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Early Childhood Development a Linchpin of Evanston's Cradle to Career Initiative

By Larry Gavin

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The vision of a proposed Evanston Cradle to Career Initiative (ECCI) is that “by the age of 23, all Evanston youth will be leading productive lives.” The proposal, which is being considered for adoption by approximately 30 Evanston organizations, 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.

Under the proposal, broad working groups would be created to develop goals, measures of success and initiatives to achieve those goals in six areas: literacy, community poverty and stability, youth and family violence, health, career and post-secondary readiness, and parent connections. Conspicuously absent is a group to work on early childhood development, perhaps the linchpin for everything else.

Rather than creating a new working group to focus on early childhood development, ECCI’s proposal says it plans to promote best practices among existing coalitions of early childhood providers, specifically the Childcare Network of Evanston (CNE) and the Evanston Community Foundation (ECF) Every Child network.

Andrea Densham, executive director of CNE and a member of the planning committee that drafted the ECCI proposal, said one reason for not creating a group to focus on early childhood is, “There’s already established and operating networks and groups in the early childhood space. Let’s leverage the resources we already have. Let’s use their models right out of the box.”

Another is that early childhood is age-related, and it cuts across the six broad areas ECCI will work on.

CNE was formed in 1967 to serve as the backbone agency for a network of early childhood providers, said Ms. Densham. It offers a wide range of programs designed to support children, parents, teachers and childhood providers. “At our core, it’s ‘How do we leverage our resources helping our providers to provide the highest early learning services and get every child and family into those services.’”

For the last 10 years, CNE has been a “gold standard” provider of Early Head Start services. It partners with early childhood providers to enhance the physical, social, emotional and intellectual development of children from birth-to-3 years old, and to educate and empower their parents.

CNE lists many early childhood centers and 38 other community organizations as community partners in its network.

In 2007, ECF began funding a research-based home-visit program for 50 families with children in the birth-to-3 age group in Evanston. Its primary partners are the Infant Welfare Society and the Family Center at School District 65. When it started, ECF's program increased the number of Evanston families receiving home visits by about one-third. More recently, ECF began to provide expanded home visiting to certain families in the 3 to-4 age group.

Last summer, ECF partnered with Northwestern University to establish a pilot "two-generation" program in Evanston that simultaneously provides high-quality early education for children as well as education, job training and employment opportunities for their parents.

More than 30 organizations provide high-quality early childhood programs in Evanston.

A. The Linchpin: Early Childhood Development

A series of recent reports published by the National Science Council on the Developing Child (NSCDC) demonstrate that early childhood experiences – whether nurturing toward positive growth or stressful to the point of being toxic – have "an enormous impact" on how a child's brain is "wired" and physically develops. Positive experiences establish a strong foundation for more effective learning capacities in the future. Negative experiences, depending on their timing, duration and severity, can produce physiological disruptions that lead to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and health. By age 3 a great deal of a child's brain architecture is already developed.

One NSCDC report, "The Science of Early Child Development" (2007), says in strong terms, "The need to address significant inequalities in opportunity, beginning in the earliest years of life, is both a fundamental moral responsibility and a critical investment in our nation's social and economic future."

The differences between children who are exposed to rich early experiences and those who are not show up early. Typically, at 18 months, children from low-income households are measurably behind children from higher-income households in language processing skills and vocabulary. One recent study published by researchers at Stanford University found that by age 2, they were six months behind children from higher-income households. By kindergarten, "linguistically disadvantaged" children know about 5,000 words, compared to "more advantaged" children who know about 20,000 words. By some measures, the linguistically disadvantaged children are two years behind when they enter school.

Studies show there is a substantial relationship between vocabulary size in kindergarten and future academic success.

"Early childhood education is really important because learning begins at the latest at birth, said Sara Schastok, president and CEO of ECF. "We've seen the high school talk about, 'We have kids who aren't at ninth-grade level when they come in' and they look back at District 65. District 65 knows kids come in the first day of kindergarten behind some of their peers. Pre-school teachers who teach 3-year olds say on the first day of pre-school they can see a difference in kids' development. It's very clear as researchers have been saying from other domains, whether it's neuroscience or developmental psychology or other fields, it's the first 24, the first 36 months of life where a lot of really important stuff takes place. The pathways that are not used in the brain, some of them fall away. That's been an important finding scientifically."

Citing research findings of James Heckman, the Nobel laureate economist at the University of Chicago, who has explored the economic implications of not investing in early childhood, Ms. Schastok said, "You look at the lifetime accomplishment of people who may have started in the same high risk low-income setting. Those

who have the good fortune to have a good early childhood education, whether they go into mediocre or good schools, you look at them some 30 years later, they're less likely to have been in jail, more likely to get a job, more likely to be in a marriage raising a family with some stability."

