

Chapter 10

Cross-Sector Partnerships for Early Education and Care

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Abstract This chapter describes an initiative that leveraged government policy to build an organization whose work transcends the boundaries of sector and geography. The Northeast (Massachusetts) Regional Readiness Center is a cross-professional structure that brings together stakeholders from several sectors for the purpose of improving communication, creating partnerships, and collaborating to provide professional development that targets the needs of young children in the region and those who educate and provide them with care.

Keywords Northeast Regional Readiness Center • Partnerships • Professional development • Cross-sector collaboration • Community schools • Interprofessional education • Race to the top • Common core standards • QRIS

Introduction

The ultimate goal of this collection of chapters is to broaden the perspectives of preservice and in-service early childhood professionals so that in considering other ways that nations and organizations do things—establish priorities in early education, structure their services, and judge their successes and failures—early educators might rethink their own goals and programs, perhaps even look differently at the children in their care. Globally literate educators are aware of, and value, multiple perspectives (Swiniarski and Breitborde 2003). They are constant learners, gathering information and seeing what’s needed in early education through the eyes of all parties, including children’s. Reflective practitioners, they are always skeptical of their own “best” practices. In gathering up and considering multiple perspectives and points of view,

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globally literate educators understand how context plays a central role in children's lived worlds—the contexts of cultural beliefs and understandings; family structure and interaction; the health of the child, of the family, and of the community as a whole; social class and economic welfare; and community relations and expectations.

While globally literate early childhood educators may understand how contextual problems such as lack of access to health care and poverty affect the children in their immediate charge as well as children in that community or that state or nation as a whole, past, present, and future, too often, the process of obtaining information or services that would enable a child even to attend a program (transportation, stable housing, respite care) is daunting, if not impossible, to navigate. Extra-educational services in the United States are typically the province of several distinct public or nonprofit agencies who don't necessarily communicate well with early educators or with each other. While they share a common goal of maximizing children's development and welfare, they share also the problems of chronic underfunding, short-staffing, and increased pressure to produce quantitative data that purports to indicate that their work is "effective." And, too often, while they might benefit from pooled resources and shared support, the worlds of early education, social work, health, housing, legal services, etc., are separated by the boundaries of their special perspectives, their language, and their priorities. These boundaries enclose arcane discourses that might as well be foreign languages, connoting meanings and assumptions accessible only to the professionally initiated and creating barriers of communication and goodwill. Social workers become the "problem" to early educators. Teachers become obstacles to health workers. The legal world is heartless and inflexible, and everyone agrees parents are the common enemy. This chapter describes an initiative that has had success in leveraging government policy to build an organization whose work transcends the boundaries of sector and geography. The Northeast (Massachusetts) Regional Readiness Center is a cross-professional structure that brings together stakeholders from several sectors for the purpose of improving communication, creating partnerships, and collaborating to provide professional development that targets the needs of children in the region and those who educate and provide them care.

“Schools Can't Go It Alone”: The Need for Interprofessional Partnerships

The idea that children's development depends on communication and collaboration on the part of workers from multiple sectors is not new. Within public education, the model has centered in schools variously labeled "full-service," "extended-service," or "community schools" (Blank et al. 2003; Melaville 1989; see <http://www.communityschools.org>). In some ways, using the school as a source for information, referral and direct help to children and families recalls the function of the one-room rural schoolhouse, a multipurpose community institution that characterized most of American schooling through the nineteenth century and that exists today in remote island communities in New England and in sparsely populated western states.

Whether ancillary services are housed under the school's roof or linked by special relationship to agencies outside the school, there is a general recognition that "schools can't go it alone." Since Maslow, we have known that a child is not mentally or emotionally free to learn unless his or her physical and primary emotional needs are satisfied (Maslow 1962). Six-year-old Joseph, habitually truant, has a single mother who is too ill to get him dressed, fed, and out the door in the morning. His classmate Janelle comes every day, but without the eyeglasses she needs to see her work that her family can't afford to buy her. Lawson (2004, 2009) has long claimed that the needs of vulnerable children call for partnerships among schools, families, community organizations, government, businesses, and higher education institutions and that the preparation of professionals whose aim is to help children should be prepared "interprofessionally."

