

In Springfield, “They’re All Our Kids”

By Alyssa Haywoode

If you’re a child walking through the Early Childhood Education Center at 15 Catharine Street in Springfield, you’re likely to notice the giant wooden train and the oversized tricycles in the gym.

If you’re a parent in the red brick building, you may spot the friendly staff and the children eating nutritional lunches, complete with brown rice and broccoli.

But if you work for one of the three early childhood programs that are located at 15 Catharine Street, there’s a good chance you’ve never seen so many city, state, and federal child care regulations stuffed into one building.

With its large windows and bright classrooms, 15 Catharine Street is a symbol of preschool success. It’s the home of Springfield’s federally funded Preschool Expansion Grant program.

With its large windows and bright classrooms, 15 Catharine Street is a symbol of preschool success. It’s the home of Springfield’s federally funded Preschool Expansion Grant program. Nicknamed the PEG grant, the award brought \$3.6 million to Springfield to create 195 brand new spots for poor and low income children who had never attended preschool.

A PEG grant partnership was created: The Springfield Public Schools worked with Holyoke-Chicopee-Springfield Head Start, the YMCA of Greater Springfield, and Square One, a local nonprofit preschool provider. They all set up their own classrooms at 15 Catharine Street.

“We were building the ship as we were sailing it,” Laura Mendes said of using the PEG grant to add more preschool classrooms. She’s the director of Pre-K–3rd Grade Curriculum Instruction and Assessment at the Springfield Public Schools. “There was no way to have a Cadillac model in year one.”

Now in their second year, these partners are learning key lessons and sharing their insights. Their building has essentially become a laboratory for trial, error, successes and innovations. From conflicting regulations to creative collaborations, 15 Catharine Street is bursting with lessons

on preschool expansion that can be shared with other communities.

“That’s one of the best programs in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts,” Springfield’s public school superintendent Dan Warwick says. “Three private providers and the public schools in the same building, same coaches, same curriculum, really working together very well. We also have the Early Head Start program in that building. And we have five birth-to-three level classes because that’s the most significantly underserved population. It’s been a huge success. But those are the kind of wraparound supports we need for our families if we’re going to get these kids graduating and having productive lives.”

“But what we’ve done too, though, beyond just the classes in that building, we’ve provided the coaches, the curriculum, and the support for preschools throughout the city, even the private preschools.”

Gather all the stakeholders

Good stories always have prequels, and that’s the case in Springfield. Long before it won the PEG grant, Springfield was busy. Philanthropists were investing in children.

The city received other grants that enabled early educators across the city in both public school and private settings to work together on projects—serving children and building strong relationships among the adults.

- In 2000, the Irene E. & George A. Davis Foundation launched Cherish Every Child. This initiative’s goal was to inspire the whole city to improve the lives of its children.

“We’re looking at this for the long haul—Springfield has the third-highest child poverty rate in the state, and Cherish Every Child is not going to make a huge dent in that tomorrow,” Mary Walachy, the Davis Foundation’s executive director, told the local publication BusinessWest in 2003. This work drove a philanthropic stake into the ground that continues to be a sturdy pillar of support for Springfield’s preschool programs.

- In 2014, after the Early Childhood Centers of Greater Springfield had gone out of business, Mayor Domenic Sarno saw an opportunity and seized it. He bought the Centers’ 15 Catharine Street building, knowing it would provide

long-term solutions for his city. In December of that year, Massachusetts was awarded the federal PEG funding that would later be utilized in Springfield and four other cities.

- And in early 2016, Springfield was awarded a planning grant from the state that helped the city map out more of its preschool needs.

Collaborate, Collaborate, Collaborate

The PEG team focuses on the “global goal” of making sure that when preschool kids go to kindergarten, they are ready, according to Nicole Blais, director of community engagement at Holyoke Chicopee Springfield Head Start.

“Egos are put to the back burner and the focus is where it should be,” says Dexter Johnson, chief operating officer of the YMCA of Greater Springfield.

“We constantly think about what the grant is expecting from us; what are we committed to do as partners... so the decisions are made together” Cindy Recouille, assistant vice-president of programs for quality assurance at Square One, explains.

Issues are discussed at steering committee meetings, and subcommittees focus on specific topics such as professional development, coaching, and family engagement.

Coaches work with all the teachers to ensure that all staff have the same resources.