In an article, "The Economics of Inequality," Dr. Heckman says, "In fact every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood education produces a 7 to 10 percent per annum return on investment. Policies that provide early childhood educational resources to most disadvantaged children produce greater social and economic equity. We can create a more level and productive playing field for all by making wise and timely investments in effective education."

Also referring to Dr. Heckman's work, Ms. Densham said, "We have very high quality data – that's longitudinal – that proves that investment in high quality early learning services for children and parents, especially if those two are linked, provides great net outcomes. ... So we know if we invest there, we have a good outcome."

"We have to teach the community why it matters – why it's a good investment. It's really important to me for everyone to understand when we do this right, when we provide these services early, we will prevent bad outcomes later in life," she added.

B. Challenges Facing Evanston

1. Expanding Services/Empowering Parents

"One of the biggest challenges is to decrease parental stress and increase the command of successful parenting strategies," said Ms. Schastok. "How you deal with an 18 month old or a 2-year old when you're exhausted because you're working three jobs or you've just lost a third job and you're wondering how you're going to keep the roof over your head and food on the table. It's hard to parent under any conditions and under the stress of being low-income and maybe sleeping on your mother's couch or living with your mother as a single mom – there's just a lot of extra challenges."

"Helping people to be better parents, more effective in those early years is going to be more helpful. For some people home visiting is great. For others it's not feasible because of their work relationships and tight schedules or perhaps other people aren't predisposed to that. But we want everybody to have a child who comes into kindergarten socially and emotionally ready as well as knowing the convention of print, maybe enjoying reading."

Ms. Schastok estimates that somewhere between 35 and 50% of the high risk low-income families in Evanston who could most benefit from home visits are currently receiving them. The state average is 7.1%, she said. "Evanston is doing a lot more than the rest of the State."

Nonetheless, many families are not receiving that particular service.

Ms. Densham also places a focus on empowering parents. "This issue about parent empowerment and parent education is critically important at the 0-3 space," says Ms. Densham. "The brain research has really illuminated that vocabulary and engagement of the parent at that time changes the trajectory. Brain synapses are developing, cognitive ability and language development is also happening at that time."

"We definitely need to grow the resources we have," said Ms. Densham. She says that CNE is partnering with other organizations to serve 193 families with children in the birth-to-3 age group through Early Head Start, but there is a waiting list. "The more of those kids we can get involved in early learning services, it absolutely changes the trajectory and not just at District 65, but 202."

Ms. Densham says it is also important to focus more resources to help parents “understand why reading is so important” to “help them with whatever gap they have in their own literacy” and to encourage them to “read to their kids and eat it up. If parents read to their kids and kids see their parents reading, it’s like an inoculation. It makes all the difference in the world.”

Ms. Densham added when parent have kids in the 0-3 age level, it is a unique moment in their lives, and it is an opportune time to teach them how to advocate for their child. In addition, they may be receptive to suggestions that they take an ESL class, or go back to school, or try new training opportunities for themselves. They may take health and wellness more seriously and in a different way. “What we’ve found is not only do we have better outcomes for the kids, if we do this right, we also have a better outcome for the parents, both in education, economics and health and wellness.”

Ms. Densham pointed to ECF’s two-generation pilot program that simultaneously provides high-quality early education for children as well as education, job training and employment opportunities for their parents. The program is intended to help sustain the gains children make in early education by providing the parents with skills and job opportunities that will enable them to provide an economically stable home for their children on an ongoing basis.

“The intergenerational work is really what’s going to define success for us,” said Ms. Densham. “It’s going to give us high quality data, but also a well-studied model that works.”

2. Scholarships for Families in the Middle

Both Ms. Densham and Ms. Schastok say a key challenge for the community is how to ensure that families who do not qualify for an Illinois childcare subsidy can send their children to high-quality child centers.

“Everyone in the middle is in a tough bind,” said Ms. Densham. “That’s one of our greatest challenges.”

The two pointed to a focus group study conducted by the “Little and Learning” committee that evolved from Evanston 150. A report, written by Susan Munro of SBM Solutions for Nonprofits, says families who earn no more than 185% of the federal poverty level may qualify for a childcare subsidy. The subsidy provides assistance to families to place their children in a childcare program while they work or go to school. Parents must contribute a co-payment based on their income.

For a single mother with two children, 185% of the poverty rate in 2013 was \$36,130.

“If a family is earning 185% of poverty or less, they can get a child care subsidy,” said Ms. Munro. “It doesn’t wipe out the cost, but it reduces it. But then they fall off the cliff. For instance, if a single mother has two children in childcare and she’s making \$36,000, she’ll pay about \$310 a month for childcare. Then, if she gets a raise to \$37,000, she’ll need to pay \$1,200 a month for childcare because of the loss of a subsidy.”

