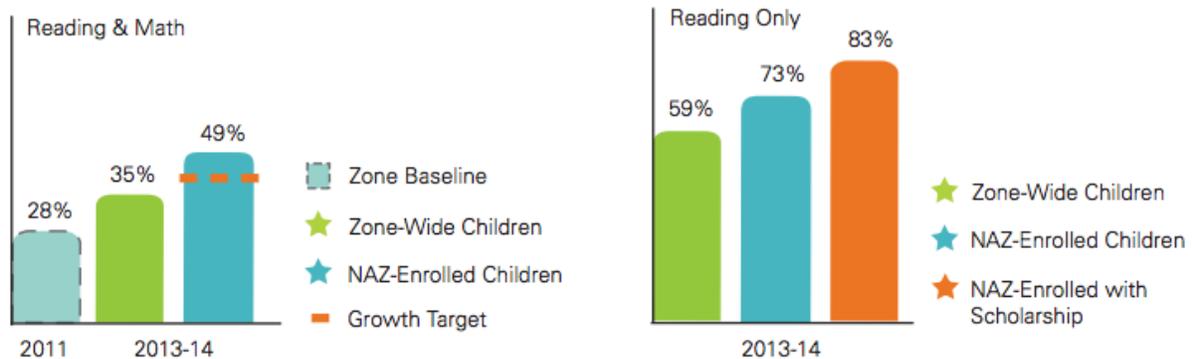
In 2013, NAZ was able to assist families in applying for another state-funded scholarship opportunity. Each child was potentially eligible to receive up to \$5,000 to attend an early childhood education center

that is 3- or 4-star rated by the state's quality rating system. To date, a total of 14 scholarships have been awarded.

Through developmental screening, NAZ is able to match those children who are delayed with early learning programs that offer therapeutic services and other supports to meet their individual needs. Results from the 2013 Beginning Kindergarten Assessment (BKA) show that NAZ-enrolled kindergarteners were better prepared than non-NAZ students across the Zone (59 percent NAZ-enrolled compared to 35 percent Zone-wide) [11].

EDUCATION RESULTS

KINDERGARTEN READINESS MEASURED BY BKA



NAZ Early Childhood Navigators are also screening families for eligibility for other supports such as child care subsidies, so that they can afford to choose higher-quality opportunities. Messaging to parents about the importance of early learning, along with support to help them access programs in the community, has helped boost enrollment throughout NAZ. Since 2010, families' participation in center-based child care or preschool programs community-wide has increased from 14 percent to 42 percent [12].

Enhancing the quality of child care and early learning programs

NAZ is working to increase the quality of existing child care programs in the community. Currently few family, friend and neighbor child care homes (also known as unlicensed or informal child care) participate in the Parent Aware quality rating system. One of NAZ's partners, [Think Small](#), is reaching out to these providers to identify and to promote quality enhancements, encourage them to become licensed and to participate in Parent Aware. To counter provider reluctance in the face of paperwork and process burdens, Think Small and NAZ staff help connect them with Parent Aware coaches (funded through the state's Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge [RTT-ELC] grant). Providers who achieve a 3- or 4-star rating are also eligible to apply for professional development scholarships.

The 10 center- and school-based early learning programs represented on the NAZ Early Childhood Action Team have built strong collaborative relationships over time. Through intentional communication

and partnership, these partners know which programs offer what services (such as transportation, therapeutic services and full-day/year-round hours of availability). Working with NAZ Connectors, Navigators and families, the early learning program administrators can help match families to the programs that best meet their needs.

Supporting families during the transition to kindergarten

NAZ is now turning its focus to scholars and families as they transition to kindergarten. Pre-K Connectors will partner with Early Childhood Navigators and Academic Navigators (who support K–12 scholars) to include transition goals in each scholar’s plan. Once families decide where they will enroll their children (public, charter or private school), NAZ will work closely with district partners to ensure staff collaborate with NAZ Connectors and Navigators. With the infusion of federal RTT-ELC funds, the district was able to allocate a portion of its Title I funding to hire two staff with expertise in early childhood and transitions to support this effort. The district supported various transition activities between schools and early childhood programs (such as field trips to kindergarten and elementary school staff visits to child care centers) and collaborated with NAZ staff to hold a “Transition to Kindergarten” event for the past two years. The events were aimed to prepare parents to support their scholars’ transition to Kindergarten and provide them with a forum to ask questions, provide families an opportunity to build relationships with other families that will be attending the same school and provide an opportunity to build relationships between families and NAZ/MPS staff.

NAZ has placed Academic Navigators and NAZ Connectors in six target elementary schools (public, charter and private) within the Zone.

CHALLENGES

Recruiting early childhood systems navigators with the right content expertise, community experience and disposition

The individuals who fill the navigator role need to know about the range of services available in the community, understand eligibility requirements and enrollment processes and be able to refer and connect families to the specific resources they need to achieve the goals of their individual plans. They also need to be able to build trusting relationships with families, providers and partners. Thus, they need familiarity with the community and the lived experiences of residents, and they need to be able to relate to families so that they are valued and respected. The NAZ Early Childhood Action Team has found only a small number of individuals with the right mix of knowledge, skills and experience to fill this important role. In fact, the team went several months without an Early Childhood Navigator rather than hiring someone who was not the right fit.

