

PAUL NYHAN WITH INTRODUCTION BY ABBIE LIEBERMAN

# After Winning, Then What?

**An Inside Look at Four Winners of Federal Early  
Education Grant Competitions**

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## **Contents**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction  | 2  |
| About the Competitions  | 4  |
| Washington Races Forward In First Year of its Early Learning Challenge Grant                  | 6  |
| Amid Financial Collapse Detroit Builds a Promising Early Learning Model                       | 11 |
| i3 Grant Tests the Potential & Reach of One of the Country's Oldest PreK-3rd Programs         | 15 |
| A San Antonio Neighborhood Works to Turn Schools Around on the Axis of Kindergarten Readiness | 20 |
| Final Thoughts  | 23 |

# INTRODUCTION

Competitive grant programs, a hallmark of the Obama administration, have been a primary means for the president to pursue his education agenda. The reform-minded administration has attempted to address many of the problems plaguing the American education system by encouraging states, school districts, and nonprofit organizations to help more students learn and achieve through a series of grants that require states and organizations to compete for new funds. Traditionally, the vast majority of federal education funding has been determined by formula grants to states, which are awarded automatically through a noncompetitive process over which the Department of Education has limited discretion. Due to growing research and improved data, researchers and policymakers are now able to more effectively identify promising practices. The federal government has prompted states, cities, school districts, and organizations to build on those practices by offering them the chance to win competitive grants.

Early education has been a growing priority for the Obama administration and its competitive funding is spurring innovation in this field around the country. Last year, early education journalist Paul Nyhan conducted case studies of four competitive grant programs that are triggering changes in early education: Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC), the Social Innovation Fund (SIF), Investing in Innovation (i3), and Promise Neighborhoods.

Nyhan examined how:

- Washington State is using its \$60 million RTT-ELC grant to connect and coordinate early learning systems;
- Detroit has applied SIF funding to evaluate the effectiveness of its early learning programs;
- The University of Minnesota is scaling up the renowned Chicago Parent-Child Centers model with i3 funds; and
- San Antonio is improving school-readiness with comprehensive and community-based supports as part of its Promise Neighborhood project.

Through these grant programs, the Obama administration has prioritized innovative, evidence-based practices that have the potential to improve student outcomes, with a focus on those students most negatively impacted by the widening achievement gap.<sup>1</sup> While each of the programs Nyhan examined has its own specific focus, they all stress data collection and rigorous evaluation. And while grantees must follow specific grant requirements, each program allows substantial room for flexibility and innovation. In some cases, applicants were also required to match funds to some extent. They were also judged on their capacity to sustain the project beyond the grant period. The Obama administration has made clear a strong focus on the ends, not necessarily the means; as Education Secretary Arne Duncan explained, “We have tried to flip the traditional tight-loose relationship between the federal government and the states, where the federal government had been loose on goals but tight on means. I thought that was fundamentally backwards...”<sup>2</sup> The grant programs attempt to determine which grantees produce sustainable solutions so that the federal government

1. Reardon, Sean F. 2011. The widening academic achievement gap between the rich and the poor: New evidence and possible explanations. *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality and the Uncertain Life Chances of Low-Income Children.*, <http://cepa.stanford.edu/content/widening-academic-achievement-gap-between-rich-and-poor-new-evidence-and-possible>.
2. Press Office. Remarks of U.S. secretary of education Arne Duncan to the inter-american development bank. in U.S. Department of Education [database online]. 2012 Available from <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/remarks-us-secretary-education-arne-duncan-inter-american-development-bank>.

can make targeted, evidence-based funding decisions in the future.

