

Leading From a New Point of View

Reflections from the Early Learning Leadership Circle



INTRODUCTION

From 2017-2021 a group of Early Learning Collaboration leaders throughout the state of Illinois came together to examine shared questions and topics of interest related to community systems development with the goal of strengthening their collaborative leadership practices and local early learning collaborations. What started as an open space for exploration and support led to leadership growth, strengthened early learning collaborations, and ongoing influencing of state policies that will impact the lives of children and families across the state. This report documents the Early Learning Leadership Circle's (ELLC) trajectory and impact.

It also identifies learnings and recommendations that emerged regarding:

- The value of supporting community leaders through self-directed learning communities.
- On-going adequate funding for local collaborations (infrastructure, leadership training, support) is critical to the success of the new regional early learning infrastructure and for systemic community change. Individuals closest to the issues are closest to the solutions.
- Characteristics of strong early learning community collaboratives.
- Well supported local early learning collaboratives are important assets for creating equitable systems of support for healthy children and families and to advance strategies within their communities.
- Advancement of systemic support of community collaborations and equitable early learning systems.
- Early learning policies need to be guided by those who have or are currently engaged in services.

Like many strategic learning collaborative projects, it would not have been possible without the support of myriad individuals, agencies, and communities. We are thankful for:

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- Community Systems Development Subcommittee of the Illinois Early Learning Council

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BACKGROUND

About the Grand Victoria Foundation:

We envision a strong, livable, equitable Illinois where all residents have an opportunity to thrive. Our mission is to empower communities to ensure Illinois is a great place to live and work. We believe people and communities are at the center of social and economic change. Through our funding, we aim to change and improve conditions that persistently hold problems in place.

In late 2017, the Grand Victoria Foundation (GVF) was interested in exploring new ways to work towards a more equitable early learning system across the state of Illinois. They recognized that this effort would require collaboration amongst a number of leaders. They saw an opportunity to invest in a group of emerging leaders throughout Illinois who had participated in the state's Innovation Zone effort, a project aimed at testing community driven ideas for improving parent engagement within underserved communities of color and rural communities. Those who had not participated in the Innovation Zone had tested ideas for parent engagement and inclusion in other ways in their respective communities. This group shared the goal of a more equitable early learning system and identified that having time and space to develop their own leadership capacity would better equip them to help shift the structures that perpetuate inequity in the early learning system in the future. The Foundation, a long-time supporter of the development and sustainment of healthy communities, recognized the value of diverse groups working together to address systemic problems while simultaneously investing in the development of strong leaders to achieve community goals. GVF Program Officer, Neeta Boddapati, saw an opportunity to convene these leaders by providing time and space for them to explore questions and issues that were

of common interest to them, that would advance their thinking and impact their leadership. The group was formed to support a collection of leaders who could work towards a more equitable early learning system; acknowledging first that they needed space to focus on their own leadership.

A group of eight early childhood collaboration leaders with a commitment to equity and shifting and improving Illinois' local child and family services systems were invited to join the Early Learning Leadership Circle (ELLC). Participants reported that they were attracted to joining ELLC for its access to in person opportunities to build relationships and learn from peers, and a meeting structure that was not prescribed and generated participant interests in an organic and responsive manner.

Early Learning Leadership Circle Process. In late 2017 the group came together for their first quarterly meeting.¹ GVF provided the group with a facilitator who was tasked with supporting the group with coaching and managing collaboration tools and resources. The Facilitator was also charged with managing the group's on-going engagement and momentum. The facilitator stayed neutral on the topics and followed the group's interest, engagement, and direction.

¹Detailed description of program activities can be found in Appendix, Timeline.

Members of the group worked with the facilitator to design each session. At each session different members volunteered to be Question Ambassadors who worked with the facilitator to co-design the sessions. This included identifying background materials to stimulate and frame the topic, data to collect or questions to ask members before meeting in-person and guest speakers to inform the discussion. During each session the group explored the topic, often drawing on their own experience as well as research and data collected beforehand. In between in-person sessions, the ELLC met in-person or online to jump-start the exploration of the next meeting topic and further frame their learning.

Early Learning Leadership Circle Activities and Frameworks. Regular activities and frameworks were established to support learning and keep group activities moving forward. This included a Journal Club where the group read relevant articles related to collective impact, community systems, collaborative leadership, stakeholder engagement, etc. These articles were discussed and digested by the group and collected in a resource library for all members to access. Members also shared current and emerging strategies that they were initiating in their local communities, as well as seeking the group's feedback and advice for the challenges they faced as leaders or within their collaboration.

