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## WI: Working together for pre-school success



More four-year-olds are experiencing high-quality pre-school than ever before, thanks to the Community Collaboration pre-school program.

The School District of La Crosse, Wisconsin believes that well-prepared four-year-olds make the best kindergarten students. For the last ten years, they've put time and effort into getting all four-year-olds access to pre-school programs. And they've seen results.

Prior to 2001, children attended private pre-schools or childcare centers, if their parents could afford it. Head Start or Title I programs offered options for low-income families, but the school district Title I program could only accommodate 150 to 160 four-year-olds and had to turn children away every year. In addition, interaction between the school district and other early childhood providers in the community was limited.

Ten years later, an estimated 95 percent of eligible four-year-olds now attend free, high quality pre-school classes in a variety of school-based and community settings throughout the district. This fall, a record number — 475 four-year-olds — will attend a program in one of fifteen sites. What's made the difference? The Community Collaboration for Four Year Olds united public and private early childhood services in offering pre-school programs to all eligible four-year-olds.

### The Community Collaboration pre-school program

From among the fifteen Community Collaboration providers, parents can choose the school-based or community-based program that works best for them and their child. All sites meet the same facility standards, teach to a common curriculum standard, and have a certified teacher and aide. Families list two sites in order of preference, which can take into account their need for a morning or afternoon program; proximity to work or a caretaker; the presence of other siblings in a facility or program; concurrent enrollment of the child in Head Start or childcare at a particular location; and the need for wrap-around day care services or other services available at a site.

During the school year, Community Collaboration sites offer 2-hour morning and/or afternoon pre-school sessions, usually five days a week. The curriculum is focused on learning through play to prepare children to enter kindergarten. It emphasizes language competence and social, motor, math, and health and well-being skills. Depending on a family's needs, a child can return home after pre-school or continue in a childcare program, often at the same site. Mid-day bus transportation is provided between pre-school sites and home as needed.

District characteristics
Name: School District of La Crosse
State: WI
Type: Small town
Grades: PreK-12
Enrollment: 7,023
Students per teacher: 13

### Organizing the Community Collaboration

The School District of La Crosse was the first district in the state of Wisconsin to join forces with community-based early childhood providers. But the district's initial attempt to develop a universally accessible pre-school program failed to include community-based providers, who then protested the potential loss of students and revenue in the media and to the Board of Education.

The conflict spurred a change. "The Board of Education decided that this undertaking could not be done effectively in isolation. They opened the meetings to anyone who wanted to participate," said Deb Suchla, past Executive Director of The Parenting Place (formerly Family Resources), a key organization in the Collaboration.

"When we finally realized that the solution needed to be community-driven rather than district-driven, we began to make real progress," notes Jerry Kember, who, as then-Associate Superintendent of Instruction, was asked to establish the partnership. Kember, who recently retired as superintendent for the School District of La Crosse, started by inviting community childcare providers, private pre-school providers, school principals, teachers, parents, representatives from programs such as Head

Enrollment characteristics
Economically disadvantaged: 63.8 %
English language learners: 8%
Students with disabilities: 15.5%
White: 82.5%
Black: 2.4%
Hispanic: 1.8%
Asian/Pacific Islander: 10.4%
American Indian/Alaska Native: 0.8%
Other: 3.7%

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Start and Family Resources, as well as other advocates for childhood education, to participate in a work group.

*Source: U.S. Census (2000)*

The initial work group developed into the ongoing Community Collaboration for Four Year Olds with representation from the various groups. "Making the Collaboration a reality required lots of time, numerous meetings, hard work, and compromise on everyone's part," recalled Kember. "We purposely used the term 'collaboration' because we were creating something entirely new in which we were all equal partners."

Building trust came slowly, but when community-based providers saw that the school district took their concerns seriously, the partnership strengthened. "Once child care providers really understood that they had an equal seat at the table, initial skepticism was overcome. As trust developed, dialogue on the issues became more open. There were no constraints on ideas that could be brought to the table," said Diane Ladwig, Director of Gundersen-Lutheran Childcare Center, which offers pre-school, Head Start, and childcare programs. She has been a Community Collaboration committee member since the start. District teachers' concerns about issues such as union membership and workloads could also have been an obstacle to the Collaboration. "Thankfully, the teachers saw the long-term benefits of the program to the community and supported the initiative," noted Kember.

Through a series of intense meetings over a nine-month period, the Community Collaboration members forged a consensus on a vision statement, mission, and goals. It also began to tackle logistical issues such as curriculum, funding, staffing, transportation, standards, criteria for providers, and a participant application process. The Collaboration kept the public informed about its progress and received feedback about its plans through the media and a series of community meetings.

## Creating new service models

From their discussions, the Collaboration began to develop several innovative models for the delivery of pre-school services using both school and community-based facilities.

"One important goal was to give families choices of models that would best support them and their needs," stated Deb Suchla. "We also wanted children to receive as many services at the same site as possible to minimize the number of disruptive transitions from one location to another during the day," says Mark White, the District Supervisor of Programs for Young Children, who is currently responsible for coordinating the Community Collaboration programs.

The Board of Education approved three preschool program models for implementation:

Model 1, a school-based option where the pre-school program takes place at one of the district elementary schools with a district teacher.

Model 2 in which a district teacher teaches the pre-school class at one of the community-based child care facilities; and,

Model 3 in which the childcare provider, such as an early childhood facility, childcare center, or private preschool, hires its own certified instructor to teach the pre-school classes at its site.

Currently, there are 15 participating sites – 10 schools (Model 1) and 5 community-based providers (Model 3) – that offer pre-school services. Model 2 faded out over the past several years because the logistics proved difficult.