Promoting the consistent use of screening tools across early learning programs

The NAZ Early Childhood Action Team identified developmental screening and monitoring throughout the birth-to-5 age span as an early priority. The team spent 1 year planning and engaged internal evaluation partners at the University of Minnesota to identify the best developmentally appropriate screening tools that all programs could use consistently. The intent was to improve comparability, aggregation and seamless use of data to inform decisions about individual children and community-wide needs. A community scan found that early learning programs were using a wide range of different tools, so convincing them to switch to a common set of tools was an unexpected challenge. NAZ staff had to

have conversations with each partnering early learning organization about why it should switch, what support it would receive and how it could use and share results. As a result, the screening initiative was rolled out only in the past year.

Financing and sustaining preschool scholarships at scale beyond the end of the state’s RTT-ELC grant

NAZ’s annual goal starting in 2016 at full scale up is to operate with 1,000 families enrolled in its pipeline, with a target of 300 preschool-age scholars annually in high-quality early learning centers. Even with the current RTT-ELC funds from the state, NAZ faces the challenge of financing scholarships for so many children. Sustaining funding for preschool scholarships beyond Minnesota’s RTT-ELC grant will be difficult. NAZ is particularly concerned about those children who, after one year in a preschool program as 3-year-olds, will not have affordable access to the program at age 4. The Early Childhood Action Team has already started to brainstorm strategies to sustain enrollment, blend public and private sources and identify other ways to ensure the NAZ neighborhood does not lose ground once the grant money is gone.



Building Shared Data Infrastructure to Better Support Families

[NAZ Connect](#) is an online tool that captures relevant data on families, programs and services in NAZ. This enables all NAZ partners to access the same information to help families develop achievement plans, connect them with opportunities and services and track their participation in and receipt of services.



Profile: Berea College Promise Neighborhood

The Berea College Promise Neighborhood (Berea College PN) was one of the first Promise Neighborhoods grantees, receiving a federal planning grant in 2010 and an implementation grant in 2011. It was also the first to focus on the needs of a highly rural population. Since its conceptual beginnings, Berea College PN has taken great strides toward realizing its vision of improving educational outcomes by working with local schools and organizations to provide cradle-to-career supports for students, families and the community. Its experiences and successes to date offer an important perspective for other largely rural communities engaged in similar work [13].

Berea College PN includes the Clay, Jackson and Owsley Counties in Kentucky, all three of which are heavily rural and have a history of intergenerational poverty. These communities have few businesses or foundations. School districts are the major employers in these neighborhoods, and other job opportunities are few and far between.

Because it is heavily rural, services are not geographically accessible for many families in the region. Only about one-third of young children attend formal early care and education programs [14]. In two of the districts, Head Start and Kentucky preschool programs combine resources to stretch dollars to serve more children from birth to kindergarten. These programs provide most of the formal child care. There is only one child care center in addition to these publicly funded programs. Most families rely on relative, friend and neighbor care. These characteristics influenced Berea College PN's decision to focus on strengthening the quality, capacity and reach of the existing early childhood programs.

During the planning year, Berea College PN convened stakeholders to discuss the needs of children, families and providers of services to children from birth to kindergarten. Berea College PN's model is unique because it encompasses three rural communities. Families are not enrolled as Promise Neighborhoods participants; rather, funding and activities are targeted to enhance the capacity and the quality of existing programs that address the range of needs families in the community experience. Early on, Berea College PN stakeholders made a strategic decision to support and to connect existing early childhood programs in the neighborhood footprint with quality improvement priorities of the [Kentucky Governor's Office of Early Childhood](#) (GOEC) and the new Unbridled Learning Accountability Model for Kentucky public schools and districts.

BEREA COLLEGE PROMISE NEIGHBORHOOD'S EARLY LEARNING NETWORK

Berea College PN developed an Early Learning Network to bring together Head Start directors, elementary school principals, early childhood district

coordinators, faith-based organizations, parents and local representatives from the Kentucky Early Intervention System, the [Berea Early Childhood Regional Training Center](#), the Community Early Childhood Councils (CECCs), the Eastern Kentucky Child Care Coalition (EKCCC) and Save the Children. The Early Learning Network is focused on strengthening relationships, building capacity and extending the partnering agencies' reach. EKCCC and Berea College PN provided technical assistance to build the capacity of local caregivers, teachers, parents and organizations to implement school readiness initiatives.

Berea College PN Early Childhood Specialists (ECSs) were added as active members of the CECCs in all three counties. Their role is to provide coaching, mentoring and financial assistance to help the three CECCs in Berea College PN become stronger assets in their communities. The CECCs receive funding from the GOEC, so the ECSs play an important role in helping them meet requirements for continued funding.

ESSENTIAL EARLY LEARNING COMPONENTS

Healthy births and young children

Berea College PN combines efforts with agencies such as Head Start, Save the Children's home visiting program called [Early Steps to School Success](#) (ESSS) and local health departments to provide services to pregnant women in order to facilitate their access to health care. Because transportation is a barrier to program participation in the rural mountain area, home visiting is an effective solution. Berea College PN partners with Save the Children to add 50 children ages birth to 3 and their families in the ESSS home visiting program. Berea College PN's Head Start and health department partners also ensure that children have a medical home and meet the health care needs of a significant number of young children. Berea College PN next plans to address dental care among preschoolers who do not attend Head Start.