After the first year, the group utilized an Action Learning Framework that helped them be intentional about defining the issues being explored. Leaders identified new actions they wanted to take in their communities and assessed what they learned from those efforts. Through these individual activities, the group began to shape actions the group could accomplish collaboratively. They determined that the ELLC's purpose was to work together to organize,



imagine, and share new ideas and solutions in order to strengthen the leadership of local early childhood collaborations. The end goal was to improve equitable outcomes for children and families and raise the value and voice of Community Systems Collaboration and to achieve the statewide early childhood vision of every child entering kindergarten safe, healthy, ready to succeed and eager to learn.

The group also recognized the importance of ongoing and inclusive leadership development that addressed leadership development from a holistic perspective and centered on the communities with whom they worked. To this end, they created a “Framework for Leadership Development” that included:

- 1) Strengthening the leadership skills of individuals in community collaboration;
- 2) Fortifying the leadership and influence of collaborations in local communities and throughout the state;
- 3) Sharing collective knowledge and wisdom with wider audiences beyond the leadership circle.

This leadership framework provided a North Star for the group and guided the work throughout their time together.

ELLC'S RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING LEADERSHIP LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Below are important factors that led to the success of this effort that should be considered when funding and supporting future leadership Communities of Practice like the ELLC.

Membership

- Keep the group small for manageability, intimacy, and trust.
- Determine the types of diversity of membership (geographic, race, gender, program type, experience level, etc.) that will be most desired for impact.
- Build on member's strengths

Purpose

- Provide autonomy and control to members instead of a specific predetermined goal, let the group emerge organically.
- Have the group work together to clarify purpose and be open to that evolving over time.

Process

- An iterative process is as important as the outcome. Sometimes the process is the outcome.
- Allow members to choose the topics and direction the group will explore.
- Create shared values that ensure that all participants feel safe and are comfortable contributing.
- Provide a neutral facilitator to guide process and support participants in growing their design and facilitation skills.
- Provide a focus for exploration (article, video, etc.) to stimulate learning and sharing.
- Ensure that there is adequate time and space for reflection and feedback.
- Provide activities that create a culture of learning and the development of shared understanding.



ELLC'S RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES FOR EFFECTIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD COLLABORATIONS

Collaboration can mean different things to different people. The State of Illinois defines collaboration as the development of a shared vision for their community with a set of goals and shared data measurements to address a community concern. Across Illinois, dozens of local communities have formed local early childhood collaborations to look across individual programs at a community level. Community stakeholders work in partnership to support community planning processes that will ultimately leverage resources, build capacity, and work effectively as a community to improve outcomes for young children and families. Their collective work and partnership ultimately will contribute to equitable systemic changes that benefit families and their young children. To achieve this goal, the group identified the following characteristics of a high-functioning early childhood collaboration:

- Apply a community systems collaboration approach.
- Facilitate coordination of services, maximize existing resources and leverage new ones.
- Focuses on equity, with emphasis on racial disparities and social justice.
- Utilizes a clear governance model agreed upon by stakeholders.
- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders are understood and practiced.
- Outlines a roadmap for action with shared goals and clear strategies.
- Addresses the unique needs, cultures, and strengths of the whole community.

- Utilizes qualitative and quantitative data from across the community to inform decision-making and service delivery.
- Provides a central hub for information, coordinated activity and collaborative action.
- Elevates and gives focus to the issue of early childhood development in the community.

Characteristics of successful collaborative leaders:

- Strong facilitative leadership skills that empower stakeholders and sustains momentum and engagement
- Deep understanding and commitment to a systemic perspective.
- Nurtures strong relationships built on trust, transparency, shared ownership, power, and success.
- Commitment to compassion, engagement and understanding.
- Articulates and practices principles and values that support equity, trust, and safety.
- Has a clear, systemic understanding of the issue(s) being worked on.
- Takes risks and tolerates ambiguity.
- Clear written and oral communication skills.
- Tenacious, passionate, and modest.
- Uses relevant data to make decisions and hold accountability.
- Builds capacity and skills for parent development and leadership.

ELLC'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYSTEMIC SUPPORT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD COLLABORATIONS

Through engagement efforts over the past few years in the circle, the group has come to understand the importance of thinking systemically about the support of Early Childhood Collaborations. ELLC leaders have identified and are promoting the following recommendations.

Recommendations for statewide support for early childhood community collaborations:

- Establish and fund a regional Coordinating Entity designed to provide shared services and support for local community collaborations with a community systems framework.
- Utilize feedback loops and other input strategies to ensure programs and policies created statewide are informed by those who receive and administer the services - families and local providers. These feedbacks and strategies should align with state goals but organized at the community level via local early childhood collaborations.
- Recognize the importance and value of Local EC Collaborations as a necessary component of the statewide EC systems, with adequate funding and ongoing support for their backbone and capacity to execute community strategies.
- Sustain ongoing funding and resources to carry out timely, culturally appropriate, developmental screenings, especially for children from typically marginalized families.
- Establish sustainable and responsive community systems solutions, policies, and funding to support childcare services that will enable parents to be consistently employed.

