By Larry Gavin
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Partners of the Evanston Cradle to Career initiative (EC2C) focused on "systems change" at their July 26 meeting held at the Lorraine H. Morton Civic Center. Sheila Merry, Executive Director of EC2C, said systems change "may reframe in modest ways the way we approach this work."

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.

Systems Change
"System change targets the normal everyday operations of social institutions aiming to remove barriers to resources and ensure fair access to opportunity for all Evanston families and their children," says EC2C in a framework document.

Ms. Merry gave two examples of systems change that are taking place in Evanston. This coming school year, she said, 16 early childhood centers are providing information to District 65 about more than half of the children entering kindergarten, which will help principals and teachers understand and meet the needs of students from the start. Representatives of District 65, Foundation 65, and early childhood providers spent a year working out the mechanics.

The second example, Ms. Merry said, is District 65 provided parents with a letter stating whether a family had qualified for free or reduced-fee lunch. Many organizations in Evanston agreed to accept that letter to demonstrate income eligibility for a scholarship at their organizations, eliminating the need for parents to fill out more forms.

Lawrence Hemingway, Director of the City's Parks, Recreation and Community Services, said the City accepted District 65's letter to demonstrate income-eligibility for free beach tokens. He said under this new procedure the City provided 2,400 beach tokens to income-eligible families, as opposed to the 400 it has typically provided in prior years.

Baxter Swilley, Communication Manager for EC2C, said this was important because youth feel they are "part of the community" and "welcome in the community."

Indicators of Systems Change
"We're seeing this as a moment in time," Ms. Merry said, "when we're really going to focus on what does system change mean."

Katie Pacyna, Data Manager for EC2C, said some partners of EC2C have been saying, "I'm not sure how I fit into this anymore. I'm not sure my organization fits."

She said the operations team had to come up with a way to frame the work in a way that would give everybody "a feeling of progress and value and still accomplish something." She said the operations team has developed "a connecting framework for the work that we can all do to see real community change faster than we think."

Mr. Swilley listed four indicators that EC2C plans to use to measure progress toward systems change. First and foremost, he said, is removing red tape and institutional barriers.

"What is really required in a community like Evanston, where there are so many resources, is removing the barriers so people have free and equal access to opportunities, benefits or resources. That's what this is all about.

"The reason why we consider this to be so important is because people in this room can do something about it today because we represent the vanguard in front of the services people are trying to access. Another reason is we believe if families are given an opportunity they will make the best choice for themselves. We believe if there are no barriers in front of them, they will do what's right for themselves and for their families, and it will improve the community at large."

Providing access to information is the second indicator. "This is really an important indicator because it is an aggressive, affirmative action to ensure families have all the information they need to make sound strategic decisions for themselves, their children, and their families," said Mr. Swilley.

Having a shared language is the third indicator, he said. "We need a public discourse that gives everyone access to the debate, particularly when it comes to families. We don't want to use jargon or language that excludes anyone."

The fourth indicator, Mr. Swilley said, is equitable investment. "Equitable investment has everything to do with direct, pointed investment in a community to ensure that everyone has an opportunity or a shot at the American dream. We're talking about private investment, social impact investment, government investment, all the investments that happen in this town. … Communities that are more disadvantaged need more investments."

Mr. Swilley gave a few examples of what he said represented systems change. The Books and Breakfast program is an example of how people can work together to fill a need that is not being met by District 65. Rainbows For All Children trains people who are working with children who have suffered adverse childhood experiences. The group has brought the cost of training down from $4,000 to about $160, which has eliminated a barrier to obtain the training, he said.

The partners broke into small groups to discuss: "What barriers has your organization created and encountered in getting families the support and resources to which they are entitled?" And "What organizational barriers do you specifically know families encounter in attempting to get the support resources to which they are entitled?"

One premise of systems change is "communication among EC2C partners helps identify opportunities for collaboration, topples silos for better cooperation and accelerates dissemination of innovative solutions, best practices and point of hope for real change," says an EC2C framework document.

The Framework to Increase Kindergarten Readiness

EC2C's operations team has prepared a framework for achieving EC2C's bold goal to "Increase overall kindergarten readiness from 54% to 85% by 2025 while significantly increasing parity for African American and Latino children."

"At the core of this framework is affirmative acknowledgment that systems and institutions shape youth development. Given this reality, systems-level measures are required to determine if and to what degree, we're creating conditions wherein Evanston youth will thrive."

The framework uses the same four indicators to measure progress toward the bold goal that are summarized in the accompanying article: reduce red tape and remove barriers; facilitate information-sharing; establish shared language and understanding; and promote equitable investment of resources.

The framework document explains how each indicator is relevant to ensuring that more children are kindergarten ready.

• "Adults play a pivotal role, and can give young people a better chance at successful lives by understanding and intentionally nurturing their development. Providing the right experiences for growth requires knowledge of child and youth development. (Demonstrates the need to pursue effective information sharing.)

• "The economy, and institutions (such as schools) play a central role in the inequitable opportunities available to young people as well as in their ability to see opportunities as viable options and take advantage of them. (Demonstrates the need for more equitable investment of resources throughout all Evanston communities.)

• "Building a common set of objectives and having a clear understanding of how to foster development is a critical step in eliminating the silos that adults working with young people often operate within. (Demonstrates the need for reducing red tape and institutional barriers as well as establishing a common understanding of what is needed to succeed.)"