Parenting support and education

Berea College PN placed a parent engagement specialist in each county. These staff members coordinate activities for parents and families, such as grandparent support groups, the Families and Schools Together (FAST) program (discussed in the section *Supporting families during the transition to kindergarten*), home visits, parent education workshops and parent advocacy groups. They also work with the ECSs, who identify and refer families for services. In addition, [Partners for Education](#) at Berea College is developing a comprehensive family engagement plan beginning with pregnant women and families of children from birth through the first year of college. Assessing the culture and measuring change are a part of this process.

The CECCs in all three counties use Promise Neighborhoods grant funds to increase family literacy and reading through activities such as [Dolly Parton's Imagination Library](#), transition picnics (fun evenings with



Unbridled Learning Accountability Model

Under the [Unbridled Learning Accountability Model](#), Kentucky public schools and districts are accountable for educating children so they are college or career ready. It includes multiple measures that take into account all areas of a school's work.

food and entertainment aimed at providing parent education about school readiness and the importance of kindergarten attendance) and the dissemination of books, reading tips for parents and child development information.

Age-appropriate functioning

There are multiple screening efforts under way throughout Berea College PN. Infants and toddlers in the ESSS home visiting program are screened using the ASQ and are referred for medical or developmental evaluations if needed. Families in the ESSS program receive information every 2 months about their child's development and are offered ideas about how to help their children reach developmental targets.

Head Start and Pre-K programs conduct community-wide screening for children at age 3 or 4. The screening identifies students who are at risk or experiencing developmental delays and are therefore eligible for publicly funded preschool. The Owsley County district uses the ASQ in its Pre-K program; the districts in Clay and Jackson Counties use the [Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning™, Fourth Edition](#) (DIAL™-4).

Children in Head Start and Kentucky's state-funded preschool program are also assessed three times per year for their ongoing progress toward the Kentucky Early Childhood Standards using the [Teaching Strategies GOLD® assessment](#). Results are reported to the Kentucky Early Childhood Data System. Berea College PN is also collaborating with preschool teachers and parents to provide targeted, intentional interactions with preschool children aimed at the areas where children are functioning below age level.

In 2013, the GOEC began to roll out a new kindergarten entry assessment using the [BRIGANCE®](#) assessment tool. By providing technical assistance and support, Berea College PN seized the opportunity to participate in the state's pilot program so that it could establish a baseline measure for annual gains in all districts within the Promise Neighborhoods boundaries.

Finally, all school-based Berea College PN staff monitor the status of children on their caseload using age-appropriate developmental assessment tools such as the ASQ. They refer families to the Promise Neighborhoods Parent Engagement Specialists when potential needs are identified. Parent Engagement Specialists forge relationships with families and communicate regularly via phone, email and home visits.

Enhancing literacy in early learning programs

Berea College PN is investing in teacher professional development and the [Raising A Reader](#) program. Through its preschool coaching project, Berea College PN is providing culturally appropriate, embedded professional development to 42 teachers in 20 of the 25 classrooms in the neighborhood. State requirements mandate that schools use the [Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale](#) (ECERS) to assess the quality of their preschool programs. The preschool coaching project supports teachers on the appropriate use of the ECERS through site visits and distance learning techniques such as phone and video conferencing and webinars. Early indicators suggest that the coaching initiative is effective. Sixteen of the 20 classrooms participating in the coaching initiative increased the quality of the care and the education environments as measured by pre- and post-ECERS scores.

Improving the quality of child care

Berea College PN is working to expand the availability of higher-quality early care and education options for families. EKCCC is providing professional development to early childhood providers in center- and school-based programs as well as for family child care providers. Training covers topics related to running a family-based child care program as a business, such as how to navigate the licensing process, money management, child development skills and how to apply for the U.S. Department of Agriculture food reimbursements. Mentor coaches provide direct support to providers on improving the physical environment and curriculum to support the education of the young children [15]. The initiative has already doubled the number of certified family child care providers participating in [STARS for KIDS NOW](#), Kentucky's current QRIS, from three to six.

The ECSs assigned to each CECC in Berea College PN review the quality of existing child care programs using the ECERS and offer materials, books and teacher consultations to 20 early childhood classrooms in the region. As a result, one child care center already completed the licensing requirements and achieved a voluntary Level 2 quality rating certificate in Kentucky's QRIS. Another program is preparing and applying for accreditation from the [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#). In addition, 14 out of 20 classrooms throughout the region scored higher on the ECERS after 7 months of coaching.

As part of Kentucky's [RTT-ELC grant](#), the state is implementing a new QRIS called Kentucky All STARS. Berea College PN anticipated the Kentucky All STARS' new mandatory quality standards and provided materials, professional development and technical assistance to help child care centers prepare to meet them. Staff will continue providing support in early childhood settings that will help the centers become Kentucky All STARS.

