

Local Success Factors in Early Education and Care

By Titus DosRemedios

OCTOBER 2018

James and Deborah Fallows spent five years flying at low altitudes to small U.S. cities to see how America was doing. They talked to people everywhere—in restaurants, schools, and stadiums—and found local recipes for civic success. They found that prosperous cities have local patriots who act as well-known municipal cheerleaders. Other ingredients include a shared civic story, a downtown area, and proximity to a research university. Thriving libraries and craft breweries are also indicators of local success. The result of the Fallows' travels and observations is a book, "Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America," that's required reading for anyone looking to help improve their community.

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At Strategies for Children (SFC), we too have spent the past five years visiting and working in local communities here in Massachusetts. Strategies is a state-level policy and advocacy organization. As a cheerleader for children, we're known for our statewide Early Education for All Campaign. We lobby at the State House and monitor state funding and regulations for preschool, kindergarten, and child care.

Our goal is to ensure that all children have access to an affordable high-quality early education, to be in dynamic preschool programs where children learn through play and develop strong social-emotional skills.

We have always known, however, that working in the historic halls of the State House was not enough. There was work to be done at the local level—work we could help with while waiting for state—and federal—policies to create more favorable conditions for early learning. Much of this work required collaboration: educators, parents, mayors, librarians, and community organizations all talking to each other about the best ways to educate young children.

We started in Springfield, Massachusetts, where we have a long-standing partnership with the early childhood champions at the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation. The foundation has invested in early learning since 2000. SFC staff has been a frequent thought partner to foundation staff and its partners, sharing background research, state policy updates, data analysis, and facilitating a policy council for the city's Talk/Read/Succeed! initiative.

We then fanned out to cultivate relationships in Worcester, Pittsfield, Holyoke, and Boston. Each of these cities launched its own early literacy campaign around 2012, and SFC provided expertise on designing these campaigns for maximum impact (hint: don't simply raise awareness, boost the skills of adults working with young children). Over time, we got to know local early childhood dynamics pretty well. This helped us evolve into a thought-partner on how to build broader "Birth to age 5" systems that would help children and their families move smoothly from infancy to preschool to kindergarten.

Through our work, we have built a network of trusted relationships with leaders in roughly 20 communities. Our friends include mayors, superintendents, early education center directors, funders, librarians, and human services providers. Sometimes we provide contracted services (data collection, preschool expansion planning, and public speaking engagements). Sometimes we make impromptu phone calls or send emails. When possible, we bring leaders from multiple communities together through conference calls, trainings, and advocacy opportunities such as testifying at the State House to support needed legislation. We've helped create a new community of early education leaders who collaborate within and across communities and value learning from each other.

As we've done this work, we've seen clear patterns emerge and develop into recipes for creating successful local B-5 early childhood ecosystems.

One observation: We're convinced that to ensure public resources are invested wisely and have a lasting impact, communities must be prepared. We use the term "community readiness." Cities and towns that are "ready" have designed their own approach for early childhood growth, and they are poised to leverage additional public and private funds. These cities have local leaders who work together and coordinate local efforts. So, for example, public housing staff knows about and can build on preschool curricula used by the school district. In these communities public awareness of early learning is high, and there is a "mixed-delivery system" that gives parents a range of high-quality options: they can send their children to preschool programs that are located in public schools or in community organizations or in the homes of licensed providers.

To make our efforts more systematic, we have developed a Community Readiness Index to track local communities' collective action in the early childhood space. This Index includes 20 factors, 20 boxes to check such as: is there a group that meets regularly to discuss early childhood? Is a strategic plan in place? Does the group use data to identify and solve problems? Are local philanthropies supportive of these efforts? Similar rubrics have been developed by national organizations such as the BUILD Initiative and the National League of Cities to guide early learning communities.