These relatively small grant programs allowed the administration to introduce new policies and priorities into the education space without having to wait on Congress to pass or reauthorize a law. Congress has been unable to agree on education reauthorizations, including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and Head Start during President Obama's tenure. These laws make up the vast majority of federal education funding for early education and K-12 and are all overdue for reauthorization. Working through the (slightly) less gridlocked annual spending bill process, President Obama was instead able to secure funding for competitive grant programs. His initiatives received significant funding from Congress during his first term, mainly due to the influx of government spending brought about in the 2009

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. However, most of these programs have seen significantly reduced funding in subsequent years as Congress has tried to control spending. The grant programs have repeatedly been sustained through continuing resolutions, in which the government maintains pre-existing funding levels instead of passing a regular appropriations bill. This happens when Congress cannot agree on a federal budget before the start of the fiscal year.

This brief provides an inside look at what kind of progress is possible – and what limitations exist – when policies are advanced through small competitive grants. The brief also opens a door into the world of implementation – the mechanics required to change practices on the ground – that rarely grabs headlines, is often invisible, and yet is the critical piece of ensuring that funding is used well and that policies succeed.

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# ABOUT THE COMPETITIONS

## Race to the Top- Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC)

Race to the Top, originally funded under the 2009 stimulus package, is one of the administration's most prominent education initiatives and aims to spur innovation in specified reform areas at the state and district level. This early education-focused version of Race to the Top began in 2011 and is jointly administered by the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services.

Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) calls on states to improve early education systems and expand access for children, birth to five-years-old, from struggling families. The funds can be used to assist states in building the capacity of and increasing coordination between home-visiting programs, child care centers, Head Start programs, and state-funded pre-kindergarten. The program was originally funded at approximately \$500 million in 2011, and was reduced to \$133 million in 2012 and increased again to \$370 million in 2013.

The Departments did not hold a grant competition in 2014, but continue to support existing grantees. Twenty states are currently receiving RTT-ELC funds, which are issued for four years and have ranged from \$30 million to \$70 million, largely dependent upon the number of high-need students in the state.

## Social Innovation Fund (SIF)

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF), founded in 2009, is a White House initiative administered through The Corporation for National & Community Service

that supports evidence-based, scalable innovations that attempt to solve both local and national problems impacting low-income communities. Grantees fall into one of three broad categories: economic opportunity, healthy futures, and youth development.

The initiative is based on six key elements: innovation, evidence, scale, grantmakers, match, and knowledge sharing.<sup>3</sup> SIF's process is unique: Grantmaking institutions, such as United Ways or other philanthropies, with a strong history of identifying and building successful nonprofit organizations are selected through a competitive process and these grantmakers then choose innovative subgrantees through another competition. Grantmakers are awarded matching grants between \$1 million and \$10 million for a period of five years. They award subgrantees no less than \$100,000 per year for up to five years, also in the form of matching grants. Like Obama administration's other initiatives, SIF places a strong emphasis on data, evaluation, and evidence. Grantmakers assist subgrantees—both financially and with technical assistance—in undergoing rigorous evaluations to determine best practices.

Grantmakers are expected to use their expertise to broaden subgrantees' scope and expand their programs. SIF currently funds 20 grantmakers and 217 subgrantees in 37 states and Washington, D.C.

## Investing in Innovation (i3)

The Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) was also created under the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. This Department of Education program aims to improve education outcomes by scaling up innovative

3. Social Innovation Fund. Our model. in Corporation for National and Community Service [database online]. Available from <http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/social-innovation-fund/our-model>. Social Innovation Fund. Our model. in Corporation for National and Community Service [database online]. Available from <http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/social-innovation-fund/our-model>.

and promising practices that have been validated by research. Local educational agencies (LEAs), non-profits partnering with LEAs, or consortia of LEAs that are using appropriately evaluated evidence-based models are eligible to apply.

The initial 2010 competition awarded over \$645 million in grants, and the Department has continued to run 13 competitions through 2014 with significantly decreased funding levels. Applicants can apply for one of three grants depending on the level of evidence supporting their programs: development grants, validation grants, and scale-up grants. Development grants, which have averaged around \$3 million, fund promising programs that would benefit from further evaluation; validation grants, around \$12 million in recent years, support programs with moderate evidence of effectiveness; and scale-up grants—which are sparsely awarded but have totaled up to \$50 million—support programs shown to have a positive impact after rigorous evaluation.<sup>4</sup> Winners must secure matching private funds in order to receive the grant money.

