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Evanston Cradle to Career Gaining Momentum

By Larry Gavin

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The Evanston Cradle to Career Initiative (EC2C) is "moving along very, very well," Superintendent Eric Witherspoon reported to the Joint District 65/202 Board Committee on Sept. 18. "There are now many partners who have joined in the initiative. There's real energy," he added.

The initiative, almost two years in the planning, 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.

The plan is to address the needs of Evanston youth, starting at birth, in a holistic fashion and to focus on all factors that impact learning, health and social and emotional development. The vision is "By the age of 23, all Evanston young adults will be leading productive lives."

Additional Partners

Paul Goren, superintendent of District 65, and Maria Allison, its chief strategy officer, "have been active participants in the planning and design" of EC2C said Dr. Witherspoon. "It's gratifying to have the leadership of both Districts actively so engaged in Cradle to Career and engaged in changing the outcomes for young people."

Many of the larger organizations have committed to EC2C. The Schools Districts and the City have each committed to contribute \$50,000 to EC2C in the first year. NU has committed to contribute \$25,000 plus provide data collection and analysis.

United Way has also joined the initiative and is considering EC2C for a planning grant of \$50,000 and in kind support, said Dr. Witherspoon. Bill Geiger, a District 202 Board member and a member of the EC2C planning group, said United Way "has brought in considerable expertise, having launched two collective impact initiatives previously."

Dr. Witherspoon added that they are starting to reach out to the business community to get businesses involved. As a starting point, the Evanston Chamber of Commerce has committed to get involved. Erie Health has also committed to participate.

Many non-profit organizations have been involved since the initial planning stage and have committed to

participate. They include: McGaw YMCA, Chidcare Network of Evanston, Evanston Community Foundation, Peer Services, Youth Organization Umbrella, YWCA Evanston/North Shore, Infant Welfare Society, Second Baptist Church, and Evanston Scholars.

The Nitty Gritty

"With some momentum having been created, the planning group is really now focused on some very practical, tangible hands-on, 'How do we make this work?' kind of issues," said Mr. Geiger. "We've moved from the theoretical, esoteric to, 'Ok, now we need to move this forward. What are specific goals and responsibilities of the partners and the operations team and the executive director and how do they interact and 'What's going to get done?'"

Dr. Goren said, "We've got the players around the table. The school Districts and the City and a wide range of our non-profits are sitting around the table and are engaged and committed to the data and where we are and where we're going.

"What we ultimately decide to do in Cradle to Career will be driven by data and by evidence, and indeed I think it will really challenge our practices and change our practices depending on what we're exploring. That's embedded in our joint work on data and accountability across the Districts."

He added that the planning group was now involved in the "nitty-gritty of the governance structure." He said it was important to "make sure all voices are heard" and to "make sure we're reaching out to the community, including the community who might not be represented around the table."

The planning group is currently seeking applications for an executive director, who is expected to start in early January. Dr. Goren said the executive director "will really drive the work."

The plan is that a steering committee will be formed to oversee the initiative. Solution design teams will be formed, and each team will focus on one of six areas: literacy, community stability including housing and poverty, mental and physical health and safety, career and postsecondary readiness and parent engagement. Each team will develop goals, a plan of action and metrics of success in their respective areas.

Looking at Things Differently

District 202 School Board president Gretchen Livingston said, "One of the things we need to be very clear about in this process going forward is the notion that we're not making work or duplicating work that already happens across the important organizations in our community.

"I think we need to be very clear that we operate very successfully within our sphere but there needs to be a way – and the mechanism is the collective impact effort – to bring it all to the table and tie it up."

Mr. Geiger said, "While we're not adding programs, we're recognizing where we need change. Our coming together requires that we look at things differently."

District 202 Board member Jonathan Baum said, the work already being done by Districts 65 and 202 in the joint committee – including the Joint Literacy Goal [adopted by Boards in January] – is a contribution to the cradle to career initiative. This is part of the process."

Dr. Witherspoon said, "We're really looking for new ways to partner in the community. How do we all have a way to contribute to the outcomes of the youth in the community.

"What we are saying – to your point Gretchen – is 'How does it differ?' What roles do we now take and how

do we come together to get these different outcomes doing things in a way not done before?"

District 65 School Board president Tracy Quattrocki said the Districts should keep in mind when talking about the Joint Literacy Goal and the joint data reporting, "how we practically fold that into cradle to career."

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