Here are four key factors driving local success in Massachusetts:

Landscape analysis

For communities looking to achieve goals like universal preschool, kindergarten readiness, or third grade reading proficiency, it's important to map existing resources. What programs currently exist? What percentage of children is being reached? Are there early intervention services for children with documented disabilities? Are there home visiting programs? Do pediatricians give parents books through programs like Reach Out and Read? How many children are stuck on child

care waiting lists, and how many families are unaware of their options or unable to afford them?

Even a small city can have a thriving landscape. That's the case in [Holyoke](#), population 40,000. The early childhood landscape includes a federal Preschool Expansion Grant and an early literacy campaign. The school district has struggled, so it's under the control of a state-appointed receiver, but the receiver is implementing a multi-year Pre-k to grade 12 turnaround plan that promises to improve early education. Holyoke officials are also paying attention to third grade reading proficiency. Since 2001 when state testing began, Holyoke has only had roughly a quarter of its students read well by third grade. So the Holyoke Early Literacy Initiative (HELI) was formed to tackle systemic barriers to language and literacy development. The HELI team of school and community-based

HELI has a comprehensive strategy and theory of change that has made local resources easier to see. If there's a program, service, community event that in any way addresses early literacy, HELI is on top of it, either leading or supporting, and ensuring alignment with research-based, best practices. "HELI leverages the assets of the entire community to relentlessly tackle 3rd grade reading proficiency." says Dr. Stephen Zrike, Receiver/Superintendent for Holyoke Public Schools. "The city understands that improving reading outcomes by this pivotal grade level is critical if we are to deliver on our mission of a pathway to college, career and/or community leadership by the time students graduate."¹ Holyoke has a big hill to climb to achieve universal reading proficiency, but assessing the landscape of programs and initiatives was an essential first step in their journey.

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Dr. Stephen Zrike, Receiver/Superintendent for Holyoke Public Schools

leaders began each meeting with a review of local data. Members participate in various learning communities and working groups. At one meeting, my colleagues and I shared Census data with HELI members to inform preschool planning. On average, there are 1,200 preschool-age children (3- and 4-year-olds) in Holyoke at any given time. Enrollment estimates from the district and community-based preschools fell short of this total by several hundred, meaning that if every family wanted to enroll in preschool, there would not be enough space. The city has since developed a universal pre-k plan to enroll 300 additional children in 19 classrooms.

Air traffic controllers

Unlike K-12 schooling, there are no superintendents or school committees for B-5. At least, not in Massachusetts. What we have instead are intrepid, often self-deputized, coordinators who lead local early childhood efforts on behalf of ad-hoc committees or working groups. These coordinators guide more than control, influence more than "own" the work. Since they manage a lot of moving pieces, we've taken to calling them air traffic controllers. They can write strategic plans, oversee grant applications, and coordinate the distribution of donated children's books. They can also design professional

development opportunities for educators, training for volunteers, and pitches for media coverage.

In **Worcester**, Kim Davenport is the dedicated air traffic controller. She manages the city's birth-grade three alignment efforts and helps coordinate preschool expansion plans and a third-grade reading campaign. Davenport, who works for Edward Street Child Services, a community-based early childhood advocacy organization, has been savvy about applying for state and private grants, promoting Worcester's early childhood efforts, and bringing new allies to the table. It helps Kim (and Worcester) that Edward Street has taken the lead as the backbone support organization in Worcester, convening the other school- and community-based partners and coordinating much of the work. The organization does so because community collaboration is deeply ingrained in its mission and vision. "Our B-8 Strategic Framework has guided our decisions around which opportunities to pursue," says Davenport, "allowing us to have new conversations with the health and business communities. Each new piece should fit into the larger puzzle—a comprehensive, whole-child strategy beginning at birth."²

Multiple entry points for families

The more doors there are, the more opportunities children have to enroll in preschool programs that help them prepare for school. But cities still have a great deal of work to do to provide all young children with an equal opportunity to learn. That's why it's so important to make early childhood information impossible to avoid. Parents who go to the library, grocery store, or to City Hall to pay a parking ticket should all be walking past print or broadcast information about preschool or playgroups. Events and information fairs should be common. And anyone who is eager to help with outreach should have the chance to share their skills and perspectives.

