CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN GREATER EAST ST. LOUIS

Greater East St. Louis Early Learning Planning Committee
Building Blocks II Project

December 2010
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Building Blocks II in Greater East St. Louis

Building Blocks II is a two-year project of Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) and IFF (formerly Illinois Facilities Fund) with the generous support of the Grand Victoria Foundation. The goal of this initiative is to develop and implement capacity-building strategies that are responsive to local needs and focus on engaging the hardest-to-reach, most at-risk families in high quality early learning opportunities. IAFC, in partnership with the Greater St. Louis Community Foundation, launched the Building Blocks II project in the East St. Louis area in 2009.

Greater East St. Louis Early Learning Planning Committee

As a first step, the project team reached out to a broad base of organizational stakeholders to develop a collaborative approach to assessing the current early learning needs and identifying strategies to address these needs. This effort resulted in the formation of the Greater East St. Louis Early Learning Planning Committee. For planning purposes, the Committee identified the following communities as the Greater East St. Louis target area: Alorton, Brooklyn, Centreville, East St. Louis and Washington Park.1

While the needs of children and families in the Greater East St. Louis area are many and varied, the Committee decided to focus on the “supply side” of the equation: building the capacity of high quality early learning programs. The Committee conducted surveys, focus groups, and interviews with child care providers serving children from Greater East St. Louis. Additionally, IFF developed child care supply and demand maps along with demographic summaries for the targeted area. Through careful analysis of this data and review of various early childhood studies and reports, the Committee identified key challenges to the early learning system and developed a set of strategies to meet critical needs.

Why Focus on Early Childhood Care & Education?

Early childhood care and education is a crucial issue in the Greater East St. Louis area. Parents need safe, affordable, and accessible child care in order to go to work or attend school; and children need a nurturing and stimulating environment that fosters healthy development.

Economists and social scientists have determined high quality early childhood education to be a cost-effective strategy contributing to academic success, higher employment and wages, better health, and lower crime rates. Children exposed to high quality learning environments are more likely to exhibit superior language and mathematical skills, greater cognitive and social skills, and better relationships with classmates. The benefits of high quality early learning environments are even more significant for children living in poverty.2

But how is a high quality early learning environment established? High quality early childhood care and education can take place in any setting: at home; in a child care center; in a family child care home; or in a publicly-funded preschool program. The essential element of quality is the teacher/caregiver. The Committee recognizes the importance of supporting a full range of options to ensure parents can choose the setting that best meets the needs of their families. Both parents and early childhood professionals need information, support, and resources to create environments in which children can thrive.

By developing and sustaining a system of high quality early childhood learning environments, the Greater East St. Louis community will lay a foundation for its children to become successful in school and beyond.

Economic Benefits of Early Childhood Education

“Careful academic research demonstrates that tax dollars spent on early childhood development provide extraordinary returns compared with investments in the public, and even private, sector. The potential return from a focused, high quality early childhood development program is as high as 16 percent per year. Some of these benefits are private gains for the children involved in the form of higher wages later in life. But the broader economy also benefits because individuals who participate in high-quality early childhood development programs have greater skills than they otherwise would, and they’re able to contribute productively to their local economies.” —Art Rolnick, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis

“Early childhood investments of high quality have lasting effects. . . . We cannot afford to postpone investing in children until they become adults, nor can we wait until they reach school age—a time when it may be too late to intervene. Since learning is a dynamic process, it is most effective when it begins at a young age . . . .” —James Heckman, Nobel Prize winning economist

1 Although other municipalities were not in the assessment, the Greater East St. Louis Early Learning Planning Committee is open to participation by representatives of surrounding communities.
2 Longitudinal studies by the Chicago Child Parent Centers, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, and Abecedarian Preschool Project
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UNDERSTANDING THE TERMS

Head Start & Early Head Start
Federal programs that provide comprehensive education, health, nutrition, and social services to children and their families who live in poverty. Administered locally by SIUE East St. Louis Center, Head Start serves children from age 3 to 5 and Early Head Start serves pregnant women and children from birth to age 3.

