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## EC2C Creating a Culture of Partnering to Help Children Succeed

By Larry Gavin

On Oct. 27, the Evanston Cradle to Career (EC2C) initiative held its quarterly partners meeting at Evanston Township High School, attended by leaders of more than 30 partnering organizations. The partners announced how \$172,500 in recent funding from United Way of Metropolitan Chicago would be allocated, and they discussed a “bold goal” around kindergarten readiness.

The vision of EC2C is “By the age of 23, all Evanston young adults will be on the path to leading happy, healthy, productive, and satisfying lives.”

The partners are taking a holistic approach to achieve this vision, recognizing, “children cannot thrive in school or elsewhere without having their basic needs met, their families able to provide healthy and supportive homes, their living and learning environments offering a strong foundation for their development, and their community helping them to succeed.”

More than 40 organizations are currently partnering in EC2C, including School Districts 65 and 202, the City of Evanston, Northwestern University, and many non-profit organizations and faith communities.

EC2C is built on the premise of “collective impact” – that schools, institutions, community organizations, business groups, and others can have a greater impact by working together to address complex social and educational issues than working alone.

### Fostering a Culture of Partnering

The partnering organizations plan to achieve their goals, not by creating new programs, but by realigning their current programs to maximize their impact. This includes using data and community input to evaluate the needs of youth and families in the community and to develop shared goals and strategies to meet those needs.

To date, EC2C partners have approved six goals focusing on parent empowerment, kindergarten readiness, summer learning, graduating from high school prepared for adult life, access to trauma-informed services, and equity. See sidebar. They have adopted a number of strategies to achieve each of these goals.

A second prong is for partnering organizations to work with other partners to collaborate and better coordinate their efforts in implementing the strategies.

A third prong is to use data to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies, revise the strategies as needed, and to hold each other accountable.

While EC2C as a whole has adopted common goals, much of the work is being done by smaller groups of partners who have a similar mission, such as early childhood development, or who have clients who might benefit from another partner’s programs or services. As an example, the YWCA Evanston/North Shore is providing equity training to City employees. The partners are collaborating to provide their services in a more efficient, effective, and comprehensive way.

For example, one need identified is to assist children’s early development, ages 0 – 3. The Children’s Outreach Librarian from the Evanston Public Library (EPL), pediatricians, local health care providers, hospitals, and agencies that provide home-visiting programs to parents with children ages 0-3 are working together on a Talk,



Alan Anderson announced the allocations of the United Way grant.



The partners discussed a bold kindergarten-readiness goal.

### EC2C's Goals

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EC2C has adopted six goals:

- Parent Caregiver Empowerment: “Parents and caregivers have their basic needs met and have the resources they need to support their child’s development.”
- Learning on Track: “Children of diverse backgrounds are ready for and will experience success in kindergarten.”
- Summer Learning: “Children maintain or gain ground academically and socially through a range of accessible, enriching summer activities.”
- Prepared for Adult Life: “All students graduate from ETHS with an individualized plan for life after high school and implement it.”
- Health, Well-Being and Safety: “Children and families receive timely and effective trauma-informed care via a coordinated, accessible system of trusted providers.”
- Equity: “EC2C partners commit to

Read, Sing initiative. The program is designed to educate parents on the importance of talking, reading, and singing to children, ages 0 – 3, to promote healthy brain development and to provide them with fun, effective strategies to do so.

Another need identified is to address summer learning loss. EPL, District 65, and the Youth Job Center have partnered to expand the ABC Boosters program by 100 students. Last summer, the recently established Freedom School used space at Family Focus, and worked with Family Focus to offer extended-day summer programming. Also last summer, EPL helped provide a short literacy program during the City's summer recreation programs.

acknowledge, confront, and eradicate the racial, social, and other systemic inequities within their organization and in the community that undermine access and opportunity for Evanston's youth, particularly youth of color, to reach their life potential."