In response, our university, whose College of Health and Human Services includes the Schools of Education, Nursing, Social Work, Criminal Justice, and Occupational Therapy, offers a graduate course, "Partnerships for Families: An Interprofessional Approach," to graduate students in early childhood education, social work, and nursing (Bryne et al. n.d.). One of this university's partner schools has housed a health clinic to provide immunizations and first-line care to children and their families. The local police department sends officers to the school to work with children to help them avoid gang involvement and prevent violence. University students have run after-school programs and served as mentors. A "night school" offers immigrant parents classes in English, citizenship, high-school equivalent test preparation, and technology training. The model has its limitations, however; like many such "community schools," it relies on one principal's imagination and her personal relationships with university staff and community agencies. The grants that funded some of the above programs in the 1990s have been discontinued in favor of funding that aims directly at improving "adequate yearly progress" on high-stakes state tests in compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Under NCLB, the link between basic health/social services, adult education, and children's learning was ignored.

The Obama election brought to Washington a new Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, who, in his tenure as CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, created a network of community schools whose links to social agencies ensured that families could access the supports that would allow their children to come to school regularly and attend to learning (Chicago School Chief 2005). In a speech he gave to the United Way of Los Angeles in March 2011 entitled "The Road Less Traveled," Duncan challenged the Greater Los Angeles area to reimagine our basic "concept of school" and broaden children's educational experiences, starting with expanded early education, to provide them with "art, chess, family literacy nights, robotics, debate teams, and GED and ESL programs for parents." He urged communities to partner with businesses for mentorships and internships, and with nonprofit organizations "like the YMCAs, the Boys and Girls Club, college-readiness programs, and other providers" to run their programs in the schools so that "schools become the heart of community life and of family life." And then, "I promise you our children will do just fine" (Duncan 2011).

At the same time that Duncan took on the task of improving the nation's schools, new Massachusetts governor Deval Patrick, a former assistant attorney general under Bill Clinton (and a native of Chicago), appointed Paul Reville his state Secretary of Education. Reville had a background in building partnerships on behalf of public education. He had founded a multiservice educational improvement organization (the "Alliance for Education") serving Central Massachusetts and had led and taught in alternative secondary schools. He supported "extended-day" and "extended-year" schools that would offer the kind of enriched learning activities that are typically available only to children whose parents can pay for them and "wraparound services" for their families. As Secretary, he would oversee three state departments of education, including the Dept. of Early Education Care, the first-in-the-nation agency that includes both early education and care, and after-school services for children and families. His agenda—to reducing the wide educational achievement gaps among Massachusetts children by widening access to high-quality education P-16, enlisting whole communities and all sectors in the effort—paralleled Duncan's.

Race to the Top and Readiness

The Obama-Duncan commitment to improve public education in general and, especially, to correct the pernicious "achievement gaps" between racial, linguistic, and sociocultural student subgroups overrepresented in high-poverty urban schools resulted in competitive grants to states who would agree to tackle the problem in comprehensive but focused ways. Millions of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act dollars were granted to states under the "Race to the Top" program. Massachusetts' proposal, written jointly by Reville's Executive Office, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the Departments of Higher Education (DHE) and Early Education and Care (EEC), was successful. The proposal made several references to the need for cross-sector collaboration in the development of "a seamless education system from birth through higher education" (MA. DESE 2010, p. 14). It recognized the wide gulf between high- and low-performing schools and districts in our crowded state, where advantaged communities yield student achievement scores at the highest international levels, and low-performing districts, home to poor immigrants, people of color, and English language learners, are worse than those of many developing nations. The pattern is not surprising: of the children in the 35 lowest-performing schools in Massachusetts, 9 in 10 are poor; 9 in 10 are students of color; 1 in 5 has a defined disability; and 1 in 4 is an English language learner (MA. DESE 2010, pp. 146–147).