Preschool for All
State-funded program for children from age 3 to 5. All children are eligible, but programs that primarily serve at-risk children get first priority in funding. Preschool for All programs are in public schools as well as community-based agencies.

Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)
The Illinois Department of Humans Services’ Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) blends state and federal funding to subsidize child care costs for families with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level. Children’s Home + Aid administers the CCAP program in St. Clair and surrounding counties. CCAP can be used for many types of child care, including centers, licensed family child care homes, and for care legally license-exempt. Families are expected to make a co-payment which is based on family income and the number of children in care.

Licensed Child Care
Care provided by a center or home is regulated by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) which sets minimum standards for staff qualifications, health and safety, activity requirements, group sizes and child-to-staff ratios.

License-exempt Child Care
Care provided by a center or home that is legally exempt from licensure by the Illinois Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS). License exempt centers include those affiliated with churches, public schools, hospitals, and universities. License-exempt home providers care for three or fewer children, including their own, unless all children are from the same household.

Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R)
An information and referral service for families, child care providers, employers, and the community. Children’s Home + Aid, CCR&R program serves the following counties: Bond, Clinton, Madison, Monroe, Randolph, St. Clair and Washington. The Illinois Department of Human Services and the United Way fund core program services: consumer education on selecting child care; training and support services to providers; building and maintaining a database on child care services.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Standards for quality in early childhood environments vary by setting. The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services licenses homes and centers, setting minimal staff qualifications, health and safety requirements, group sizes and child-staff ratios. Licensing alone doesn’t assure quality; rather, it is considered the “floor” upon which quality programs are built. The publicly funded preschool programs each have their own set of more complex standards (e.g., curriculum, family support, screenings for health and developmental issues). A significant number of child care providers (650 in FY2010) in the East St. Louis area are legally exempt from licensing and are not regulated by DCFS.

In an effort to enhance and sustain program quality in child care centers and homes serving low-income children, the Illinois Department of Human Services implemented the Quality Rating System (QRS) in 2007. This voluntary program awards a star rating to programs meeting specific indicators of quality above minimum licensing standards. Licensed centers and homes, as well as license-exempt homes, are eligible to participate and can receive a quality add-on, or bonus, to their CCAP reimbursement rate. Participation in the QRS has been low in the Greater East St. Louis area. As of October 2010, only one center and one licensed home have received a rating through QRS.

Components of High Quality Early Childhood Care & Education Programs
- An environment that is safe, nurturing, and stimulating
- Curriculum that is intentional, age-appropriate and focuses on developing the whole child (social-emotional, physical, creative expression, and cognitive)
- Teachers with knowledge of child development as well as skills in teaching young children
- Monitoring and Assessment of each child’s strengths, needs, and developmental progress
- Families are welcomed and engaged as partners
An estimated 3,200 children under the age of six have working parents and may be in need of child care (IECAM, 2008 estimate). The Greater East St. Louis area is home to a multitude of early learning programs. Families earning less than twice the federal poverty level are eligible for the IDHS Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP, see box), which offsets the cost of child care.

In the Greater East St. Louis area, there are 12 Licensed Child Care Centers and 117 Licensed Family Child Care Homes with a combined capacity for serving just over 2,000 children.

Many families in the Greater East St. Louis area choose to use License-Exempt Family Child Care, instead of or in combination with center-based programs. In Illinois, a home-based provider is exempt from licensure if she is caring for 3 or fewer children (including her own).

Parents choose license-exempt care for many reasons: convenience (particularly with multiple children); irregular/non-traditional work schedules; or preference for children to be cared for by family member, friend or neighbor. One-half of children in Greater East St. Louis whose care is paid for through the CCAP are in license-exempt family child care homes.
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EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS IN EAST ST. LOUIS
Publicly funded preschool programs offer an additional early learning opportunity for eligible children. Children ages 3, 4 and 5 may qualify for Head Start or Preschool For All. Early Head Start serves a small number of pregnant women, infants, and toddlers. Both programs require teachers to have higher qualifications than is required for teachers in licensed child care centers. Head Start also provides a comprehensive set of services for children and their parents, but eligibility is limited to children from extremely low-income families. Because of funding limitations, Head Start and Preschool for All cannot serve all eligible children and cannot provide the full work day, full year care that many parents need.

