

Title: Six Kentucky Superintendents Lead Collaborative Efforts for Quality Early Childhood Education

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This article is a collective effort on the part of six superintendents to share experiences promoting the importance of quality early childhood education in our districts, our communities, and our commonwealth. This collaboration was a byproduct of participating in an executive doctoral cohort at Northern Kentucky University and addressed one of the key program competencies regarding *regional stewardship*--the superintendent's role in targeted public engagement efforts that have the potential to further the work of the school district and improve the quality of life and educational attainment in the community, the region, and beyond.

What is regional stewardship and why should it matter to school superintendents? Regional stewardship, often referred to as public engagement, is characterized by partnerships that coalesce around a mutually defined need or opportunity of benefit to a particular region. Regional stewardship efforts are typically multijurisdictional initiatives that require public, private, and civic sectors to work together, willingly and intentionally blurring jurisdictional lines. Projects that lend themselves to regional stewardship include community or civic engagement activities, collaborative government, economic vitality, and other ventures that have the potential to improve the quality of life in the region.

Partnerships are critical if superintendents are to be successful regional stewards. In the increasingly interdependent world in which school leaders operate, key partners include universities, local governments, non-profit and philanthropic agencies, Chambers of Commerce, faith-based organizations, and more. Traditional leadership models are typically characterized by "ones" - one jurisdiction, one organization, one problem, one network. Regional stewardship models are characterized by "many" - multiple jurisdictions, multiple organizations, integrated visions, diverse networks. Regional stewardship has at its heart a collective commitment to the place and improving the quality of living of the citizens in that place.

While there may be many large-scale regional stewardship initiatives underway across Kentucky, cohort members discovered that the greatest local examples were evident in our promotion of quality early childhood education, especially for children of poverty. Each superintendent was

able to describe targeted efforts, with support from regional partners, to identify regional resources and capitalize on integrated networks, in order to better meet the needs of young children and their families. The stories that follow serve to illustrate regional stewardship approaches to providing high-quality early learning experiences by leveraging the financial, fiscal, and human resources of an entire community or region. Also included is research to support early learning and the positive impact it holds for communities that are willing to invest in better meeting the needs of its youngest citizens and their families.

Carroll County Schools Early Head Start Child Development Center

The Carroll County Community Development Corporation (CCCDC) describes itself on its website as “an innovative organization designed to promote community development and to improve the quality of life for all who live in Carroll County. Established in 1983, CCCDC has coordinated the development efforts of city and county governments, recruited new businesses and industries to Carroll County, assisted with the expansion of existing Carroll County industries, and worked to improve housing, education, and cultural opportunities.” Improving the quality of life in Carroll County is, in fact, a long-time shared goal of the CCCDC and Carroll County Schools. To that end, the two entities have collaborated on several grant opportunities in the area of early childhood development. A total of \$40,000 in grant funding over the past four years has been awarded for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, through which registered children under the age of five receive a book by mail each month. Since December of 2005, more than 1200 children have participated in the program. The two organizations were also key partners in establishing the Literacy, Education, and Reading Network (LEARN) of Carroll County. For the past seven years, LEARN has hosted the Dr. Seuss Birthday Bash, a community literacy fair focusing on preschool children.

The most successful joint grant venture for this regional stewardship duo occurred with the award of a \$2.12 million American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) Early Head Start grant in December 2009. The goal of the grant was to provide services for low-income families and their children from the pre-natal stages through age two. Implementation of the grant began with the hiring of staff in April 2010. Staff members then received training toward their Child Development Associate (CDA) certification. Eighty children were then recruited and began receiving home-based services on June 1, 2010. Center-based services began in a temporary location in September 2010 with further community support from the Carroll County fiscal court who provided office space for the home-based program while the permanent center was being developed and constructed. One year later in September 2011, to the delight of the entire community, the comprehensive Carroll County Child Development Center opened and began serving all registered preschool children in the district from birth through age four. As was the experience in Gallatin County, Carroll County Superintendent, Lisa James, credits the partnership with CCCDC and their shared regional vision for bringing the idea to life: “The Child Development Center simply would not have been possible without the strong collaboration

and support of our community partners and the Carroll County Community Development Corporation.”