Somerville is seeking to create a "single point of entry" for families entering the early childhood system. In most communities, the early childhood landscape is confusing, with many programs and services, each with their own eligibility, registration forms, and staff. Somerville believes there should be a "through any door" approach to get information. As Lisa Kuh, Director of Early Education for Somerville Public Schools, explains, "There are many passionate school and community-based leaders in Somerville, including a newly convened Single Point of Entry Taskforce, all working towards the same goals for children and families. Single point of entry would help us to align our information and referral processes and all get on the same page, and avoid the 'parallel play' that keeps us in silos and makes this world so confusing for parents."³ The Somerville plan blends high- and low tech solutions: a new web-based platform for information and reg-

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istration, plus a shared protocol for anyone in the city who interacts with young families on how to help them find programs and services that meet their needs, and a city-wide awareness strategy to help families understand the importance and range of early childhood options. Somerville's plan is informed by national models, including Chicago where city librarians help show families who visit the library how to register for preschool on the libraries computers.

Shared sense of progress

Anyone has had worked on a cause for years knows how important it is to track

growth. People need to understand what impact they're having and how this impact is changing children's lives. Without this shared sense of progress, it's too easy to give up.

Springfield tells its own story of progress better than any other community we've seen. With celebratory events organized by the dynamic staff and board of the Davis Foundation, Springfield partners convene, tell their collective story, inspire one another, and recommit to the long-term cause. Events have a tangible quality, and are well attended by large groups of stakeholders: educators, elected officials, business leaders, and parents.

In December 2017, more than 100 community partners gathered at the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield to celebrate the many achievements of the local Reading Success by 4th Grade initiative. Chief of these was an 11 point increase in third grade reading

proficiency that year. Attendees were congratulated by Ralph Smith, the director of the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, who travels to cities all across the country to encourage their early reading initiatives. The finale of the celebration was a photo slideshow of dozens of Springfield families reading with their children—pictures shared on social media by the families themselves—and sharing messages of what they are thankful for. This is one of many #413Reads videos that Springfield has created thanks to its grassroots social media campaign.

In September 2018, the community broke ground on Educare Springfield—a

state-of-the-art early education and care facility that will open in 2019. The groundbreaking was one of the most vivid displays of authentic collaboration and public-private partnership I've ever witnessed. The financing for the project comes from blending many sources, federal, state, local, and private, and all contributors, as well as parents, children, and educators, were on hand to celebrate the day. Educare Springfield will serve as a learning lab for Springfield College, Springfield Technical Community College, Springfield Public Schools, and the early education community across the state. It would have been impossible for participants to leave that groundbreaking ceremony with anything but a sense of shared accomplishment and positive outlook for Springfield's early childhood community.

These four "must-haves" for community readiness, can help early childhood systems meet key needs such as building infrastructure, improving coordination, deepening collaborative relationships, and enhancing communications. The must-haves also provide

direction for philanthropic and policy leaders. Local foundations, for example, should look beyond direct-service programming to also fund these "connective tissue" components like planning and coordination. State leaders can craft policies and laws that build on these components and are flexible enough to incentivize further innovation and ensure a long-term trajectory of local progress.

We continue to travel across Massachusetts. We don't have a plane like James and Deborah Fallows—I suppose we don't really need one. But we're excited to see more and more communities that are ready to expand and improve early education programs, services, campaigns, and outcomes. While federal and state action is needed and appreciated, we think these local leaders are writing the book on helping young children thrive.

- 1 Email exchange with the author, 10/16/18.
- 2 Email exchange with the author, 10/22/18.
- 3 Email exchange with the author, 10/16/18.

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Strategies for Children serves as a thought partner and resource to local communities across Massachusetts working to improve their early learning delivery systems. For more information visit www.strategiesforchildren.org/CommunityReadiness.html.

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