Supporting families during the transition to kindergarten

The Berea College PN Early Childhood Network is focusing on periods of transition and ensuring continuity through the early end of the cradle-to-career pipeline. A main thrust of its work is changing the supports for working with families. Berea College PN sponsors several activities such as FAST, which changes the role of families in the school by empowering families to be a more active presence in the school. As an evidence-based program, FAST was intentionally chosen to help reshape school culture. Also, the ESSS home visiting program is intentionally designed to build a bridge between home and school. Parent/child groups are held at local schools to help families of young children become comfortable in the environment before their child enters kindergarten.

CHALLENGES

Developing solutions for rural communities

The family enrollment approach typical of most other grantees is less suitable for families living in rural areas. Because of the geographic distance, logistical challenges and high mobility rates of families, the grantees realized they could not expect families to sign up for a new initiative. Rather, they sought to strengthen the quality and capacity of existing service systems so that families throughout the region are better served. Because families' participation in formal early care and education settings is relatively low, Berea College PN early childhood stakeholders made the decision to increase attention to family child

care providers. They also expanded efforts to reach young families at home through partnerships with Save the Children's ESSS home visiting program.

Funding cuts to early childhood and family support programs

In many communities across the country, federal and state funding cuts to early childhood and family support programs are a challenge. Such cuts are especially difficult for families in rural areas with high poverty levels. The Promise Neighborhoods grant funding helps fill the gap, but there are concerns about sustainability after the grant ends. Berea College PN partners have sought to leverage educational and developmental opportunities, such as quality improvement and school readiness efforts launched through the GOEC. This qualified them to receive technical assistance and other supports to achieve their own goals.

Data sharing among implementing partners

Because Berea College PN's early childhood system is still emerging and partnerships are in their early stages, mechanisms for facilitating seamless sharing of data and best practices are still evolving. However, agreements are now in place so that partner agencies can share individual child and family data and ensure mutual accountability for results.

Need for supportive leadership and reflective supervision

Berea College PN grantees found that many school administrators and other district leaders are compelled by accountability pressures and long-held professional beliefs that developmentally appropriate play-based curricula are not sufficient to ensure that young children will meet the state standards for preschool and kindergarten education [16]. Consultants are collaborating with early childhood supervisors to develop sustainable systems of supervision to support teachers as they implement quality initiatives. Stakeholders recognize that more work is needed to ensure that school leadership and the systems that support effective teaching are well grounded in developmental science, age-appropriate practice and the benefits of reflective supervision.



Profile: Hayward Promise Neighborhood

The Hayward Promise Neighborhood (HPN) encompasses the neighborhood bounded by Jackson Street, Harder Road and Whitman Street (the Jackson Triangle) in South Hayward, California, and supports students who attend six target schools within the Hayward Unified School District (HUSD). HPN represents a partnership among the Alameda County Public Health Department; City of Hayward; HUSD; California State University, East Bay (CSUEB); Chabot College; the Eden Area Regional Occupation Program and the Community Child Care Council (4Cs) of Alameda County; Tiburcio Vasquez Health Center; La Familia Counseling Service and Super Stars Literacy. About half of all residents are Hispanic, 63 percent speak a language other than English at home (46 percent speak Spanish), 47 percent of households have children under 18 years old in the home, 21 percent of children under 18 years old are living below the poverty level and more than 70 percent of students at HPN focus schools qualify for free and reduced price lunch and 51 percent of families are at low- to extremely low-income levels [17].

HPN identified significant gaps in its early learning programming for young children living in the neighborhood. When implementation of HPN began only 18 percent of children attended early learning programs, and there were long waiting lists for the few public preschool classrooms inside the neighborhood's borders. The supply of licensed child care providers and early learning slots are woefully insufficient to meet the neighborhood's demand. Currently, 25 percent of HPN children aged 0 to kindergarten entry living in the Jackson Triangle participate in center-based or formal home-based early learning settings, which is an increase from 24 percent in 2013. According to assessment data, children aged 0 to kindergarten entry living in HPN who demonstrated age-appropriate functioning across multiple domains of early learning at the beginning of the school year was as follows:

- 80 percent in 2012/2013 and 83 percent in 2013/2014 among 3-year olds
- 72 percent in 2012/2013 and 69 percent in 2013/2014 among kindergartners [17]

HAYWARD PROMISE NEIGHBORHOOD'S EARLY LEARNING NETWORK

The 4Cs of Alameda County leads HPN's Early Learning Network in partnership with numerous HPN funded and unfunded partners. The Early Learning Network meets monthly and is charged with improving outcomes for children prenatal through third grade. It brings existing agencies together to develop a common framework, help families find services and identify gaps [18]. It is also trying to improve collaboration among organizations working in the neighborhood. The Early Learning Network is also working to align local

policies with state policies; for example, by engaging child care programs in HPN to participate in a state QRIS pilot.

ESSENTIAL EARLY LEARNING COMPONENTS

Supporting mothers and families through home visiting programs

The Alameda County Public Health Department is now offering a Public Health Nursing program to all expecting and new mothers in HPN, with a special emphasis on low-income families at risk of poor health outcomes, to provide information and support during pregnancy and throughout a child's first three years, which is a critical developmental period. The public health nurse in the program works with HPN families who have children up to age 8 with medical and psychological needs. The public health nurse provides home visits in HPN and assesses medical and psychological needs, including whether the family has insurance and a primary care provider. Before the public health nurse can formally close a case, the family must be stable and connected to a medical home.