The collaboration is particularly useful in expanding professional perspectives.

Early educators in nonprofit and private settings were used to a deficit model of doing more with less, so they got to see public school officials who insisted on having more resources.

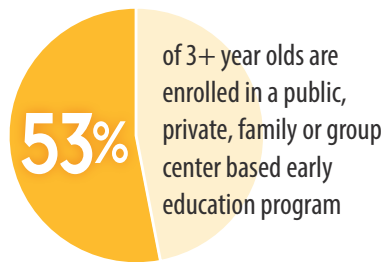
“We sit at the table and we don’t always agree. And maybe we have different ideas, but it’s put out there and it’s respectful,” said Recouille.

Have a Point Person Who Can Provide Instructional Support

Rosemarie Waltsak is the principal at 15 Catharine Street. She knows the children and their families. She knows the teachers. She knows the curriculum. She knows how these three different programs run. And she sees the way that the three partners have learned from each other and how their collaboration has grown over time.

the facts

5,169 children aged 3-, 4-, and ½ of 5-year-olds (“preschool aged children”) live in Springfield.



Waltsak makes sure that good ideas get even better in the classroom. The key, she says, is teaching that’s geared to children’s developmental stages. So she’ll help teachers modify the curriculum when necessary. One example:

“This week, we’re working on sounds. For a child who coming in who has never been in the program before, to understand the difference between letter sounds is a very hard concept. So instead of doing that for a child who is just learning to hear different sounds, we were... doing it with animal sounds. We had visuals out and we were playing animal sounds. [We ask] does this animal sound the same as another animal sound?”

That helps children who, developmentally, are not ready to hear the difference between “s” and “f” sounds. It’s also an example that shows how important it is to have a leader with a strong early childhood background.

Hang on to your teachers

To staff PEG classrooms, the programs have poached their own teachers, moving them from existing classrooms into the PEG funded rooms. This leaves programs scrambling to find more teachers.

Early education and care programs are also plagued by low salaries. Teachers’ salaries are so low that even the most dedicated, passionate employees quit their jobs because they aren’t earning enough money to support themselves and their families. Some PEG grant teachers have already moved on to jobs in public schools where they earn more money and work a shorter day in a school year that’s only nine months long instead of PEG’s 12-month year. For the directors of these programs, the constant need for new teachers creates ongoing anxiety.

To recruit teachers, Square One runs an early education program at a local high school. Participants have a positive experience and some are even hired by Square One, according to Kris Allard, Square One’s director of development. But other participants steer clear of the field of early education, despite their positive experiences, because they see preschool teachers struggling to make ends meet.

The solutions: equal pay for all teachers of young children, whether these teachers work in public schools or child care centers, and finding more qualified teachers overall. The PEG grant has helped Springfield take steps to equalize pay, but the challenge of finding more teachers remains.

Prioritize Professional Development

Preschool teachers need more support and training on how to deal with children who come from high-poverty districts and may be coping with the toxic stress—including abuse, maternal depression, and exposure to violence—that can compromise brain development. These children can have developmental delays and behavioral challenges. Teachers need the tools and the

language to meet these varying needs—and to refer children for additional services when that’s necessary.

The state’s Early Childhood Educator Scholarship helps. But if Springfield had a pool of money, it could create more higher education opportunities for teachers at the community level. Substitute teachers, for example, could get help earning their CDAs (Child Development Associate credential), and other educators could earn associate and bachelor degrees. Achieving this goal will mean creating new partnerships with institutions of higher education.

Give Families What They Want—and Need

A hefty challenge for the PEG program is that families have different needs and work schedules. Some hesitate to sign up for PEG’s five-day-per-week, full-year program.

“I have this dream of pre-K boot camp,” says Sally Fuller, program director at the Davis Foundation. Fuller says the city could have a five to six-week summer program for children “who we couldn’t find before,” the ones who have never been to preschool. A six-week summer program would provide children with at least some preparation for kindergarten.

Early educators in Springfield also want to have an official centralized enrollment system that will help children and families navigate the confusing mixed-delivery, public/private system and find a good program match. Enrollment advisors would help parents find the best program for their child. It’s an idea that the Springfield Public Schools is looking into.