The criteria for 13 grants have changed slightly with time, but projects most frequently have been asked to address one of the following priorities: “(1) supporting effective teachers and principals; (2) using high quality standards and assessments; (3) turning around low-performing schools; and (4) improving science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education.”<sup>5</sup> The Department has included early learning—specifically school readiness, program collaboration, and alignment of programs birth through third grade—as a competitive priority in past competitions, meaning grantees focusing on this area were eligible to receive additional points in their applications.

## Promise Neighborhoods

This U.S. Department of Education program attempts to break the cycle of poverty by providing children and families in designated communities with a continuum of comprehensive supports at the local level. The model is based on the widely praised Harlem Children’s Zone and similar initiatives that utilize community networks to provide children with steady, wrap-around services, and supports from birth through college and career.<sup>6</sup>

In past competitions, community-based organizations and institutions of higher education that operated or partnered with local schools could apply for two types of grants. One-year “planning grants,” usually ranging between \$300,000 and \$500,000, have supported grantees developing plans in their communities.<sup>7</sup> “Implementation grants,” which last from three to five years and have ranged from \$1 million to \$6 million per year, were awarded to applicants to execute promising plans.<sup>8,9</sup> Grantees that won planning grants the first time around were not guaranteed implementation grants the following year.

As with the administration’s other initiatives, extensive data collection is required of all grantees. The program began in 2010 with \$10 million in funding, and quickly grew to receive approximately \$30 million in 2011 and \$60 million in 2012. But due to decreased funding levels in the FY 2013 continuing resolution, the U.S. Department of Education was not able to fund a competition in 2013. While existing grantees in over 50 communities continue to receive their designated funding awards, it remains unclear whether the Education Department will hold another Promise Neighborhoods grant competition in the future.

4. Tomassini, Jason. 2012. New investing in innovation grant winners focus on faculty, validation. *Education Week* 2012.
5. Scott, George A. 2014. *K-12 EDUCATION: characteristics of the investing in innovation fund*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Accountability Office.
6. Harlem Children’s Zone. About us. 2014 Available from <http://hcz.org/about-us/>.
7. U.S. Department of Education. Promise neighborhoods. 2014 Available from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/promiseneighborhoods/index.html>.
8. Severns, Maggie. Promise neighborhoods: Applications for planning grants now available. in Early Ed Watch [database online]. Washington, D.C., 2010 Available from [http://earlyed.newamerica.net/blogposts/2010/promise\\_neighborhoods\\_applications\\_for\\_planning\\_grants\\_are\\_now\\_available-31426](http://earlyed.newamerica.net/blogposts/2010/promise_neighborhoods_applications_for_planning_grants_are_now_available-31426).
9. Press Office. Obama administration announces 2011 promise neighborhoods grant winners. in U.S. Department of Education [database online]. Washington, D.C., 2011 Available from <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/obama-administration-announces-2011-promise-neighborhoods-grant-winners>.

# WASHINGTON RACES FORWARD IN FIRST YEAR OF ITS EARLY LEARNING CHALLENGE GRANT

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**W**hen Washington won an Early Learning Challenge grant, what it really earned was an opportunity to put its vision for early learning on a fast track, one that quickly led to progress and some turbulence within a year.

Essentially, Washington is spending its four-year \$60 million grant to speed up three projects that were already underway: construction of a ratings and improvement system for early learning centers (known nationally as QRIS); development of a child assessment and transition program (WaKIDS); and creation of better professional development for early educators.

With this approach the state got off to a quick start, hitting or exceeding most of its early targets. By the end of the grant's first year, the state surpassed one goal by enrolling nearly 1,000 child care programs in its QRIS system, extending WaKIDS to 307 schools, and enrolling 17,570 educators in its online career and training system.