Our state's successful proposal promised comprehensive wraparound initiatives for children and families that would involve early education and care providers and community health and human service agencies in providing integrated community support for children's social, emotional, and health needs in high-poverty schools "where often the most effective classroom instruction cannot entirely overcome these non-academic barriers to learning" (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2010). It admitted that "in most districts, existing education

and human service systems (e.g. child welfare, juvenile justice, and mental health services) demonstrate good intentions but also pervasive inefficiencies and fragmentation of effort” (MA. DESE, pp. 153–154). Recognizing the importance of reaching children before they enter kindergarten with comprehensive strategies to ensure their learning, the proposal saw EEC as a full partner in the delivery of high-quality services to children, their families, and the early education workforce. EEC was charged with the development of a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) to assess and improve early education in center- and school-based programs, family child care, and after-school programs (Schilder et al. 2011); the creation of a Birth to School Age Task Force to support the healthy development of children, particularly those from low-income families; and the expansion of universal prekindergarten to promote school readiness. The Race to the Top early childhood initiatives linked early education standards and K–3 curricula and assessments, including integration of the federal common core standards in early grades, provided model curricula through a digital library, and developed formative assessments and curriculum-embedded performance tasks in early grades.

Central to the carrying out of RTTT programs and priorities was the establishment of six regional Readiness Centers to provide high-quality, targeted, professional development to “great teachers and leaders”—an “effective, academically capable, diverse, and culturally proficient workforce” (MA.DESE, p. 87), focused on student learning. The six regional Readiness Centers would serve as hubs for collaboration among local, regional, and state education stakeholders and would convene stakeholders from across the early education, K–12, higher education, and out-of-school-time sectors collaboratively to address education priorities, leverage resources, and increase integration and coherence, all focused on improving teaching and children’s learning. These new centers would build new relationships and partnerships among regional stakeholders, resulting in more coherent and focused professional development aligned with the real needs of children in the region, as well as statewide educational priorities. The collaborating partners to the Readiness Centers would, for example, develop criteria for selecting and assessing professional development providers; identify and disseminate replicable effective programs to partner child care centers, schools, and districts; and establish an educational culture characterized by cross-functional, cross-sector communication within a shared vision and vocabulary for education reform (MA. DESE, p. 34).

A group of higher education institutions, school districts, early childhood and out-of-school-time programs, and workforce development agencies submitted a successful application to form the Northeast (Massachusetts) Regional Readiness Center (<https://www.salemstate.edu/academics/schools/9444.php>) in early 2010. It would be headquartered at Salem State University, a large public institution with a long-term commitment to preparing and serving teachers for the region’s schools. NRRC took as its mission to respond to the educational needs of P-16 schools and community organizations with resources, opportunities for collaboration, and models of effective practice. Its ultimate intention was to become a central network of research-based, effective professional resources for implementing, supporting, and sustaining improved educational practice in the region. In a region that included

several older, formerly industrial cities, gateways for new immigrants and housing many schools considered low-performing, NRRC acknowledged the rich history and culture of our communities as resources for learning, the variety of workplaces and areas of economic growth, the wealth of cultural institutions and museums in the region, and the many organizations that contributed to the education and welfare of children and families. NRRC would help develop great educators cognizant of regional needs and help improve the quality of early education and out-of-school-time programming by strengthening the preparation and support of providers, articulating career pathways for those committed to young children's education and care, and expanding after-school opportunities for older children.

The NRRC was from its inception a self-consciously collaborative entity, whose members believe that professional growth happens best in communities of practice. NRRC's Executive Committee and Advisory Board represented the region geographically and included early childhood, school-age, and higher education organizations, public, private, and nonprofit. Its priorities were embodied in six teams: early childhood, out-of-school-time programs, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), College/Career Readiness, Communities of Practice, and Assessment and Evaluation. These teams would take the lead in developing programs and activities, grant-writing, and professional development. In Board and Team meetings and programs, NRRC would use the discussion and decision-making protocols to model collaborative structures and strategies and maintain positive relationships among participants.

