

5/2/2018 3:50:00 PM

## **EC2C Adopts 'Ambitious' Goal to Increase Kindergarten Readiness**

By Larry Gavin

On April 27, partnering organizations in the Evanston Cradle to Career (EC2C) initiative approved an overarching goal to substantially increase the percentage of children who are kindergarten ready when they enter School District 65. They plan to do this, not by teaching kids their ABCs or how to read, but by creating “systems” that will support families to be able to have their children kindergarten ready.



Monique Jones, Executive Director of the Evanston Community Foundation, addresses participants at EC2C's April 27 meeting.

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.”

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.

### **EC2C's Kindergarten-Readiness Goal**

EC2C's first shared bold goal is: “Increase the District-wide kindergarten readiness score to 85% by 2025 by creating and strengthening equitable, supportive,

accessible systems for pre-k children and their families in Evanston, significantly increasing racial and ethnic parity for African American and Latinx children.”

Currently 53% of children are kindergarten-ready when they enter kindergarten at District 65, said Katie Pacyna, Data Manager for EC2C.

The District’s latest achievement report reflects that 68% of White students, 34% of Black students, and 39% of Hispanic students are kindergarten ready, using the District’s definition.

Increasing that number to 85% in seven years is an “ambitious goal” said Sheila Merry, Executive Director of EC2C. “But we decided to go ambitious, and it will be challenging.

“We want to spend next year going all in on kids and families zero to five, and we want to talk a little about what that looks like.”

“This is a refinement for us,” said Dr. Pacyna. “This is the next step in identifying a very specific focus to align all of our work so that we can begin to see the benefits of the collaborative process.”

Some of the steps the partners of EC2C plan to take by going “all in” are to create an action-driven plan to achieve the goal, distribute United Way funding in a manner that will support the goal, and align the work of EC2C’s action teams with the goal.

Ms. Merry said Advocates for Action, formerly called the Community Leadership Team, will be involved “in helping with this work and really leading us to make sure that where we’re moving is in a direction that makes sense.”

Advocates for Action has 21 community members representing underrepresented voices in the community.

### **Create an Action-Driven Plan**

Ms. Merry said the EC2C operations team would like to bring in a person with expertise in the zero-to-five age group to work with them to develop an action driven plan during the coming year, “so that we’re really developing very concrete steps on how we can move forward this agenda around this age group.”

Dr. Pacyna said the plan would include common objectives, and the planning work would be very specific and results driven.

Stephen Vick, Executive Director of Infant Welfare Society, suggested that the focus should be prenatal to five, rather than zero to five, a suggestion that was quickly adopted.

## **Distributing United Way Funding**

EC2C anticipates that it will receive between about \$150,000 and \$200,000 in funding from United Way in the next fiscal year. It plans to allocate this funding to partnering organizations that develop action plans that address the key question: “What can we do as a community to support families in their children’s earliest years of development?”

Ms. Merry emphasized, “We’re not talking about necessarily, exclusively training kids to recognize their ABCs by any means. We’re really talking about how do we create the systems that will support families to be able to have their children be ready for kindergarten when they arrive at the District.”

Monique Jones, Executive Director of the Evanston Community Foundation, similarly said, “We’re not just talking about helping children learn how to read before they get to elementary school. We’re talking about all the things in the system that make it successful for children to thrive, 0 to 5, before they get to school.

“We’re really talking about how we create what needs to exist in the community to support parents and families so that kids are able to arrive with the skills that they need to be ready for kindergarten, which can be a wide range of opportunities.”

The plan is to invest in efforts that “address the systems and structures in our community that create barriers to equitable access and opportunities for all children and their families.”

Ms. Jones said ECF would assist in processing the applications and that a committee consisting of representatives of some of the partnering organizations would decide on the allocations. Members of the Advocates for Action will be involved.

The guidelines for submitting an application for a grant provide that only partners in EC2C are invited to submit an application for the funding. At least three EC2C partners must collaborate on an application. Proposals can be submitted for distributions of between \$5,000 and \$50,000.

A proposal must describe the “systems change” effort being proposed; what change the proposal is seeking to accomplish and how it advances equity; and how the proposal will ensure access and break down barriers in Evanston.

To help define what type of systems changes the leadership team has in mind, the team gave some examples: building a system of coordinated intake and referrals with follow-up, to make access to services and eligibility more streamlined for families with young children; advancing work toward the goal of Evanston as a trauma-informed community; improving coordination among health care providers, home family visitors and other services to better support children; engaging parents

of young children in canvassing their neighborhoods and social networks to identify opportunities for creating more responsive community supports.

### **Align/Refine Action Teams Work**

Dr. Pacyna said some of EC2C's Action Teams are doing great things, but, "We want them to bring their work together so that their efforts are mutually reinforcing."

Three of EC2C's Action Teams – the Parent/Caregiver Empowerment Action Team, the Learning of Track Action Team, and the Health, Safety, and Well-Being Action Team – have focused on initiatives that are designed to support families to promote kindergarten readiness.

Some of these initiatives include:

- They have implemented a Talk, Read, Sing program to educate parents about the benefits of talking, reading and singing to children starting at birth, and also implemented a texting program which provides tips to parents of young children and things parents can do to promote their child's development. More than 600 parents are registered in the texting program.
- They have worked with District 65 to develop shared standards regarding kindergarten readiness, and they distributed the standards to early childhood providers. They have developed a strategy to share information about children's development between preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers.
- They are working on ways to implement trauma-informed practices and care throughout the City, including through in-home services.
- They are working to implement a centralized home family visiting system, and to identify systemic barriers to young fathers playing a significant role in the lives of their children.

Several other EC2C's Action Teams are focusing on summer learning programs, preparing youth to achieve a meaningful career, and increasing equity.

"It's my belief that every organization in EC2C's Action Teams has a role to play in this," said Dr. Pacyna. "The organizations have to see the value they can bring to achieving this goal."

Several people gave examples of how organizations who are not directly involved in early childhood education might provide essential help in this area.

Karen Tollenaar Demorest, Executive Director of Youth Job Center of Evanston, said YJC serves youth 14 to 25 years of age, and that early interventions with young children potentially reduces the work that YJC does. "It's really about adopting a

totally preventative approach,” she said. “There’s no silver bullet. We know that there’s complicated factors in every young person’s life. But the closest thing to a silver bullet is let’s get them off on a really good start and then support them all the way through.”

Mr. Vick said a young dad was recently arrested, and that has caused tremendous turmoil in that young family. He said the Moran Center may play a role in providing legal support to try to keep that family together. He suggested that the community might also develop a program that enables offenders to stay out of the penitentiary and to provide support to their families.

Lindsay Percival, Executive Director of Learning Bridge Early Education Center, said providing secure housing was essential for a family with young children.

A representative of Connections for the Homeless added, “None of this work is possible without people having a safe, secure place to live that they can afford.”

And, of course, a decent job is necessary to maintain stable housing to raise young children.

Dr. Pacyna said that while the school districts provide good data, there is a need to gather reliable data concerning health, employment and housing.

Ms. Merry said EC2C would also need to identify and recruit other partners who are not currently at the table but who need to be at the table to address this goal.

Mr. Vick noted that Oak Park has changed its property tax base to fund the 0-5 age group. “That’s the goal isn’t it? Not having a K-12 system, but having a pre-natal to 12 system that’s funded publicly. Is there room to have that conversation here?”

Ms. Merry responded, “I think there has to be room to have that conversation.”