*The grant demands an incredible amount of change and flexibility from educators, providers, and regulators in only four years.*

But with speed and progress also comes disruption, and at times confusion. The grant demands an

incredible amount of change and flexibility from educators, providers, and regulators in only four years. In that first year alone, nearly 600 kindergarten teachers adopted the new kindergarten entry assessment and transition process, and many of them felt rushed. Within three years, Washington's application promised that program would cover all of the state's more than 70,000 public kindergarten students.

It "put people out of their comfort zone and I think that is what the grant is designed to do," said Juliet Morrison, who oversees implementation of the grant for the state's Department of Early Learning. "There is lots of changing course and changing development... The pace of it alone is a huge challenge."

Another huge challenge during the first year was that Washington built and implemented statewide programs at the same time. Within its QRIS program, for example, it constructed a data management system even as it gathered data. And it needed technical assistants in the field at the same time it wanted to train them.

This approach often "required everyone to work at top speed, often while not at full organizational capacity. Decisions have needed to be revisited as more is learned through implementation," Washington said in its progress report to the federal government about the first year of the grant. "While these changes are essential to improving outcomes for children, they can cause a lot of disruption during the process."



## How Washington's ELC Grant Extends up Through 3rd Grade

When the Obama Administration announced the Race to the Top Early - Learning Challenge competition in 2011, most of the attention was focused on programs for children before kindergarten. But Washington is using its grant to strengthen its emerging PreK-3rd networks, better known in the state as P-3 because they start with children and families before the pre-kindergarten grades while still extending up through third grade. In fact, elements of P-3 permeate the grant's core strategies, including:

- ▶ **WaKIDS:** The state is expanding the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills program (WaKIDS), a child assessment and transition system increasingly seen as the bridge between "birth-to-5" early learning programs and elementary schools.
- ▶ **Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS):** The state's quality rating and improvement system (Early Achievers) is designed to align with WaKIDS.
- ▶ **Professional Development:** Online training in Early Achievers and other professional development initiatives for early learning professionals focus on childhood development from birth through third grade.

## WaKIDS Shows Potential and Pitfalls of Racing to the Top

Perhaps nowhere is the disruption and potential of Washington's Race to the Top grant clearer than in the kindergarten entry and transition program, WaKIDS.

WaKIDS is an ambitious three-part system that could become the linchpin in Washington's emerging PreK-3rd strategy, which it calls P-3 (for prenatal through third grade). It calls for meetings between teachers and parents at the start of kindergarten, stronger relationships between early learning and kindergarten teachers, and assessment of incoming kindergarteners' skills. Largely through observations, a teacher measures a student's abilities in 19 categories, ranging from social-emotional to mathematics.

By the time Washington won its grant, the state had been developing WaKIDS, which is also known as the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills, for five years. The Race to the Top plan accelerated development by promising it would cover all of the state's kindergarten students in public schools by the 2014-15 school year and more than double coverage to 34 percent of students in the first year.

While this timeline was impressive, it did not give many kindergarten teachers a lot of time to prepare for a brand new approach to kindergarten transition.

"There is nothing that kindergarten teachers hate more than to be unprepared. They felt unprepared for it," said Bette Hyde, director of Washington's Department of Early Learning. "They liked the concept. It was just too fast."

Veteran kindergarten teacher Marla Claffey is one who likes the concept of WaKIDS. When she meets parents before the school year starts at Mark Twain Elementary in Federal Way, Wa., she gets a clearer picture of her students' strengths, weaknesses, and home life.

Last fall, for example, a mother walked into her WaKIDS meeting high on crystal meth with blood streaming down her face after falling in the school parking lot. As troubling as that meeting was, Claffey saw that her new student faced challenges at home, which guided her teaching during the year.

"Before WaKIDS it was kind of a blank slate. You didn't know anything about that kid, anything about that

parent,” said Claffey. “It gave me a lot of insight and that is something I wouldn’t have gotten before.”

WaKIDS student assessments, however, are not as easy.

