

Local communities are taking the lead to support early learning. Nationwide, and here in Massachusetts, community leaders are collaborating with each other to support young children and families through a variety of innovative strategies. Community action is being driven by local concerns around kindergarten readiness, preschool access, and reading proficiency. With insufficient state and federal resources flowing to the local level to meet increasing educational challenges, communities are taking matters into their own hands.

Between January and June 2016, 13 communities developed strategic plans for preschool expansion, thanks to state-funded planning grants that build off of Massachusetts' federal Preschool Expansion Grant. Strategies for Children served as a strategic thought partner to several of these communities to support the planning process. We were pleasantly surprised by the amount of learning that took place as teams created ambitious but realistic plans for how to expand preschool locally. Here are ten things that we learned.

- 1. Demand for preschool is high across Massachusetts.** The 13 planning grantee communities came from all corners of the commonwealth, and included large cities like Springfield, smaller cities like North Adams and regions such as Cape Cod. Communities were eager to conduct a thorough planning process despite knowing that implementation funding might not be available right away. Parents surveyed by planning teams indicated strong interest in affordable, full-day preschool.
- 2. Communities created authentic and customized plans.** Not that we didn't expect this, but the plans were truly different from one another. From **Worcester's** proposed centralized preschool demonstration project to **Lowell's** commitment to building upon its family child care infrastructure, communities created ambitious plans that mapped onto their unique assets. The state now has 13 plans to learn from when creating the next wave of preschool policy and funding.
- 3. Planning is different from implementation.** After reviewing several plans, we can see tremendous value in a state-funded planning process that was open and flexible enough for community teams to be bold, think differently, and not be constrained by the status quo of the early education and care system. This allowed teams to actually think about and construct a new vision for children and families.
- 4. Leadership matters – period.** District superintendents, center-based program directors, and other community leaders need to collaborate and own the issue to ensure a successful preschool planning process. Ownership of early education on the local level is necessary to drive change, ensure accountability, and strategize plans for sustainability. Temporary grants for planning, alignment, and other activities, provide leadership opportunities for local stakeholders to increase their ownership of the issue.
- 5. Take time to evaluate resources.** What are the current funding streams coming into the community? Are there opportunities to reallocate or streamline funding? What are the opportunities for new funding on the local, state and national level? These are important questions for planning teams to raise, even if the answer isn't readily available.
- 6. The data is out there.** Early education has much less data than K-12. But in participating in preschool planning, we learned that there's lots of good local data out there. Every partner at the table has access to their own program's data, and multiple sources can be pooled together to create a profile of the community's needs, its children, its programs, and teachers.

- 7. Special education planning presents unique opportunities for mixed-provider collaboration.** School districts often have greater expertise than community-based preschools in the delivery of special education services. At one planning meeting, **New Bedford's** team met with the district special education director. The team talked through potential collaborative programming strategies for delivering special education services to children in four community-based preschool sites. The planning grant allowed this conversation to take place and for local programs to “think outside the box” on behalf of children with special education needs.
- 8. Budgeting exercises “make it real.”** At some point in the planning process, teams need to move from the abstract to the concrete. Budgeting for preschool expansion was the ideal activity for getting partners to think in real terms. Budgets require the unique expertise of community-based program directors and school district budget officers.
- 9. Public buy-in is important, and outreach can take many forms.** Preschool planning should be as transparent as possible to the community and its stakeholders. For the **Cape Cod** 4-town partnership, we worked with the planning team to host two public forums during the planning process, and one at the end as a culminating event. The planning team surveyed parents and preschool program directors, and used these opportunities to not only collect data but to promote the preschool planning process.
- 10. Massachusetts has tried “local” early education strategies in the past – this was different.** There are many lessons from the CPC funding stream of the 2000s and more recent community structures like CFCE and the B-8 Alignment grant. Having to create a PEG-like model was an important, tangible challenge that brought local stakeholders together to collaborate. It forced tough, but necessary conversations within the mixed-provider preschool community: Who’s doing what for programming? What are every program’s strengths and weaknesses? Preschool planning elevated and changed the conversation in many communities, and reinforced Strategies’ for Children’s commitment to the mixed-delivery model of public and private preschool providers.

Bonus: Local planning strengthens local advocacy. Having taken part in a six-month planning process, hundreds of individuals in communities across the state are now more likely to keep preschool momentum alive through outreach, communication, and advocacy. It’s not enough for a community to have a well thought-out plan to implement preschool, energy must be spent making connections to state legislators and other allies and advocating for implementation dollars. It’s easier for individuals to “make the case” for preschool when their community has adopted a strategic plan.

To learn more about Strategies for Children’s Community Readiness initiative, please contact director of research and policy Titus DosRemedios at 617-330-7387 or tdosremedios@strategiesforchildren.org.