

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

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D65 and D202 School Board Voices Support for Evanston Cradle to Career Initiative

By Larry Gavin

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The Evanston Cradle to Career Initiative (ECCI) was formally presented to the District 65 and District 202 School Boards at their joint meeting on Jan 13. The “vision” of the initiative, which was unveiled last month, is “By the age of 23, all Evanston young adults will be leading productive lives.”

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

The proposal, still a work in progress, plans to address the vision by initially focusing on six areas: literacy, community poverty and stability, youth and family violence, health, career and post-secondary readiness, and parent connections.

The proposal contains guiding principles, it lists the data that ECCI plans to collect in three broad areas, it contains a framework for working groups that will be charged with setting goals and creating initiatives in the six focus areas, and it provides a concept of a governing structure.

The presentation was made by a panel composed of Sue Schultz, assistant superintendent of District 65; Eric Witherspoon, superintendent of District 202; Sara Schastok, CEO of Evanston Community Foundation; Andrea Densham, executive director of Childcare Network of Evanston; and Bill Geiger, president and CEO of McGaw YMCA.

All were members of the planning committee that drafted the ECCI proposal, under the leadership of Michelle Shumate, an associate professor at Northwestern University who has done extensive research in the area of interorganizational networks designed to impact large social issues.

The Panel’s Overviews

“From the perspective of District 65,” said Ms. Shultz, “it’s important to know that the initiative is very consistent with our mission and will support the achievement of our District’s goals. We have made strides

in improving our achievement for all of our students, especially our most struggling students but we know that success is sometimes related to factors beyond our control. We know that issues of housing, poverty, health, as well as community issues, also impact their success going from cradle to career.

“This initiative will really provide our students and families the help they need so our students will fulfill the mission of becoming self-sufficient, educated, responsible adults.”

“For District 202,” said Dr. Witherspoon, “this is a vital part of how we can elevate the work that we are doing and more fully fulfill the mission for all the youth that attend ETHS.”

Despite everyone’s work, he said, “there are still gaps and there are still goals that are not being fully realized. We have youth between the ages of birth – or even pre-natal – through age 23 who are not fulfilling their potential in the way District 65 wants to see, the way District 202 wants to see, the way Childcare Network wants to see, that McGaw Y wants to see.

“We know there is a power to collective work. ... All of these agencies working together can have an amazing impact,” Dr. Witherspoon said.

Ms. Shastok said, “We believe too that working together is what we need to do as a community, sharing in the responsibility for all of our children. This is a way to get all of our children in the community to attain outcomes that are not predetermined by their families, by their income, by things that are outside their individual makeup as often they are.

“Big problems take time and concerted effort to address,” Ms. Shastok continued. “It takes a long-term effort. This is not low-hanging fruit and easy victories. It’s very challenging to take on the problems that are enmeshed in poverty.”

Ms. Densham said, “Leveraging our collective skills, knowledge and resources to build a continuum of coordinated services from cradle to career is core to this work.

“It allows us to expand the great work you have done on your initiative [the joint literacy goal] to the early learning spaces, to ensure that we are using common measurement tools and we’re holding all of us responsible for the outcome which is critically important.”

Mr. Geiger focused on two of six guiding principles for ECCI. He said the equity principle – which acknowledges disparities that exist in the community – is critical. “For me, and I think for several others at this table, this is the motivation to come to the table. It’s the glue that keeps us at the table.”

Another principle mentioned by Mr. Geiger was “shared responsibility,” something he said he thought was shared around the room. “We are responsible for all of the youth in our community.”

He added that other communities have been successful in this type of work. “We are not reinventing the wheel,” he said.

School Board Reactions

All School Board members who spoke said they strongly supported the initiative. They suggested ways to make it stronger.

Data to Measure How Youth Are Doing

The ECCI proposal lists metrics that will be used to measure how youth are doing in three broad areas: education, health, and community. Some of the data ECCI would like to measure is not readily available and is in what they call Phase 2 Metrics.

Gretchen Livingston, president of the District 202 Board, suggested that in addition to collecting data showing “hope and resilience” that ECCI collect data showing “persistence and grit,” which she said have been identified in the literature as important things in terms of student success.

She also noted the term “violence” was used in the proposal in several spots, but she focused on gun and knife violence. “I would argue that’s a very important component of our community health, our general public health. ... It’s a real public health issue that needs to be a very central focus of our work.”

Claudia Garrison, District 65, suggested tracking tardiness and absenteeism. “These are kind of the canary in the coal mine.” She also suggested that ECCI attempt to collect data on students who were disengaged or underachieving.

Mark Metz, District 202, asked a related question, about how to find which students are falling through the cracks and what needs they have.

Candance Chow, District 65, asked if “academic engagement” could be measured, and noted that Ms. Garrison’s suggestion of tracking tardiness and absences might be a proxy. She suggested that in looking at “social and emotional learning” a starting point might be the PBIS data collected by the Districts.

Expanding the Concept of Equity

Richard Rykhus, a member of the District 65 Board, said the vision which applied to “all” Evanston young adults is “very powerful” and “a real statement about what we want.”

He added that he thought it was important and appropriate that the “equity” guiding principle in the proposal “culled out issues of racism very explicitly.” He suggested that poverty and students with special needs be included in the statement on equity.

Staffing and Governance

Several Board members suggested that ECCI may need someone more skilled than a “project manager” to oversee and manage a large number of organizations in the initiative, and suggested that the budget be increased to cover the cost of hiring someone with a higher skill level.

When asked about the governing structure, Ms. Densham said the planning committee did not predetermine who would be members of the working groups or on the steering committee, which would have primary responsibility for the initiative. She said the planning committee wanted to ensure that people whom the initiative is designed to help would have a place in the working groups and on the steering committee. “That is a core element of this,” she said.

Dr. Witherspoon added that community organizations that sign onto the initiative would be asked to help pay the costs and that the payment would be based proportionately on their budget in relation to the budgets of other participating organizations. The first year’s budget is \$203,000. The three organizations with the largest budgets are the School Districts and the City. Dr. Witherspoon estimated that the maximum contribution for each School District would be \$50,000.

Dr. Witherspoon said each participating organization would also be expected to be part of one of the working groups, and that they would likely want a role in the decision-making.

Core Goals

District 65 Board President Tracy Quattrocki noted that the Strive Together model in Cincinnati had a short list of five measures of success and asked if ECCI would follow suit.

Ms. Densham responded there is “a full intent” to have around five high-level benchmarks of success. She said there would likely be some additional data for those interested in more details.

Ms. Quattrocki closed the discussion saying, “We look forward to seeing how we can contribute both financially and in aligning our efforts with this initiative when we take on our strategic plan and in setting our own goals.”

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