In 2015, HPN assigned a Promotora employed by Tiburcio Vasquez Health Center to work on referrals and linkage to Home Visitation Nurse services. The purpose of this coordination was to increase the caseload to the visitation nurse and to allow the focus of the nurse's efforts to be on nursing, health interventions and health education and case management, not outreach.

Reaching families through neighborhood Promotoras (Promoters)

The Promotoras Program is a volunteer, community-based effort focused on health education and outreach. Volunteers are trained how to become leaders in the community, communicate health information and advocate for the rights of their families and neighbors. Tiburcio Vasquez Health Center will provide Promotoras training and coaching for 10 Jackson Triangle residents each year. The Promotoras will support families of children birth through 5 years old with language and other barriers to accessing health care and/or to providing support (early childhood services referrals) for their children's education. The Promotoras have a dual focus: improving medical access for families and increasing parent understanding, engagement and participation in their children's schooling. They also provide advocacy to ensure their children's needs are met and that they are academically successful. Promotoras are deployed from the Parent Centers at Harder and Park Elementary Schools and conduct local level interventions at various community venues. Promotoras trained at Tiburcio Vasquez Health Center have an annual goal to reach 200–400 families with children 0–5 years old to ensure families have a medical home.

Parenting support and education

The 4Cs of Alameda County offers the Parent Promise Academy program for Jackson Triangle parents and caregivers such as informal family, friend and neighbor caregivers of children ages 0–8 years. This is a 30-week program that includes parenting education, peer support, resources for families and caregivers and enrichment activities for young children. The program is organized into three 10-week sessions covering three main topic areas: (1) positive communication and discipline, (2) child development and (3) health and nutrition. Classes are held one evening per week at the HUSD Family Resource Center Hub located in the heart of the Jackson Triangle. At the beginning of the evening, the families come together for dinner and socializing. After dinner, parents and caregivers attend interactive parenting classes. The class format is a combination of instruction, guest speakers, group activities and

Kindergarten Readiness Camps

The Kindergarten Readiness Camps served 24 children in their first year. The goal is to help transition students from being in a home environment to a school environment. The teachers emphasize positive social interaction among students. Class time focused on the social–emotional and self-regulation aspects of readiness. For example, children were exposed to routines and structures such as circle time, taking turns and lining up. Parents also agreed to attend 5 hours of parent education covering topics such as school readiness, literacy and health. By the end of the program, children were able to write numbers 1 to 10, hold their pencils correctly and get along with other children.

A study of summer Pre-K programs in Alameda County found that participating students outperformed their peers who had no Pre-K experience, but were still slightly behind those who attended a full-year preschool program.

For more information, visit <http://www.promiseneighborhoodsinstitute.org>.



discussion. During this time the children are involved in age-appropriate activities with experienced early childhood teachers. To support early literacy, parents take home reading calendars and record the times they read to their children. Children’s books are given to the families as incentives for completing the calendars. The program is offered in English and Spanish. The goal is to serve 30–40 Jackson Triangle parents and caregivers per year.

Age-appropriate functioning

Early care and education programs and providers in HPN use a variety of tools to assess children’s developmental progress. Parents participating in the Parent Promise Academy complete the ASQ. Results are used to refer families as needed to early intervention services provided through the [Regional Center of the East Bay](#) (ages 0–3) or HUSD (ages 4 and 5). All children enrolled in a state-funded HUSD preschool or child care program are assessed twice per year using the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP 2015) developed by the California Department of Education. Head Start classes in HPN have the discretion to use a range of instruments for developmental screening and assessments.

EARLY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Providing quality consultation to early care and education providers

Quality Counts is an intensive consultation program that was developed by First 5 Alameda County. The 4Cs of Alameda County provides Quality Counts coaching and training to early care and education providers serving children from the Jackson Triangle. The coaches help providers identify their program strengths and challenges and provide support and resources to improve program quality. The Quality Counts program services include collaborative program assessment to determine needs and strengths, collaborative development of a comprehensive action plan, facilitated support in implementing quality improvement strategies and ongoing support. Grants are provided to participating sites to help make improvements. In Year 4 HPN began working in collaboration with Alameda County’s QRIS pilot program to provide coaching, consultation and training to HUSD preschool programs in the Jackson Triangle, including Head Start classrooms at John Muir School and HUSD’s Tennyson High School Teen Parent Program. By Year 5, the goal is to have served 17 providers and approximately 152 Jackson Triangle children.

Expanding preschool capacity

HUSD, in partnership with HPN, opened eight new state-funded Pre-K classes in the Jackson Triangle serving students ages 3–5 from low-income families, English language learners and students with disabilities. The classes run for 3 hours per day, 5 days per week during the school year. About 190

additional children ages 3–5 are now able to attend a formal preschool program, enhancing their odds of being ready for kindergarten.

Preparing children through kindergarten readiness camps

Kindergarten data show that 43 percent of Jackson Triangle students are not prepared for kindergarten. First 5 Alameda County and HUSD are providing evidence-based kindergarten readiness camps for 4- and 5-year-olds who do not have prior preschool experience and who have other needs (such as they are English language learners or have disabilities). The 4-week camps are offered 4 days per week for 3.5 hours per day.