The first weeks inside Claffey’s classroom are generally hectic. At any given moment a child is pleading for help tying his shoes, a group is wandering around when they should be lining up for recess, and students are arguing about who gets a Lego piece.

During this two months of controlled turmoil, Claffey must observe and often take notes on 19 objectives – more than 30 if subcategories are included – for each of her 22 students. Does a student notice and discriminate rhyme? Show an understanding of patterns? Demonstrate physical balancing skills, such as sidestepping across the edge of a sandbox and attempting to jump rope?

“Lawmakers don’t know what we are dealing with. We have 25 kids in our classroom and trying to get 30-some assessments for this WaKIDS assessment [is] crazy,” added Rania Carter, who uses the program in her kindergarten classroom at Beverly Elementary School in Lynwood, Wa. “It has great potential. We have to figure out how we can scale it back and how we can make it more manageable.”

One way to make it more manageable would be to combine state and district assessments into one system, Claffey said.

State policymakers appear to be listening. Six months after Washington won its Race to the Top grant the legislature approved a WaKIDS plan that did not include the grant’s goal of statewide participation by all 74,972 kindergarteners entering public school in 2014-15. Instead, it created a work group to focus on implementation.

By the end of the grant’s first year Washington fell just short of its WaKIDS target, reaching 85 percent of its goal, or 22,710 out of 25,714 students. Now, grant leaders are reconsidering the rest of the Race to the Top plan’s ambitious WaKIDS timeline.

### **Thinking Differently About Quality**

During the start-up phase of Washington’s Race to the Top, these WaKIDS challenges were the types that refined,

and at least once changed, the work. When it came to building a statewide quality rating and improvement system, Early Achievers, the award spurred policymakers to rethink what quality even means in early learning.

“This is our opportunity to look at quality in a new way, in a deep way,” the Department of Early Learning’s Morrison said.

Policymakers began by reviewing how they were improving child care. They already had a plan to increase access to high-quality services proven to improve outcomes for kids. Now the grant gave them the money to implement, refine and more rapidly expand their plan around the state. Coaches, for example, now helped teachers introduce interactive reading by creating opportunities for them to ask children questions during story time, a technique proven to develop early literacy skills.

### *The award spurred policymakers to rethink what quality even means in early learning.*

This review led to a change in Washington’s RTTT – Early Learning Challenge plan. As grant work began, leaders at the Department of Early Learning debated where the two biggest early education programs in the state – Head Start and state-funded preschool, the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) – fit within the ratings system. Other states simply added Head Start and state preschools to a QRIS system at the same established rating, perhaps three out of five possible stars. But Washington went in a different direction, one not proposed in its Race to the Top application. It launched a pilot project to develop a streamlined process for these programs to join Early Achievers, and test how centers would apply rules and define quality under the program. Ultimately, the pilot determined these programs should join at level three.

The Head Start-ECEAP pilot yielded plenty of other lessons as leaders expanded the rating system across the state. They learned, for example, how much high-quality ratings cost.

The grant money allowed the pilot's director, University of Washington's Gail Joseph, to hire salaried, not hourly, data collectors, and send them to a wide range of programs. These relatively well-paid workers and their broad net produced higher-quality data, which, in turn, should create better ratings.

These lessons will be useful in the grant's second year, as work moves from enrolling and supporting child care providers to actually rating nearly 700. So far, this transition has been slower than expected.

Initial reluctance by providers is understandable. Coaching and technical assistance are relatively low-risk moves, but receiving a public grade, one that could affect business, carries more risk. The Department of Early Learning, however, is confident it will have enough volunteers.

Getting more providers to raise their hands to be rated is part of a fundamental shift across all of the grant's work in the second year from development of programs to implementation. In addition, the grant will receive outside help. For example, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation will continue to provide support to selected school districts for WaKIDS training, planning and

support. And more teachers will have three days at the start of the school year to meet parents, under a bill recently signed by Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee.