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There are many other examples where the schools, the City and non-profit organizations are partnering together to provide services and programs. EC2C has helped to promote a culture where organizations look for opportunities to partner together and where they are willing to partner together toward a common goal. This is a significant shift from five years ago.

The grant award process of the United Way funds helps to take this a step further.

### **The United Way Grant**

United Way recently made a grant of \$172,500 to EC2C, to be managed by the Evanston Community Foundation (ECF). At their July 20 meeting, partners of EC2C determined the guidelines for distributing the grant. Under these guidelines, applications for the grant had to be submitted by EC2C partners, with at least three partners participating in each application; and the focus had to be on "systems change" rather than program offerings, said Marybeth Schroeder, Vice President for Programs at ECF.

The partners also decided the applications should focus on one of four goals of EC2C focusing on parent empowerment, kindergarten readiness, access to trauma informed care, or equity.

Alan Anderson, Executive Director of Neighborhood and Community Relations at Northwestern University, said seven groups submitted applications, and a diverse committee decided to allocate \$157,500 of the United Way funds to four groups. The four are:

*Home Visiting Centralized Intake Study:* Childcare Network of Evanston (CNE), Family Focus, the Infant Welfare Society, and the Joseph E. Hill Early Childhood Center each provide home-visiting services to families with infants to provide them with supports and education. They are partnering together to explore a centralized intake system to ensure that families are matched with the best program to meet their needs and to streamline the process for families to gain access to a home family visiting program.

*Community Schools:* Youth and Opportunity United (Y.O.U.) has partnered with School District 65 and other organizations in providing a community school at Chute Middle School for almost five years. Community Schools seek to break down barriers between families and schools and to improve access to needed supports. The Moran Center, which provides legal services to youth, and Metropolitan Family Services, which provides mental health services, propose to partner with District 65 to provide affordable, accessible legal and family counseling support services to families at the community schools. District 65 plans to assume the leadership role of the community school at Chute; and to work with partnering organizations to establish a community school at Oakton Elementary School.

*Trauma Informed Services for Evanston Early Childhood Programs:* CNE, Infant Welfare Society, Reba Early Learning Center, Learning Bridge, and JEH Early Childhood Center, all providers of early childhood services, came together to establish a coordinated intake system to link families experiencing trauma with a mental health consultant specializing in trauma-informed care at no cost to the family. Trauma-affected children are often labeled as disruptive, defiant, and poor learners and are at high risk of disconnecting from school. By streamlining access to free services, this initiative seeks to ensure all families have the support they need and all children are on track for a strong start in kindergarten.

*Moving the Equity Needle:* The City of Evanston Equity and Empowerment Office, the YWCA, and the City of Evanston Parks and Recreation Department propose to build a core group of "Beyond Diversity" associates across the City's departments, and to provide equity training to City employees. The YWCA has been engaged in diversity training, including with the City, for many years. "Given the fact that our City has so many services that support so many folks in our community, having the individuals who are in those roles being able to look at the world through an equity lens is critically important," said Mr. Anderson.

EC2C also approved \$15,000 in funding for an Evanston Fatherhood Initiative, said Mr. Anderson. He said, this initiative addresses the needs of fathers in Evanston, and is a collaboration between the Infant Welfare Society, Family Focus, the City of Evanston Parks, Recreation, and Community Services, the Youth Job Center, and YWCA.

Ms. Schroeder said the funding for the fathership initiative "is going to be for a planning grant to help these partners think, not just how to serve fathers programmatically, but to really examine what are the ways that the system excludes fathers and provides barriers of fathers of not only young children, but across the board, from being engaged in their children's lives."

"This is a nudge for us to do the long-term collective impact work with boots on the ground," said Paul Goren, Superintendent of School District 65. "What we see is partners doing things that are really here and now and end up being systemic. It's just a really nice pivot of where Cradle to Career is going."

Mr. Anderson said, this is "a really important moment" because funding will assist the partners to look at how they can address systemic issues that exist in the community. "It's a powerful thing."