Gallatin County Schools – Provider of Early Head Start and Head Start Services

Gallatin County Schools is a small, rural, high-poverty district with limited resources available for early childhood learning opportunities for young children in the community; therefore, strategic partnerships and a regional stewardship approach were critical to this success story. The Gallatin County School District, under the leadership of Superintendent Dot Perkins, engineered a partnership with their regional educational cooperative, the Ohio Valley Educational Cooperative (OVEC), to jointly provide Early Head Start and Head Start services under the direction of the school district. Both partner organizations collaborated on the design, construction, and financing of a renovation and addition to the district’s lower-elementary school building project, strategically blending local, state, and federal resources to bring Early Head Start and Head Start programs under one roof as opposed to housing them in mobile units across the campus as had been done in the past. The students served in these programs are of high-need, either coming from poverty, having a learning disability, or both. By bringing the federal programs under the direction of the school district, the superintendent and her team sent a strong message: “These are *our* students and we believe that the earlier we can intervene with specialized early childhood services, the better chance for success these children will have.”

Because the Early Head Start and Head Start programs are now housed under the district’s roof, children from six-weeks to three-years-old transition seamlessly into the district’s preschool and full-day kindergarten programs. In addition to the new program space, the district’s early childhood programs share personnel and academic spaces with Head Start, including the playground, gym, cafeteria, and library. With continued help and support from OVEC, the district is also able to provide physical therapists, speech therapists, screenings for vision and dental, and other related health services for these young children. While Gallatin County Schools continues to seek resources within the community and the region to build capacity and provide further support for all children, Superintendent Perkins is quick to attribute their early success to regional cooperation: “OVEC has been a great partner in helping us meet the needs of our children. This partnership has given us the opportunity to build trust and positive relationships with the parents and children who need us most. And, more importantly, we have joined forces to put these students on the optimum pathway to success.”

Boone County Schools Success By Six Initiative

Even though high school graduation is a distant thought for most parents with a new baby, it is foremost in the minds of leaders in Boone County Schools. That is because administrators, teachers and community partners have worked together for ten years to help ensure children in Boone County have a solid foundation for school success right from the very start.

In 2002 representatives from eight agencies in Boone County came together to form the first Success By 6 collaborative in Northern KY when the demographics survey revealed that more than 80% of parents with children under five-years-old worked outside of the home. To address

the need for quality child care for these children, the collaborative received a Federal Early Learning Opportunities Act Grant which was used to purchase a 40' mobile unit, known as the Boone County Community Center on Wheels, for program outreach to neighborhoods, childcare centers and preschools. The grant also allowed the St. Luke Hospital to create a home visitation program to reach families who did not qualify for existing home visitation programs in the county.

The collaborative continues to use state and local data to drive action plans built around the greatest areas of concern. These areas are:

- Improving the quality of early care and education through efforts such as screening for developmental delays and referring for interventions, targeting training of early childhood teachers and implementing research based curriculum in programs and public awareness.
- Creating or improving programs which support children's early literacy skills and reduce early childhood obesity.

Highly effective preparation for schooling is vital to shrinking the sizable academic gaps that already exist for students when they enter kindergarten. The collaborative efforts of Boone County Schools with the Success By 6 initiative is helping to build a strong foundation of success for children as they enter school ready to learn. Children are now participating in programs with research-based curriculums. They are being screened for developmental delays and referred to appropriate resources for intervention. They are learning healthier nutritional and physical activity habits. They are spending time with trained early childhood teachers who are aware of the importance of the first five years of life and its significant impact on progress in later academic efforts.

Madison County Early Childhood Alliance

In the summer of 2007, school leaders from Madison County returned from the Model Schools Conference with research and data showing that children were far more likely to succeed later in their academic careers if they were properly prepared for kindergarten. The district began looking for a solution to assist more young children in being better prepared, especially those in poverty. As a result of partnerships with other concerned organizations in the community, the Literacy Education and Awareness Program (LEAP) began in 2008.

Through LEAP, children and families in the Madison County Health Department's HANDS program were provided with in-home visits conducted by school Family Resource Center directors to provide increased literacy opportunities. LEAP targeted the children, ages 2- to 5-years- old, who did not attend a preschool or child care center. During home visits, the directors worked with families and children on learning activities and offered developmental resources in an effort to prepare them for kindergarten.

LEAP led to a deeper series of conversations about options for expanding early childhood education opportunities in Madison County. The result was the Madison County Early Childhood Alliance. With seven "partner" child care centers and several community partners, the

Alliance began work in July 2010 with the goal of the Alliance is to prepare students for kindergarten and long-range academic success.

Members of the Alliance have formed mentoring triangles with district preschool and kindergarten teachers meeting with area child-care employees. Those triangles provide opportunities to meet and observe each other in order to share expertise about effective teaching methods to reach young children and help them be more kindergarten ready. The Alliance also conducts Super Saturday events three times a year through which professional development opportunities are provided for childcare providers and are conducted by teachers and administrators. These events are approved for the required continuing education for childcare workers and are attended by more than 100 childcare providers/employees.