"In designing the pre-school curriculum, we were very fortunate to have the full support of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction," said Diane Ladwig. "They basically allowed us to think outside the box while meeting their standards." For home-based providers and parents who preferred to keep their children at home, the Collaboration developed a home-based instructional program with additional resources available through The Parenting Place.

## Making the pre-school program work

"Actual implementation of the Community Collaboration models required a lot of attention to detail and logistics, especially with so many diverse sites. Student enrollment and registration, transportation, supplies, application forms for participating providers, and contracts all needed to be put in place," recalled Jane Morken. For seven years, Morken orchestrated the Collaboration pre-schools as the District Supervisor for Programs for Young Children while also serving as principal of the North Woods International Elementary School. "Constant communication among all of us, from phone calls and e-mails to site visits and regular meetings, allowed us to address issues as they arose and to find solutions. This isn't a static program, so processes needed to be reviewed and refined over time," she said.

Since its start, the Community Collaboration has operated with minimal staff. The current District Supervisor of Programs for Young Children, Mark White, who is also an elementary school principal, continues to provide overall coordination for the Collaboration and serves as the primary liaison with district teachers and school principals. Early on, the Collaboration contracted with The Parenting Place for a coordinator to serve as the liaison between the community-based providers and the school district. The coordinator now also monitors the pre-school sites twice a year. A part-time administrative assistant, based in White's office, continues to handle the registration process, works directly with parents about the best pre-school location for their child or children, and coordinates transportation. "Other school districts with pre-school collaborations have different staffing models, such as a separate Collaboration coordinator, but a combination of district and community-based staff has worked best for us," observed White.

## Funding the Community Collaboration

The state of Wisconsin, which has a long tradition of supporting early childhood education, has funded the program since its inception. Each spring, the service providers sign a written agreement with the district setting out the terms and conditions of their participation. The school district receives state funds and allocates them to the participating

sites based on the number of students enrolled and a negotiated rate. "This form of payment offered the community-based providers a stable stream of funding. It also allowed them to hire their own teachers at a salary more comparable to that of district teachers," explained Kember. By using state funds that were available for pre-school students, the District was also able to reallocate its Title I funds to K-12 programs, thus benefiting more students throughout the district.

## Measuring success

- The Community Collaboration for Four Year Olds counts itself as successful on many levels.
- Surveys of parents have shown a high level of satisfaction with the program.
- The number of four-year-olds enrolled annually has tripled since 2001.
- District teachers consistently report that children who have attended pre-school are well prepared for entry into kindergarten.
- Participation in the Collaboration by schools and childcare providers has been long-term and consistent. Since the beginning, only one of the original providers has dropped out, mainly because of space issues.
- The Community Collaboration model has been adopted or replicated in some form by many school districts across the state. Collaboration members have also advised school districts across the country about how to establish a successful public-private collaboration.

## Looking to the future

The Community Collaboration continues to meet on a quarterly basis to provide overall guidance and to explore new ideas, such as additional professional development for providers. "You need an ongoing forum to address questions, ongoing concerns, and new requirements, such as number of children to be enrolled, placements, changes in teaching staff, and new state or federal regulations," said Diane Ladwig. Although the Board of Education is not directly involved with the operations of the Community Collaboration, the Collaboration is part of the Board's annual strategic plan. According to White, the board will be addressing additional methods to integrate special needs children into the program, new common core K-12 standards that may impact the pre-school curriculum, and a formal program evaluation.

"We are truly proud of what the Community Collaboration has achieved on behalf of La Crosse families and their children," said White. "Working together, we raised the bar by opening the door to high quality, pre-school programs to everyone in the community."

### Lessons Learned

1. **Collaboration is not the same as cooperation or coordination.** "Cooperation means that parties have agreed to communicate and develop a relationship. Coordination really refers more to scheduling and working together. Collaboration, however, means that everyone has to learn a new way to do business. In collaboration, everyone has to give up something to make something new," says Jerry Kember.
2. **This type of program cannot be done in isolation.** "As a school district, we really didn't know the full range of needs or available services for children in the community," says Mark White. "We learned as much, if not more, from the community as it learned from us. Ongoing discussions with the state on issues of funding, curriculum, certification, and standards were crucial to the Collaboration's success."
3. **Recruit a diverse group of concerned parties for the Collaboration.** "A diverse collaborative group will enable you to come up with a better product because different concerns and perspectives will be brought to the table," says Kember.
4. **Don't skip the hard work of developing a vision, mission, and goals.** "These concepts provide you with a rationale for what you are doing. They are critical for getting people to buy into the project and to keep everyone focused," says Diane Ladwig.
5. **Research and use all available resources to develop the program.** "You have to seek out new information and resources to keep the conversation advancing," counsels Suchla. "For example, we spoke with staff from a collaborative program in New York City that required a percentage of funds to be set aside for community pre-school models. We worked with the Wisconsin State Department of Public Instruction to ensure we met curriculum and certification standards. We learned about shared early childhood education concerns from the Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners. By expanding our network, we also gained advocates for the program along the way."
6. **Dedicate the time necessary to put program processes in place and to refine them as the program develops.** "Don't underestimate the amount of time it takes to get this type of program organized. Once systems are in place, issues still arise. For example, we found that student enrollment needs to be completed in June rather than in the fall to avoid any last minute bussing issues," notes Jane Morken.
7. **Any pre-school model should reflect the specific needs of the community it serves.** "Our Community Collaboration program offers a good template for other pre-school programs. Just replicating the La Crosse model, however, won't work. Put in the sweat equity necessary to create a model and processes tailored to your own community's specific needs. It's well worth the effort," advised Jane Morken.

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