In the second year, leaders remain ambitious and committed to targets they set in their winning Race to the Top application. By the end of 2013, they plan to double the number of child care providers in the ratings program to 2,227, add more kindergarten classrooms to the kindergarten entry and transition process, and move more early educators up the professional development ladder.

But, a less tangible and perhaps more important measurement of the entire grant's success looms at the end of this year and every year going forward.

The Department of Early Learning's Juliet Morrison said she wants to see that "families out of the gate know this is what I want for my child, this is what quality is. If we can create some champions in the state that start to see these connections, I think we are going to be in a really good place."

"It is our shot to start shifting the way communities think about this."



## **In Seven Washington Districts, A PreK-3rd Focus Honed by RTT-D Grant**

A year after Washington won its first Race to the Top grant, seven of its school districts banded together to win a second – this time to build a birth-to-college system in one of the state’s poorest regions.

The coalition of districts beat out more than 350 other applicants for the 2012 U.S. Department of Education’s Race to the Top-District grants with a sweeping plan of eight strategies spanning birth through college in South King County, where more than half of students live in poverty.

One of those strategies is to get all of these districts moving in the same direction by aligning programs for children from pre-kindergarten through the third grade, in integral part of a broader goal of a birth-to-college continuum.

Before the coalition won the \$40 million grant in Fall 2012, pockets of this work – which it calls P-3 – were scattered around the county but were not coordinated. The ambition is to align and expand these efforts under a single approach, in part, by taking three initial steps:

- Develop leadership capacity by creating a P-3 leadership team and a lead contact in each school district.
- Create a common language and framework among the districts by having all seven use models and tools developed by national P-3 expert Kristie Kauerz. These tools will be used to plan, implement and evaluate integration of the first five grades.
- Build effective evaluation systems driven by data.

It is not all about systems building. The Race to the Top grant, which is part of the broader community-based Road Map Project, has a separate pool of funds for promising projects within districts. The Road Map aims to boost the percentage of third grade students reaching state reading standards by third grade to 87 percent by 2020 from 66 percent in the 2009-10 school year.

Less than a year into the Race to the Top grant, leaders are still working out specific goals, but they know they want a clear definition of school readiness for policymakers and parents.

“We will have a common definition and common understanding of what it means to be kindergarten ready. Without that how can each system do their best work?” said Julie Rolling, assistant superintendent for learning, teaching and family support, at Puget Sound Educational Service District.

As these efforts got underway, yet another goal emerged: figuring out how to best coordinate the efforts of the statewide Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant and the Race to the Top-District grant. Surely, the thinking goes, the two projects will accomplish more together than alone.

Leaders of the two grants held their first joint meeting in June.

This post is available [online](#).

# AMID FINANCIAL COLLAPSE DETROIT BUILDS A PROMISING EARLY LEARNING MODEL

**D**etroit may be bankrupt, but it is also home to an early learning model that was promising enough to win a Social Innovation Fund grant in 2011 to figure out just how effective it is.

It began five years ago, when the United Way for Southeastern Michigan started building its Early Learning Communities platform. The intent was to nearly double the percentage of low-income children ready for kindergarten in Detroit. But the effort had been slowed by challenges documenting which parts worked and by a lack of money to pay for expansion.

Then two years ago the group won a \$4 million Social Innovation Fund (SIF) grant to do both. The grant allowed the United Way to be a middleman and a mentor. It started by awarding smaller grants to 11 nonprofits that formed a web of nearly every aspect of early learning in the city, from family, friend, and neighbor child care to nutritional counseling. Then it helped these groups develop tools to measure, evaluate, and replicate what they were doing.

One group, for example, is measuring the effectiveness of an intensive approach to teaching home-based caregivers about what high-quality early education looks like and how to implement it. Using assessments that track caregivers' knowledge about child development and teaching practices, the group should know within five years whether the approach led to more kids being prepared for kindergarten.