Supporting families during the transition to kindergarten

HUSD is continually working to align the content standards it uses for its preschool classes with its transitional kindergarten through grade 12 content standards. A team in the district works specifically on the articulation from Pre-K through kindergarten and first grade so that children transition seamlessly and learning from each level builds on the prior level. HPN is instituting data sharing among early care and education providers and kindergarten teachers (with parental permission), so that kindergarten teachers are prepared to meet the needs of incoming students [19].

CHALLENGES

Meeting the unique needs of immigrant families

The majority of the community in Hayward is Latino and, for many, Spanish is their primary language. Particular consideration is needed to ensure that information and services are translated or available in Spanish. Early on, the Promise Neighborhoods leadership made a commitment to communicating all of its work in both English and Spanish. Among first generation immigrants there are also issues of immigration status, fear of deportation among undocumented residents and the resulting fear and mistrust that impact their willingness to participate in the initiative and/or share information about their families and their circumstances with the Promise Neighborhoods institutions and staff. Bilingual services, in these cases especially, are not enough. The Hayward leaders also recognize the need to be sensitive to the cultural differences and legal challenges of many of their residents and design their efforts accordingly.

Recruiting frontline staff who are linguistically and culturally compatible with the families they will support

HPN's commitment to hiring staff who are a cultural match with the families they would serve proved a recruiting challenge and caused implementation delays in at least one piece of the early childhood strategic plan. For example, the Public Health Nursing program got off to a late start because of HPN's commitment to hiring bilingual and culturally compatible staff. The decision was made to postpone implementation in order to uphold the commitment to valuing families and promoting culturally and linguistically responsive practices.

Bridging institutional cultures

Another challenge, exemplified in the partnership between First 5 Alameda County and the Alameda County Health Department, was bridging distinct institutional cultures, processes and procedures. As a traditional public agency, the county health department is required to adhere to a number of protocols and procedural policies that, while necessary for legal and accountability purposes, can slow down

implementation efforts. In contrast, California's local First 5 commissions have greater flexibility over the use of funds and less procedural "red tape," which makes them more nimble and able to move more quickly to implement action steps. The two partners found this difference in institutional culture and procedural structure to be a challenge to smooth and rapid implementation of the HPN program. However, the experience taught them about the importance of understanding these differences and planning accordingly when deciding the roles, responsibilities and timelines of partnerships.

Locating training sites to accommodate staff recruited from the neighborhood

A third challenge, which also yielded valuable lessons, related to the location of training for the Promotoras. In the first year, the Promise Neighborhoods staff assumed due to transportation barriers that it would be best to train the Promotoras locally in the community. However, the staff had a hard time finding an appropriate, available space. Instead, the prospective Promotoras asked to hold the training at CSUEB, a Promise Neighborhoods partner organization located 2 miles away. Many were interested in experiencing a college setting, and with their own resourcefulness and some logistical assistance from the Promise Neighborhoods, all were able to work out transportation to attend the training on campus. Child care was provided, enabling the Promotoras to bring their children along with them so that they could experience a college environment as well. The Promise Neighborhoods staff helped them navigate logistical challenges such as how to secure a parking permit and take campus tours. The opportunity helped break down cultural and experiential barriers for the Promotoras, many of whom are now interested in exploring campus offerings and thinking about their continued education. The important lesson for the Promise Neighborhoods staff and leadership is that they should not always assume that every activity must be done in the neighborhood. They learned the importance of listening to the wisdom of the neighborhood residents involved and giving them a voice and a choice in decisions about planning and implementation.

Neighborhood Success Factors

Overall, there are three common factors that contributed to the emergent success of these three Promise Neighborhoods grantees.

STRONG AND TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG INITIATIVE LEADERS AND PARTNERS, PROGRAM STAFF AND PARTICIPATING FAMILIES

Partners in all three Promise Neighborhoods grantees found that strong, trusting relationships among individuals at all levels of the initiative contributed substantially to early and continued successes. This applied to the relationships among the lead and partner organizations spearheading the grant, among the Promise Neighborhoods partners and early learning providers and professionals in the community and among the Promise Neighborhoods staff, community navigators and the families with whom they work.

Very early on, NAZ leaders prioritized efforts to ensure that the initiative, through its staff, activities and investments, reflects and values the families in the community. The first step, and perhaps the key to NAZ's success, was to hire NAZ Connectors from within the community who reflect the demographic make-up and also the life experiences of the families enrolled. NAZ attributes its soaring enrollment and retention numbers to this strategy [8].

Also, in NAZ, the partnership that developed between the early learning organizations and NAZ partners on the Early Childhood Action Team contributed substantially to the initiative's successful efforts to screen young children. Prior to the NAZ screening effort, the ELOs were all using different screening tools and were not able to disaggregate and compare data on NAZ-enrolled children. NAZ purchased a common screening tool, offered training and helped them identify NAZ-enrolled children to ensure they were all screened. Through frequent meetings and communications, the partners quickly realized they were aiming for the same results. Another contributor to NAZ's successful screening outcomes was the trusting relationships that existed between the NAZ Connectors and the families they supported. NAZ was very intentional about using NAZ Connectors as the frontline contacts for inviting families in their caseloads to participate.