Sharing the common purposes set by the Governor's Office, the six regional Readiness Centers varied in their membership, decision-making structures, and program priorities. NRRC, though, was unique in several ways:

- (a) It developed an organizational structure designed to model and sustain common goals, mutually respectfully communication, and collaborative work.
- (b) It included early educators in its leadership structure. The regional representative of the Dept. of Early Education and Care is a full member of the Advisory Board, which also includes early education faculty and administrators from higher education and from regional centers and partnerships. Early education was embodied as a priority in the creation of an Early Childhood Team.
- (c) Its membership was deliberately cross-sector, including representatives from higher education, schools and school districts, child care/out-of-school time organizations, community agencies, and workforce development. The Advisory Board also includes regional representatives from EEC and ESE.

Collaborative Professional Development to Advance Early Childhood Education

One of NRRC's first accomplishments was the receipt of a regional partnership grant from the state Dept. of Early Education and Care to NRRC's Early Childhood Team. The multiyear Region 3 Partnership (R3P) project (<https://www.salemstate.edu>).

edu/academics/schools/10846.php) uses federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds to provide professional development and career advancement opportunities to some 2,000 licensed child care providers in northeastern Massachusetts. Participants are teaching assistants, family day-care providers, after-school program staff, child care center directors, or teachers or paraprofessionals in public schools. At least half the children in their charge must have received state low-income tuition waivers. The survey that NRRC's Region 3 Partnership (R3P) grant development team sent to some 600 practitioners indicated a need for training and support for directors/administrators and programs leading to a leadership credential, assessment of the quality of the various Child Development Associate programs offered in the region and increased transferability of the CDA credential into college early childhood programs. For the 39 % of providers who reported that English was not their primary language, there was a clear need for workshops and courses offered in contextualized English both to increase their early education knowledge base and also to improve their ability to model standard English for the children in their charge. Providers and administrators requested professional development on a wide variety of topics, including how to engage young children in science inquiry, how to identify and work with children with special needs, how to nurture social-emotional development, how to teach and lead with cultural proficiency, and how to assess children's learning in multiple, authentic ways. Rather than choose from a random menu of offerings on important topics, R3P urged participants to enroll in a program leading to a certificate (e.g., infant/toddler or school-age educator), a Child Development Associate credential, an associate [2-year] degree, a baccalaureate degree with an initial license as an early childhood teacher, or a master's degree in early childhood education, taking courses from the organization offering the program and using its resources for information on admissions, financial aid, and academic, and test preparation support. Three members of the Early Childhood Team, who represented early childhood "hubs" in the region, became key project leaders. The three geographical hubs included a community college, 4-year institutions, federal Head Start programs, private preschools, YMCA/YWCAs, Catholic Charities, community development agencies, after-school programs, and several public school districts with early childhood programs.

Outside the Early Childhood Team, NRRC provided support to R3P by helping organize professional development on targeted topics and publicizing on its website links to the various career pathways in the region to help participants move toward degrees and professional credentials. NRRC provided easy access to a network of early childhood providers, school districts, agencies, and early childhood teacher preparation programs across the region and linked its website to the R3P calendar of activities and professional development opportunities. NRRC also made sure to include R3P participants and other early childhood providers in its non-grant professional development programs, for example, its workshops on the new statewide curriculum frameworks that incorporate federal common core standards in literacy and mathematics.

All NRRC higher education partners offered workshops and undergraduate and graduate courses within the grant using formats, locations, and special