Across the 11 non-profits, the development of evaluation tools has been the hardest. The project had to forge partnerships between local non-profits, which knew how to deliver services, and top

researchers, who knew how to evaluate what worked and what didn't. This step toward sound evaluation is at the heart of the federal Social Innovation Fund, which strives to identify successful programs that can be shared locally and nationally.

The idea, said Jennifer Callans, who manages the Social Innovation Fund project for the United Way for Southeastern Michigan, is that "communities already know what needs to be done. The right people are in place. We just need to figure out what is working and how we need to leverage it for broader impact."

*Across the 11 non-profits, the development of evaluation tools has been the hardest.*

During the first year, it took longer to develop measurement plans than some hoped. At times, researchers struggled to introduce rigorous analysis and high standards of data collection to non-profits accustomed to providing services first and asking how those services worked later. Smaller agencies struggled because many essentially were learning a new language of research and analysis.

This meant evaluation plans that were supposed to take three months stretched to six months, and in some cases more than a year. Making things even more complicated, some non-profits struggled to raise matching funds in an impoverished city where social agencies often seek help from the same funders.

*Rigorous evaluation is a door to identifying successful programs that can be replicated.*



“There were a couple of soul crushing moments,” Callans recalled. “Once we went through five revisions. I was on the phone with their evaluation team on a weekly basis convincing the subgrantee to stay with it, to keep going on.”

A year into the project all 11 of the original subgrantees were still in the program, in part, because the payoff could be huge. Rigorous evaluation is a door to identifying successful programs that can be replicated around Detroit, Michigan and the country.

If any place needs this door opened it is Detroit, where half the children live in poverty and less than half are ready for school when they start kindergarten. The city’s fourth and eighth grade public school students recorded the lowest scores in the country in math, science and reading on the 2009-10 National Assessment of Educational Progress test, according to the United Way’s SIF application. Reading scores were the lowest ever recorded by the test.

The grant’s idea is to lift those scores and educational achievement overall by focusing on 40,000 newborns, toddlers, and preschoolers in ten of Detroit-area’s poorest neighborhoods.

Now that some of the trials of the first year are over, the initiative appears to be taking off. Family coaches are working with parents. Detroit Public Television is sending HighScope curriculum videos to families. Breakfasts, lunches, and dinners are improving in homes and child care programs thanks to nutritional counseling. And child care experts will begin helping home-based providers in October. In each instance, meaningful data is being collected to evaluate which interventions are most effective.

“If it works...it just creates this amazing model for other communities,” said Kimberly Browning, a veteran early education researcher who is working with several grantees.

## Building Quality One Family, Friend, and Neighbor Provider at a Time

Of all the project's initiatives, its effort to improve the quality of child care provided in homes of family, friends, and neighbors could have the biggest impact.

A nine-person non-profit with nearly 20 years of experience working in the North End of Detroit, Vanguard Community Development Corp., leads this project, the only one of its kind in the city and possibly Michigan. Over the next three years, its team will explain child development, improve interactions between teachers and children, and reduce stress among 400 caregivers. And they will do a lot of this by mentoring providers in early literacy, a focus of the SIF grant.

They already helped one teacher who thought preschoolers could only learn early writing skills by filling out worksheets. She handed out homework that asked children to find the letters of their names from a box at the bottom of a page. The head of the family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) project, Mignon Murray, taught her a more developmentally appropriate exercise, where children pick letters, cut out of magazines, from a bucket and glue those letters on a sheet of paper.

"The concept was the same, but the process was much different," Murray said.

Evaluating this type of help is critical because even though FFN child care is the most common type of care, outside of parents, there is little research on the effectiveness of efforts to improve it, according to Vanguard's evaluation plan.

But, Murray wants to do more than raise quality in family, friend, and neighbor care in Detroit's North End and Central neighborhoods. She wants to fundamentally change how providers there view their work.

"That informal level of caregiving is where we could see kind of a shift of what people think of what it means to care for a child," Callans said. "As opposed to 'Oh, I am babysitting.' That is where I think we can have huge impact."

Murray knows she can have an impact because she has been doing that for the last five years.