In Berea College PN, direct contact with families through the ESSS home visiting program and with family child care providers through coaching and technical assistance made a difference to its sustained participation and initial progress. Support from the Early Learning Network and skilled technical assistance providers started a shift toward reflective supervision, better use of screening and assessment tools and stronger family engagement.

Likewise in HPN, the Promotoras and the Promise Neighborhoods nursing staff have also been key to reaching families as a trusted source of information and encouraging their enrollment in the initiative. The direct connection with families also reshaped the way partners work together to ensure they are truly meeting the needs of families.

INSTITUTIONAL CULTURES THAT PROMOTE COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS AND VALUE THE PERSPECTIVES OF FAMILIES, PROVIDERS AND COMMUNITY VOICES

Good relationships, while important, are not enough. Unlike K–12, the early childhood “system” is a conglomeration of public and private programs, services, agencies and stakeholders that operate within a complex landscape of policies, delivery mechanisms, support infrastructure and populations served. The three Promise Neighborhoods grantees demonstrate the necessity and value of intentional collaboration among all partners and stakeholders, from those leading the initiative to those implementing specific pieces of the action plan and working directly with providers and families. This requires taking the time to get to know the individuals, functions and potential contributions of partner organizations and also their institutional policies, procedures and processes. It also requires institutional leadership and the commitment of all staff to collaboration. It starts with developing a shared vision and goals, establishing clear roles and responsibilities and sharing and using data to track progress and promote collective ownership of results. It also requires recognition that change takes time.

NAZ intentionally focused much attention to shifting institutional and neighborhood culture so that families are valued as leaders. The NAZ strategic plan includes goals, objectives and progress measures related to this outcome for each partner organization. The role and functions of NAZ Connectors are intentionally designed to empower families to set and reach their own goals and connect them with the support and information they need. The vision is that through this approach, NAZ families build a culture of achievement in their own home. As NAZ scales up to enroll more than half of the families within the Zone, their individual successes become the culture of the community, leading to population-level change.

The early learning organizations that are part of the NAZ team found that because of their history of strong partnerships and collaboration they already established a high degree of trust among one another and quickly built the same with NAZ Navigators and staff. Collectively, the ELOs and Navigators are knowledgeable about the capacity, resources and services available through individual programs, so that they can direct families immediately to the program that best suits their needs, regardless of which door the families walk through to become a part of the initiative.

Berea College PN grantees recognized early on that changing institutional culture about engaging and working with families is essential to achieving successful outcomes for children. Parent engagement is a focus of the professional development offered to child care providers and programs and will be an important element of the new QRIS standards. By holding parent/child activities at neighborhood elementary schools, the ESSS home visiting program serves as a bridge between home and school for families with very young children well before the start of kindergarten. Likewise, the FAST program was chosen intentionally for its focus on building a school culture that values parents as partners. Collectively, these and similar efforts are moving parents from the sideline to a more central role in promoting their children’s learning and development.

Partners in HPN learned the importance of understanding how processes, policies and procedures differ from one organization to the next. They found that the community-based organizations, higher education partners, the school district and city agencies all have their own systems, approval channels, accounting and financial procedures and other processes that impact how quickly decisions are made

and action steps are implemented. For example, some organizations have stricter internal controls and longer approval processes, while others are more nimble and can take action without jumping through multiple hoops. Understanding these differences minimizes misconceptions about the degree of commitment and effort each partner pledges. It also helps partners make strategic decisions about collective roles and responsibilities and contributes to informed and realistic implementation timelines.

An important lesson from HPN's experience is that changing "business as usual" within an institutional culture takes time and practice. Change does not happen on its own, and it is not simply about convening people and holding meetings. It requires institutional leadership to keep staff focused and committed to internalizing changes in practice and in attitude. It requires intentional conversations about why change is needed and how it will occur, what challenges may arise and how they might be addressed and how leaders, staff, partners and participating families will know progress is being made. HPN partners also found that when the work required collaboration among staff across multiple agencies, it was important to build in the time staff need to collaborate. This included meetings and face-to-face conversations about how to work effectively with staff in other organizations, identify opportunities to share resources, maximize efficiencies and other considerations. HPN partners found that meetings and interactions were most fruitful when they were intentionally designed and structured to encourage staff to build trusting relationships, identify shared goals and problem-solve collectively to achieve intended results.

ALIGNMENT WITH STATE AND FEDERAL PRIORITIES AND RESOURCES

Leadership of all three Promise Neighborhoods grantees made strategic decisions to align their own goals and strategies with state and federal priorities and funding opportunities. This enabled them to accomplish more, stretch existing dollars further and secure additional funding when available. In some cases, these presented short-term solutions or one-time funding opportunities that were helpful to get the ball rolling. In other cases, they were instrumental in building the systemic foundations for sustainable change, such as developing infrastructure to support quality improvement and accountability, enhance the capacity of educators and child care providers or strengthen alignment between early childhood and K-3 systems.