### **A Bold Kindergarten Readiness Goal**

EC2C has adopted six goals, but Katie Pacyna, Data Manager for EC2C, said as a Neighborhood Network Collaboration of United Way, one requirement is that EC2C adopt a "bold goal." She said having a bold goal provides "a

concrete message” to say that all of the systems work being done by partners of EC2C is “leading to this one outcome.”

Dr. Pacyna said EC2C submitted the following bold goal to United Way several months ago: “Increase kindergarten readiness to 89% by 2025 while significantly increasing racial and ethnic parity for African American and Latino families.”

Part of the rationale for submitting a goal around kindergarten readiness as EC2C’s bold goal, she said, is that so much of the work has “organically coalesced” around the early time period of a child’s life and that it makes sense to start there.

She said the goal includes not just the work being done by early childhood providers, but also “it includes workforce development programs that are stabilizing households, and substance abuse programs that are supporting family members, and anybody who is influencing a child’s life.

“We don’t anticipate this will be our only bold goal,” Dr. Pacyna added. “But we will start here and we will add on as work down the line starts to formulate. We have plans to look toward high school and post-secondary years. We have plans to think about all the kids and their families going in between those two time periods.”

In response to a question, Dr. Pacyna said “kindergarten readiness” is defined the same way as District 65 defines it. District 65 has provisionally defined kindergarten readiness as scoring above the 50th percentile in at least four of the five areas assessed in the Illinois Snapshot of Early Learning (ISEL): alphabet recognition, phonemic awareness, one-to-one matching, letter sounds, and story listening.

District 65 has cautioned that its definition has not been validated as predictive of future student performance, nor does it capture the full array of skills that are associated with readiness for kindergarten.

Diane Lequar, Board President of Foundation 65, said, “The kindergarten readiness measure is around literacy, and it’s not yet a whole child measure.” She added that a whole child measure is important to many early childhood educators.

Dr. Goren questioned whether the target is “overpromising” or “underpromising” and asked if they should assess both social and emotional learning, academic skills, and other skills sets. “If we had to prioritize one or two skill sets, what would you prioritize?

“One of the things I have to stand tall on is I need to know if a child is reading at third grade,” Dr. Goren said. “If not, I need to know that we can help that child progress. I also need to know that a child is a fine citizen and gets along well in a group and has self-control and regulation.

“It’s not an ‘either/or.’ It’s an ‘and,’” Dr. Goren said. He also expressed concerns about excessive testing.

Dr. Goren emphasized, “This is not a judgement call on the assets of a child who lives in a society where they have been marginalized or their families have been marginalized. We have to be oversensitive to that.”

Michael Carr, Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs and College Transitions at Oakton Community College, said the measure adopted should align with college readiness. He added, “Having a clear definition and metrics that we’re going to use is really huge.” He questioned, though, “Are the metrics appropriate for everybody?”

Eric Witherspoon, Superintendent of School District 202, said, “I’d rather have a goal that stretches us to our limits and if we fall short I’d rather fall short than not push ourselves and try to do something ambitious.”

Karen Tollenaar Demorest, Executive Director of the Youth Job Center, said non-profits are often driven by “what can we accomplish versus what do we need to accomplish. I think we need to be driven by what we need to accomplish and then find the sweet spot.”

Dr. Pacyna also presented a draft revised kindergarten readiness goal for the partners to consider: “Increase the District-wide kindergarten readiness score to 65% over the next 10 years by creating and strengthening equitable, supportive, accessible systems for pre-k children and their families in Evanston.”

She asked the partners to break into small groups and to discuss what specific conditions or changes would help make services or programs in Evanston “accessible” and “supportive.” Partners were also asked to consider what their organizations could do to help achieve the bold goal.

In this regard, one partner noted, “Kids are influenced by so many factors going on around them because they depend on so many things going on around them to be successful. How do we support them so they will ultimately be successful?”

Dr. Pacyna said she will summarize the input at the next partner’s meeting.