schedules feasible for working adults, including nights, weekends, late afternoons, week-long summer institutes and as hybrid or online formats, and at sites accessible to the three hubs cities (Lynn, Lawrence, and Lowell) and subregions. All agreed to reduce their tuition and fees to meet the EEC rate requirements as part of their in-kind contribution; the maximum amount a student was asked to pay for a 3-credit college course was \$50. Salem State, for example, offered special sections of its cross-sector graduate course *Partnerships for Families: An Interprofessional Approach to early childhood directors*, as well as baccalaureate courses in language and literacy development and special education and workshops in family literacy and collaborative assessment to child care providers and early childhood paraprofessionals. NRRC's community college partners offered courses and continuing education workshops in, for example, child development, early childhood curriculum, infant/toddler programs, contextualized English, and the process of obtaining national accreditation. Professional development offerings, in whatever form, were aligned with the EEC's Core Competencies for Early Educators: Understanding the Growth and Development of Children and Youth; Guiding and Interacting with Children and Youth; Partnering with Families and Communities; Health, Safety, and Nutrition; Learning Environments and Curriculum; Observation, Assessment, and Documentation; Program Planning and Development; and Professionalism and Leadership (Massachusetts Dept. of EEC Core Competencies). Links to how the activities support an early childhood program's advance on one or more of the five standards that ground EEC's Quality Rating and Improvement System (Curriculum and Learning; Teacher-Child Interaction; Safe, Healthy Indoor, and Outdoor Environments; Workforce Development and Professional Qualifications; Family and Community Engagement; and Leadership, Administration, and Management) are explicit (Mass. Dept. of EEC QRIS). In addition, where appropriate, professional development offerings address ESE's Curriculum Frameworks and national (National Association for the Education of Young Children 2008) standards for early education programs (Overview of NAEYC Standards and Criteria).

In the first year of the grant, R3P offered adult basic education and high-school equivalency support; contextualized ESL classes; center accreditation support; Child Development Associate certificate trainings; professional development workshops for continuing education credit; college courses for associate, bachelor, and master's degree pathways; academic advising; QRIS and Core Competency information; and outreach and coaching and mentoring services for infant/toddler, pre-school, school-age, family child care, and public school early education programs. The three urban "hubs"—Lawrence, Lynn, and Lowell—employed part-time bilingual (Spanish-English and Khmer-English) coaches. In its second year, the grant will offer similar professional development and information and advising related to individualized development and career advancement. To address the growing need for professional development for providers whose English is limited, some continuing education workshops will be offered in Spanish. Pre-workshop trainings in computer labs will strengthen providers' ability to register online for grant activities

and access Dept. of EEC information and registries and, at the same time, reinforce their computer skills. Grant leadership intends to create a large “steering committee” to widen the project’s governance structure and provide subcommittees for detailed tasks undertaken by interest groups.

The umbrella collaborative NRRC was instrumental in enabling R3P grant leaders quick access to a network of providers, school-based early childhood programs, and higher education programs in the region for planning, information-gathering, coordination, and program delivery.

By including early childhood as a priority focus area from the beginning, NRRC raised early educators’ awareness and expectations for involvement in all conversations related to P-16 education, for example, programs on the new common core standards/curriculum frameworks for literacy and mathematics. The R3P-NRRC partnership has provided a cadre of providers who care for the neediest children in the state with financial support to increase their knowledge and skills and advance their careers along clear professional pathways.

In addition to R3P, NRRC is undertaking several other projects in Year 2 of its existence. Among the initiatives already underway are (1) a series of programs aiming at increasing school districts’ ability to plan, even collaborate on, comprehensive transition programs for students with special needs who are nearing graduation and entry into the workforce; (2) workshops for faculty in educator preparation programs, including in early childhood education, on the new common core standards in English and mathematics with work toward vertical articulation of their curricula; (3) a regional structure providing information on out-of-school-time programs for children and youth; and (4) an expansion of its website to include links to replicable programs and research. In our first year, we’ve learned much:

- That good people have much to learn about each other’s work on behalf of children
- That time spent in building and guiding relationships—for example, through inclusive membership, structured discussions, and establishment of norms—is time wisely spent
- That positive relationships will motivate ideas and partnerships, often with no external funding

Funding for the NRRC was very late in arriving. The Advisory Board, Executive Committee, and teams met for a full year before the Race to the Top grant was awarded to the Commonwealth. NRRC partner organizations hosted meetings and programs at their own expense and moved forward with common purpose and goodwill, so that when the (modest) funds did arrive, NRRC had already built its networks and held fruitful conversations and initial programs linked to regional priorities. At this writing, given the political climate in Washington, the future of federal grants is uncertain. We at NRRC, however, believe that the partnerships and relationships fostered by this center will stand and result in continued collaboration to meet regional educational needs, despite the vicissitudes of government funding. We have taken a giant step forward in building alliances on behalf of children and their teachers.

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