There are other scenarios in which parents may not qualify for a subsidy, such as where they complete their education and are looking for a job. In addition, parents who were once able to stretch their finances to pay the entire cost of early child services may lose the ability to do so, if for example one of two working spouses loses a job, or if they are forced to pay for unexpected health care costs.

“At Little and Learning, we’re starting to think about how do we build an endowment that will make it possible for all Evanston children to have high quality childcare and pre-school,” said Ms. Munro. “Helping families keep their children in high-quality early learning environments is good for kids, for families’ economic security, for our school systems, and in the long run, for Evanston.”

Ms. Densham said CNE, ECF and Little and Learning are all interested in establishing an endowment fund

that could be used to provide scholarships for early learning services to families who do not qualify for a childcare subsidy and who need assistance to send their children to a high-quality early learning center.

“We think that providing folks that bridge, that assistance will really expand the number of families that are ready to access it,” she said.

“We have focused in the past on those who need it the most, which is a very important part of our mission,” said Ms. Densham. “But we also recognize that as people fall off subsidies, we don’t have an infrastructure to continue to support them.”

“When our goal is ensuring that every child enters kindergarten ready to learn and every child is prepared to thrive, we have to look at the entire community,” she said.

Ms. Schastok added another perspective. “Our whole community is not supporting early childhood education,” she said. “They don’t have to. We pay our taxes for a K-12 system. What about the pre-K years? If there were more people who would contribute to early childhood, we would be better off.

“I’m hopeful we as a community can come together around that,” she said.

3. Other Challenges

Ms. Densham and Ms. Schastok mentioned several other challenges that have difficult solutions.

The Little and Learning report found that parents cannot always find high quality childcare that fits their work schedules. “Early learning centers are designed to meet the needs of parents working traditional hours, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.,” says the report. “Parents working in low-paying jobs, whether housekeeping, health care, or retail, often have to work outside of those traditional hours and may not know their schedule from one week to the next.”

“The scheduling is pretty hard for families to fund childcare if they’re working a 3-11 p.m. shift, said Ms. Schastok. “I don’t know of any center that would accommodate families with that schedule. We have a workforce that’s evolved in a way and our educational system is not supporting that.”

Another challenge is compensating teachers. Ms. Densham said, “Early Head Start does great work on professional development and standards. It requires all of us to rise to a higher level. The expectations are very high about the quality of services.

“One of the huge challenges we have as the requirements go up for educational experience is that salaries have not followed,” said Ms. Densham. “The teachers are paid really poorly. If we really care about this space and the outcomes here, we’re going to have to invest more and pay for the work that they do. We need to provide them opportunities for professional development and help them get out of the classroom and continue to learn about this great brain research that’s going on out there.”

C. Cradle to Career Opportunities

“One thing the cradle to career initiative provides is the opportunity to say, ‘Hey look here, we’re in Evanston. It gives us the opportunity to select common methods for collecting information and then tracking what our success rate is. Our school districts both do that and it’s time to do that in the early learning space,” said Ms. Densham.

Ms. Schastok said CNE, ECF and others will be developing goals and measures of success for early childhood development. “It’s very early in the process, but it is important to know that’s a fundamental

aspect of this project we're embarking on." She added, the goals and metrics would have to be developed with experts and with the buy in of participating organizations.

ECCI's draft proposal provides for hiring a data analyst to collect data showing enrollment rates for preschool and home visiting programs, and the percent of children who are kindergarten ready in language and literacy development, cognition and general knowledge, approaches to learning, physical health, and social and emotional development.

The initiative will also collect and report data relating to health, immunizations and obesity.

These and other data may be used to set goals and measures of success.

The initiative also provides a structure for representatives of CNE, ECF, Little and Learning and providers of early childhood programs to collaborate with other organizations in the community, such as the school districts in developing a literacy goal and initiatives to achieve that goal, or perhaps with Erie Family Health Center in developing a health goal.

The Boards of School Districts 65 and 202 are scheduled to have a joint meeting on Jan. 13 to consider adopting a joint literacy goal that would include partnering with the community.

On another level, Ms. Densham said one Evanston family was recently working with seven different Evanston agencies. "We were all working in isolation. It's the perfect example of why this is important. If we can break down the barriers and if we as agencies can do the heavy lifting of talking to each other, we're going to be able to provide the kids and parents much better services and it's going to have better outcomes."

Some communities are already tracking what services each family receives from various organizations in the community to see if there are gaps or duplications in the services and if there is way to improve the services, said Ms. Densham.

Getting a community conversation that's aligning everybody around certain goals and understanding the relevance of birth-to-three years to those later outcomes, this is a big thing for a community," said Ms. Schastok. "The cradle to career initiative is a wonderful paradigm for us to work effectively together toward these goals of ours."

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