The Alliance has now grown in the second year to 14 member centers. Member centers are provided with the Kindergarten Readiness Toolkit prepared by staff members in accordance with Kentucky's new Kindergarten readiness standards, partners with preschool and kindergarten teachers in the district for mentoring triangles, and promotional materials from the district..

Madison County Early Childhood Alliance partners include Madison County Schools, Kentucky River Foothills Head Start, Madison County Early Childhood Council, Eastern Kentucky University, Berea College, area child care centers and Kentucky School Boards Association.

The Alliance strives to improve the opportunities for all children in our community to be kindergarten ready. The Alliance is working to continue to add new centers and expand its efforts in the community. The success of the efforts of the Alliance is a great example of what can happen when a community comes together to collaborate in meeting the needs of its children.

Research to Support Regional Stewardship for Quality Early Childhood Care and Education

Early childhood care and education can make a positive, lasting difference in a child's life. These programs, beginning as early as infancy, can change the expected life trajectory for low income children in particular. The short-term benefits are well established, including higher test scores in reading and math, reduced need for special education services, fewer retentions, fewer behavior problems, less delinquency and crime, and reduced smoking, drug use and depression. Some of the longer-term benefits include more years of education with a college degree more likely, more consistent employment, and less use of public assistance. Three long-term studies that follow children through to adulthood show both the short-term and long-term benefits of early childhood care and education.

The first of these studies called the HighScope/Perry Preschool Project enrolled 123 at-risk children ages 3 and 4 in a preschool program in Michigan. In addition to academic gains and less delinquent behavior as adolescents, the study found that adults at age 40 who had the preschool program had higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes, and were more likely to have graduated from high school than adults who did not have

preschool (Schweinhart, et. al., 2005). In an impressive rate of return, economists calculated a lifetime benefit of \$284,000 from a cost of \$17,600 for each child in the program (Mervis, 2012).

A University of North Carolina study, known as the Abecedarian Project, began in 1972 with 111 babies from low-income families who were randomly assigned to two groups. Half were enrolled in quality early childhood education from infancy to kindergarten; the other half, the control group, received whatever care their families arranged. Researchers have followed the children since then and found the child care group posted better scores on reading and math tests in school. They were more likely to pursue education beyond high school and less likely to become teenage parents. The latest data from the participants, at age 30, show that those who received early education were four times more likely to earn a college degree (Campbell, et. al., 2012). Though the return was calculated at over \$175,000, the cost of this program was significantly higher around \$70,000 due to the earlier start during infancy (Mervis, 2012).

The third long-term study, known as the Chicago Longitudinal Study (CLS), began in 1967 and was a larger study with about 1000 at-risk children in the test group. These children began attending publicly funded Child Parent Centers and compared to the control group, they were 21% more likely to graduate from high school and 31% more likely to have attended a four-year college. In contrast, the control group non-preschool students were 27% more likely to be arrested for a felony and 39% more likely to have spent time in jail. The rate of return was excellent on this program which cost around \$8,000 and resulted in a benefit of more than \$80,000 (Mervis, 2012).

From these studies, it is evident that the educational and economic benefits are worth the investment in early childhood care and education. Additionally, there is a growing body of brain research that substantiates biologically why this investment is a good one. Though we are born with about 100 billion neurons, about the same number we have as adults, we now understand that most of the physical architecture of the brain, called pathways, are created after birth. It is the early life experiences that determine the nature, extent, and efficiency of these pathways. The rate of synaptic growth is phenomenal in the first three years of life, resulting in about 1,000 trillion connections by age three (Huttenlocher, 1990, 1994). Brain development is experience-dependent (Rosenzweig, et. al., 1972). To that point, children who experience chronic stress suffer the effects of cortisol, a stress hormone that interferes with the development of brain pathways (Perry, 1997; Shore, 1996). In light of these facts, early childhood care and education offers a proven way to help support healthy brain development so more children can begin school socially, emotionally, and cognitively ready for kindergarten. The research shows that children who start school ready to learn are more likely to achieve success throughout their schooling and life.

It is everyone's responsibility to ensure that our children have the best chance possible of success in school and in life. The discussion has been happening for years, the time for action is now. If not now, then when? As a society we can no longer afford the repercussions of children not having access to quality early learning experiences. We know that investing in high quality early childhood programs will produce children with better school readiness skills and result in significant long-term paybacks.

Together we must create the demand for quality early education and care for our children. Or, we can fail to act and pay the price later through increasing drop-out rates, higher costs in special and remedial education, higher crime, less economic competitiveness and fewer thriving communities. All levels of government partnering with parents, public and private sectors must learn to work collaboratively as advocates and regional stewards to accept shared responsibility for ensuring a bright future for generations to come.

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