NAZ, for example, capitalized on Minnesota's RTT-ELC grant and other state funding sources to expand the supply of high-quality ELOs and provide scholarships to its highest-need 3- and 4-year-olds to attend these programs. NAZ partners also took advantage of the Parent Aware coaches, who were also funded with state RTT-ELC grant funds. These not only were strategies to ensure improvements in kindergarten readiness outcomes in the short run, but also to increase the demand for high-quality early learning programs in the neighborhood, creating market incentives for programs to achieve higher-quality ratings in the Parent Aware QRIS.

Berea College PN aligned their efforts with the priorities of the GOEC in order to take advantage of resources and opportunities to improve the quality of existing child care programs while simultaneously preparing for the rollout of new mandatory quality standards. It also volunteered to participate in the state's kindergarten readiness screener pilot test so that rather than coming up with its own kindergarten readiness measure it could use the results to meet the federal indicator requirements for the Promise Neighborhoods grant.

HPN leveraged state funding for Pre-K to expand its ELOs for 3- to 5-year-olds and capitalized on existing programs, such as First 5 Alameda County's Quality Counts initiative. As a next step, early childhood programs and providers in HPN will be among others in Alameda County participating in California's pilot QRIS, which is being implemented with the state's RTT-ELC grant.

Implications for Local, State and Federal Policy

Early results and shared experiences of NAZ, Berea College PN and HPN also suggest the following considerations and implications for local, state and federal policy efforts that seek to achieve lasting community change and improve school readiness outcomes.

COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

The Promise Neighborhoods grantees demonstrate that taking a comprehensive approach to addressing issues — while leveraging community strengths and targeting investments — can be transformative for communities and for families. Policymakers should continue to pursue policies and funding opportunities that encourage local innovation to meet the unique needs of families with young children. These policies should include a results-focused approach that has built-in accountability and involves the participation of community members in establishing the desired results. State and federal policies should recognize that doing this work successfully entails dismantling the structures that perpetuate disparities in outcomes and opportunities and replacing them with innovative solutions that take into account the unique strengths and needs of every community.

The experiences and emerging results from these three pioneer Promise Neighborhoods grantees reaffirms the assertion that there is no one-size-fits-all solution or silver bullet to improving developmental and educational outcomes for young children at the neighborhood level. State and federal policies and investments should seek to maximize local flexibility over early childhood strategies while also building local capacity to sustain efforts and remain accountable for results.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Among all three initiatives, success is influenced by a strong degree of sensitivity and responsiveness among partners and staff to the demographic, cultural and linguistic characteristics of the community. Being mindful of the need to intentionally build awareness and promote responsive institutional cultures and practice played a strong role in the success of the initiatives. State and federal attention should be given to holding up exemplary actions and promoting similar efforts through investments in research and technical assistance.

OPPORTUNITIES AT EVERY LEVEL

The three grantees demonstrate that real, sustainable change takes time to achieve. At the same time, they also prove the notion that “what gets measured gets done.” By holding the grantees accountable for specific measures of child-, parent- and family-level outcomes, the federal Promise Neighborhoods initiative successfully encourages innovative approaches and strategies to achieve those results. At the same time, NAZ, Berea College PN and HPN all experienced the challenges inherent in early childhood screening and assessment. Future state and federal opportunities should continue to include a strong focus on clear and measurable outcomes while also recognizing the need to support capacity building and provide guidance around early childhood assessment. Additional attention should also be given to

expanding the universe of developmentally appropriate, valid and reliable assessment tools, particularly those appropriate for specific subpopulations such as dual-language learners.

While most results cannot be achieved overnight, this does not mean they should not be sought or measured over time. Interim process and proxy measures can help fill the gaps. Local, state and federal accountability policies and requirements should support a process of continuous improvement that tracks and monitors progress through appropriate short- and long-term measures, encourages reflective decision-making and allows for mid-course corrections.

Policymakers should have a clear plan for applying the results and the lessons learned from the Promise Neighborhoods grant initiative to existing programs and policies so that the effects of this significant investment continue to be felt long after the funding ends. This is an important way to encourage sustainability and promote smart policy for children, families, communities and the nation.

Conclusion

As the profiles illustrate, the Promise Neighborhoods grantees are implementing solutions that reflect a solid research base on how children grow and develop, what they need to thrive and how their families and communities contribute to their well-being and academic success. The Promise Neighborhoods program creates incentives for the grantees to identify and characterize the populations that are most in need of supports and services in order to ultimately achieve community-wide and population-level changes for children. One of the critical decisions that influenced NAZ's success was to hire NAZ Connectors from within its own community. These are people who personally understand the neighborhood, which improves their role as advisers and support to the children and families and increases the successful results from involvement in the program. Understanding the challenges involved in the implementation of the Berea College PN, specifically geographic distance and the high mobility rates of families in the rural communities, the grantees decided to strengthen the quality and capacity of existing services and supports instead of designing an entirely new initiative. The strategy of partnering with local and state agencies and schools proved to be a useful approach. For HPN, major consideration of the immigrant population and the many different languages spoken in the neighborhood was necessary to pursue the Promise Neighborhoods program. The information communicated by the services and supports was translated or available in Spanish, the language spoken by the majority of the participants. HPN was also aware of the cultural differences and legal challenges within the multi-ethnic community and designed the program so as not to limit or diminish its impact. The Promise Neighborhoods grantees are pursuing a range of strategies to ensure that children enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and that family and community members support learning.

Endnotes

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