The Children of Greater East St. Louis: By the Numbers

5,237
Children age 5 and under
- 2,453 under the age of 3
- 2,784 age 3, 4, or 5

85%
Children live in low-income families

51%
Children live in poverty

61%
Children live in families with one or both parents employed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Capacity for Children</th>
<th>Estimated % of Eligible Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head Start (ages 3 - 5)</td>
<td>277 (as of April 2010)</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Head Start (ages 0 - 3)</td>
<td>48 (as of April 2010)</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool for All (ages 3 - 5)</td>
<td>260 (as of September 2010)</td>
<td>10%</td>
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</tbody>
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Demand: Zero - Five Population

- Total Children
- Low-Income
- Potential Demand for Full-day/Full-year Care
The Early Learning Planning Committee identified the following challenges to developing and sustaining high quality early childhood environments in Greater East St. Louis:

**Under-utilization of available resources**

There are a number of state-funded resources for providers of early childhood care and education, including training and professional development, grants, and QRS. These programs are designed to enhance the quality of care and, in some cases, increase revenue for providers. However, very few providers participate in these programs. Some of the contributing factors identified through our community assessment include: (1) providers are isolated from each other and lack support to pursue community resources; (2) a lack of release time (or funding for hiring substitute staff) available enabling staff to attend meetings or training sessions required by these programs; (3) ineffective marketing of programs to providers; and (4) the limited accessibility to programs (i.e., time and location of offerings).

**Lack of connections and networking opportunities for providers**

There are an estimated 1,000 early childhood caregivers and educators in the Greater East St. Louis area, one-third of whom work in a licensed center or home or publicly funded preschool program. Unlike other communities, there is no family child care association, network for child care center directors and staff or network for cross-system collaboration. Providers identified the need for a support group, which would give caregivers a forum to share information about available resources or other child care issues. In addition to the lack of funding/resources to support this much-needed effort, the isolation of providers contributes significantly to this challenge.

**Lack of consensus around quality standards of care**

Early childhood care and education programs based on reliable quality standards reach only a fraction of the population; the majority of children spend at least part of their day in unregulated care. Home and center-based providers (both licensed and exempt) could benefit from training and professional development to enhance understanding of best practice. Participation in QRS could also help providers identify areas for improvement; provide technical assistance to implement specific steps; and serve as a baseline measure of program quality.

**Need for innovation in parent involvement and engagement**

Through interviews and focus groups, providers identified a number of issues that point to the challenges and opportunities for involving and engaging parents. Parents in the Greater East St. Louis area face significant stressors: the unemployment rate is twice as high as the statewide average; median income is less than half the statewide average; the teen pregnancy rate is twice the statewide average. Child care providers can (and do) support and encourage parents as their child’s first teacher; but they need information, support, and resources to sustain their efforts.
Training & Professional Development

To empower the early childhood care and education professional community in Greater East St. Louis by enhancing access to training and professional development opportunities that are responsive to local needs and build consensus around quality care.

Establishment of a Network of Providers

To connect to one another for support; to connect to available resources for themselves and the families they serve and; to advocate at the local, state, and federal levels for the resources to meet the needs of children in the Greater East St. Louis area.

Leadership Development

To develop a core group of early childhood leaders to advocate at the local, state, and federal levels on behalf of children and families and build the capacity of early childhood organizations.

Develop a Strengthening Families Learning Network

To involve early childhood centers and homes in an evidence-based model designed to strengthen families by building on protective factors. The Strengthening Families approach empowers providers to engage families in positive relationships that support their child’s success in early learning settings.

About the Planning Committee

The Greater East St. Louis Early Learning Planning Committee is comprised of early childhood stakeholders working collaboratively to identify critical needs and develop a set of recommendations to further strengthen the early learning system in Greater East St. Louis which includes: Alorton, Brooklyn, Centreville, East St. Louis, and Washington Park.

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The Building Blocks II project in the Greater East St. Louis area is an Illinois Action for Children program and is funded by the Grand Victoria Foundation.