More money for outreach would enable providers to do the essential grassroots recruiting that it takes to find families—from manning booths at local fairs to knocking on doors to generate word of mouth. This intensive personal touch encourages positive interactions with families and is essential for locating hard-to-find families, such as recent immigrants who do not speak English. This positive interaction

before school starts sets the tone for strong and trusting relationships between parents and educators throughout the school year.

Rip Off the Red Tape

“I’m not usually in the preschool space, but when this grant came about, I definitely fully engaged with it,” Pat Roach said in a recent interview. As chief financial officer of Springfield’s public schools, Roach handles operations, so he saw the clash of regulations that came from the public schools, state-license early education programs, and federally funded Head Start programs. “Being in this one building flushed that out.”

Some regulations called for locked cabinets and bolting furniture to the floor, while others didn’t. And where city officials saw outdoor play structures that looked like fun, state officials saw the risk of head entrapment.

the facts

The PEG team examined results from the September 2015 **Kindergarten Reading Assessment (KRA)**—a tool used by Springfield Public Schools to determine whether children are entering kindergarten with early literacy knowledge and skills.

Only **11.7%** of kindergarten students scored “proficient” or higher.

Roach says that he’d like to be able to share the public schools’ services—such as a nurse or staff from City Connects, a program that connects families to public services. But regulations get in the way. “It would have been really helpful if somebody came and tried to help us work through the red tape on all of that.”

“We’re duplicating efforts in a lot of places which is just inefficient, and it’s a waste of resources, and we’d love to figure out how to target that towards the kids.”

“The money is siloed,” Recoulle says. “So we’re only serving the children that meet the criteria for each of those silos. And there’s this whole bunch of kids standing out in the pasture who don’t meet any of those criteria.”

What if PEG grantees could pool their money—mix city, state, and federal funds—and streamline resources?

“We could actually solve the community’s needs if we could do that,” Roach says.

One pressing example: If Springfield could use some of its funding for transportation, the city could serve more children who live in neighborhoods that don’t have enough preschool programs.

More collaboration is also needed between federal and state government. Early educators in Springfield would like to see more conversations happen between the federal officials at the Administration for Children and Families and state officials in the departments of Early Education and Care and in DESE (the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education). If state and federal officials modeled better collaboration, early educators in cities could do their jobs more effectively.

Get the Facts

The sizeable state wait list for preschool spots in Springfield led PEG officials to expect huge demand for their new seats. Plans were made to develop a local waiting list.

Instead the PEG program in Springfield was under-enrolled. The wait list inflated the demand among some children, and failed to capture the needs of other children who were not “officially” eligible.

To illustrate this point, there are 209 preschool age children on the state waitlist as of January 2017. However, the planning process revealed 5,169 preschool-age children living in Springfield, 47% (2,430) of whom are not enrolled in any form of early education and care program.

Now, understanding the importance of good early childhood data, Springfield has started looking at child data over time to better understand impact and outcomes.

Still, data is limited and that makes this work harder. In addition, there is no one in Springfield whose job it is to know where all the 4-year-olds are. Creating such a position would help Springfield do a better job at implementing preschool programs.

Data would also help Springfield's team answer key questions, among them:

What else do kids and families need?

Are all neighborhoods being served?

Do we have the right array of programs?

Can kids get to them?

Coming up with good questions may be as important as finding the answers, and

Springfield is poised to continually self-assess its strategy and make adjustments for improvement.

Plan for the Future

Local early educators wish that Springfield could open two more early education buildings like 15 Catharine Street in other neighborhoods.

But for now the city has to deal with the PEG grant's ticking clock. Springfield is in year two of the PEG grant's four years of funding, so the looming questions are:

Are these programs sustainable?

What happens next?

Will all the partners be able to keep their programs in the Catharine Street building?

This all remains to be seen.

Their strong relationships will likely keep all partners at the table, talking to each other about how best to serve young children. But without funding some of their hard work could evaporate into warm memories.

Nonetheless, Fuller, of the Davis Foundation, is optimistic.

"We have history with and without funding," she says. "We've been in and out of funding before."

Springfield also has a lot of history and determination, and the city is driven by a simple motive. As Waltsak, the learning center's principal, says, "They're all our kids."

Strategies for Children serves as a thought partner and resource to local communities across Massachusetts working to improve their early learning delivery systems. In 2016, 13 communities developed local plans for preschool expansion. Community Stories illustrate this process, highlighting local examples to inform state policy.

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