- Support stronger connections with children's health care providers and community service providers (e.g., early intervention, school districts, pediatricians, home visiting).
- Integrate understanding and access to the important role that community-based collaborations play in advancing equity work throughout multiple agencies and outlets.

Recommendations to further strengthen the ability of early childhood collaboration leadership:

- Provide new collaborative leaders with access to an in-depth overview of the state's collective ECE systems and continued access to Partner Plan Act's on-demand consulting along with mentor support.
- Provide communities of practice with opportunities to collaborate with other communities who share similar profiles and challenges.
- Set up systems to consistently listen and learn from other leaders and families.
- Establish systems that encourage ongoing reflection and continuous quality improvement to meet the changing needs of families and communities.
- Provide leaders of collaborations with continuous support in understanding and implementing strategies that support racial and equitable outcomes for young children and families.
- Provide systemic support for Community Systems Leadership and Skill Development.

- Recommendations and insights to strengthen funders' support of Early Childhood Community Collaborations:
- Consider smaller organizations and their leadership as just as impactful as those that are larger.
- Reduce grant writing and reporting requirements; they are cumbersome and produce barriers for low resourced communities who need the resources the most.
- Communities know what they need; trust them, and have patience, it takes 3-5 years of investment before returns are visible.
- Consider the capacity and resources of both small and large organizations and their ability to respond to a letter of intent or RFP.
- Prioritize infrastructure supports when funding community collaborations or collective impact efforts.
- Provide nontraditional methods for demonstrating impact such as an onsite visit, interviews or resident voice.



IMPACT OF EFFORTS

Grand Victoria Foundation's vision of supporting a small cohort made up of emerging early childhood collaboration leaders has led to members growing in their own understanding and skills leading to more effective leadership of their own local collaborations and increased engagement in statewide initiatives. There is significant value in providing a small group of committed leaders time for self-directed, "out of the box" thinking, supported by a neutral process facilitator, particularly when the participants are passionate about making a positive difference in the lives of young children and their families. It was essential to have flexibility in expected deliverables, allowing the group to be guided by their own sense of what they needed most and what was needed in the field. Crucial to this process was having someone dedicated to facilitating the process and keeping the momentum going. This freed them to fully participate and engage in the process. The impact of these efforts can be seen in the following areas.

Increased individual leadership capacity and its impact on the specific communities we serve:

- Gained new knowledge and understanding of the state of Illinois' early learning infrastructure, resources, and key decision makers.
- Shared learning including brave conversations without judgement and taking risks without fear of losing funding.
- Improved leadership and strengthening of local Early Learning Collaboratives (ELCs).
- Identified and practiced impactful skills, models, and best practices to manage and lead collaborations in our communities.

- Increased insight into how other ELC's are moving their communities forward and how they are helping to strengthen our own local systems.
- Strengthened confidence as leaders and expanded commitment and passion for ELC initiatives.
- Lasting collaborative working relationships with peers that will continue to positively impact ELCs.

I learned new approaches, skills and ideas about community collaboration leadership and work that have helped the Addison Early Childhood Collaborative (AECC) leadership team and partners. One example is the anti-racism conference that AECC, Elgin Partnership For Early Learning (EPEL) and SPARK (Strong Prepared And Ready for Kindergarten) Early Childhood Collaboration held. Anti-racism work is at the heart of what we do and collaborating with EPEL and SPARK enabled us to offer our partners an excellent learning opportunity. We know that anti-racism and anti-bias work needs to continue always and being able to support our partners on their personal learning journeys demonstrates our collabs' values and commitment to anti-racism and helping to provide equitable access and services for children.

Increased leadership capacity and its impact on the state level:

- The group provided important input on recommendations made to the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding for restructuring early childhood systems at the state, regional and local levels.
- Through the Community Systems Development sub-committee of the Illinois Early Learning Council the ELLC regularly participated and provided input on topics including equity in early childhood education and care and how collaborations can enhance their work on equity.
- Several ELLC members were critical to advancing funding commission recommendations, CSD subcommittee work, and helping raise awareness about racial equity.
- Collectively they helped to influence the State-regional-local CSD framework - a product of bringing value and voice to their work.



RECOMMENDATIONS TO LOCAL COLLABORATIONS FOR CONTINUING ADVANCEMENT OF EQUITABLE EARLY LEARNING SYSTEMS

Throughout 2020, the ELLC considered plans for how the group could continue to meet and best support the advancement of creating a more equitable early learning system in the state. After much reflection, the group could see that a separate group was not what was needed to drive this equity work. They decided it was better to work within existing structures and put their efforts into other initiatives. This included the *Illinois Early Learning Council Community Systems Development Subcommittee*; co-chaired by ELLC member Trish Rooney. This group formed the *Racial Equity Workgroup* to examine early childhood community collaboration's role in addressing systemic-level racism and racial inequities. ELLC member, John Borrero joined this workgroup and contributed to the creation of an initial report "*Adopting and Embedding a Racial Equity Lens in Community Systems Development*"²; the report's recommendations are aligned with and further advance ELLC's findings:

- Make reducing and eliminating racial inequities an explicit part of the collaboration's work moving forward.
- Hold regular trainings and discussions about reducing racial inequities, both internally and externally.
- Recruit and involve a diverse, representative group of stakeholders to guide collaboration work.
- Craft a deliberate plan to develop and promote the leadership of members of color.
- Engage the community in decision-making.

²Provide link to document

- Build a culture of inclusion and equity.
- Assess all collaboration materials for racial bias and deficit thinking. Internal and external materials should be reviewed to ensure they reflect the diversity and assets of the community.
- Disaggregate all data including by race. Systems development strategies are usually designed to benefit all children and families, but certain groups may benefit more or be burdened more than others.
- Be transparent and accountable to the community.
- Invest resources (e.g., time, funding) to do racial equity work.

Looking Forward. ELLC participants recognize that in order to drive real and meaningful systemic change as leaders of local early childhood collaboratives they must, in addition to implementing the above recommendations, strongly advocate for:

- Long-term significant revenue streams to support the new regional infrastructure including adequate financial support of local collaborations.
- Policies to be amended or created applying an equity lens and informed by those receiving services
- Design and implement programs and outreach strategies that reflect the diverse realities of families' lives and their needs and abilities.

APPENDIX: RESOURCES

Collaborative Leadership Resources

Early Learning Leadership Circle Timeline of Activities (link to PDF)

[Collaborative Innovation Competency Model: Co-Creative Consulting](#)

[Six Characteristics of High-Performance Networks for Network Leadership David R. Hackett | visionsynergy.net](#)

[Tamarack Collective Impact | 3.0](#)

[Collaborative Leadership: Self-Assessment Questionnaire](#)

[6 Patterns In Collaborative Innovation](#)

[Polarity Tensions in Collaborative Innovation: Co-Creative Consulting](#)

[NETWORK DESIGN PRINCIPLES](#)*Research Alliance for Regenerative Economics (RARE)

[Assessing the Quality of Collaborative Process Darrin Hicks University of Denver](#)

[Six Crucial Behaviors of Collaborative Leaders](#) Carol Kinsey Goman Contributor

[The Dawn of System Leadership](#) By Peter Senge, Hal Hamilton, & John Kani

[The Water of Systems Change](#): John Kania, Mark Kramer, Peter Senge

Building Skills

Identified Strategies:

[Capacity Building Self-Assessment Tool](#)* HHS Child Care and Development

[7 Ways to Get Work Done](#): Co-Creative Consulting

[12 Tools to Foster Alignment & Collaboration](#): Co-Creative Consulting

[COMPREHENSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM-BUILDING](#): A Tool To Inform Discussions On Collaborative, Cross-Sector Planning: Early Childhood Systems Working Group (ECSWG)

[ABLE Change Framework: Action Learning Questions](#)

[Building Child Centered Communities: Raising Places](#)

Advancing Equity

[NAEYC's Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education](#)

[Awake to Woke to Work: Building a race Equity Culture](#)

[Race for Results- aecf 2017 Kids Count Policy report](#)

[The Origin or Race in the USA](#)

[Becoming Anti-Racist infographic](#) (George Washington University)

ELLC Generated Resources

[Raising the Value and Voice of Early Learning Community Systems Development](#)

[Roadmap To Equity Presentation](#)

Early Learning Leadership Circle Members

Collaboration For Early Childhood Care and Education (Oak Park, Illinois)

Addison Early Childhood Collaborative (Addison, Illinois)

Southern IL Coalition For Children and Families (Carterville, Illinois)

Elgin Partnership For Early Learning (Elgin, Illinois)

Community Childcare Connection (Springfield, Illinois)

Greater East St Louis Early Learning Partnership (East St. Louis, Illinois)

Fox Valley United Way - SPARK Early Childhood Collaboration (Aurora, Illinois)

The Community Foundation of Macon County (Decatur, Illinois)