Two years ago, for example, Murray visited a home-based child care in the shadow of the General Motors plant in

Southeast Detroit. The owner kept a 42-inch television on all day and the telephone rang constantly.

"She wanted to do the right thing. She wanted to come and get the training," Mignon recalled, referring to the provider. But, "she wasn't really doing anything with the kids."

The children were smart enough to anticipate when "Dora the Explorer" came on, but it became clear that their daily routines weren't helping them develop early literacy skills they would need in kindergarten. The director didn't even want children to use Play-Doh because she worried it would ruin her carpets. She also didn't think the preschool-age children were old enough to start writing. And she didn't see the connection between the two. Murray, who has held every position in child care from assistant teacher to owner, explained to the woman that the children "can't write because their hands are not strong enough." Murray pointed out that by using Play-Doh, she could help children build the fine motor skills that help them write their name.

*FFN child care is the most common type of care, outside of parents, but there is little research on the effectiveness of efforts to improve it.*

Two weeks later, Murray and the owner had overhauled the child care.

"By the time I finished she had her living room set (with) divided spaces, Murray said. "She had the toys in a closet. She had a schedule so the kids could predict what the routine would be...She had story time and lunch time."

Now, Murray wants to do the same thing with hundreds of other family, friend, and neighbor providers in Detroit. After spending the last year developing an evaluation plan, her team of eight will start knocking on doors and walking through neighborhoods this fall, looking for collections of toys in backyards and other signs of in-home child care.

"The goal is to create a model of training focused for family, friends, and neighbors that does not really exist in Detroit," Murray said.

## The Challenge of Evaluation and Replication

If the family-friend-and-neighbor project holds the most potential, developing rigorous evaluation plans for 11 non-profits holds the greatest challenge. Many of the nonprofits have never conducted large-scale evaluations. While these groups may have collected data, it was not the level of detail and quality required by the Social Innovation Fund.

In fact, simply creating a control group – an essential building block of an evaluation – runs counter to the nature of some social services groups because it means people do not get help, Michael Tenbusch, vice president for educational preparedness at the United Way for Southeastern Michigan, said.

“They see a need and they want to answer it,” Tenbusch said. “That is where their heart is.”

But, a SIF grant asks non-profits to embrace control groups and all of the other steps of an evaluation because that is where replicable solutions are. They are asked, for example, to add administrative staff to manage reporting, not just program staff to deliver services.

A key lesson from the first year: Hire experienced staff because the evaluation process is often not intuitive, project staff added.

“Hire folks who are really good evaluators, who have a lot of experience, who have federal experience,” said Browning, who is one of those evaluators. “There is a language that is being spoken and the people on the ground need help understanding and speaking that language.”

In the grant’s first year, evaluators invested a lot of time helping subgrantees understand this language, so that in the next three years these groups could identify what strategies were preparing children for kindergarten.

The SIF grant is also elevating Detroit’s early learning work nationally and locally. The grant connects Detroit-based groups with national experts and resources. Those connections, and the status of winning a federal grant contest, in turn, give these groups credibility in the neighborhoods where they work.

Despite Detroit’s financial decline, the city’s early education prospects are rising.

“Early childhood can be kind of marginalized,” said the United Way’s Callans. The grant “is the game changer for our region.”

This post is available [online](#).

*Despite Detroit’s financial decline, the city’s early education prospects are rising.*





# I3 GRANT TESTS THE POTENTIAL & REACH OF ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S OLDEST PREK-3RD PROGRAMS

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**W**hen the University of Minnesota won an Investing in Innovation (i3) grant two years ago, it bet that it could expand one of the nation's most successful PreK-3rd grade programs from only 10 Chicago schools to schools around the Midwest.

On one level the gamble was pretty basic. The grant would breathe new life into one of the most well-regarded and second oldest federally-funded early education programs in the U.S., Child-Parent Centers, by spreading its approach to public schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin. At the same time, it would reinvigorate the program in Chicago, where it was born 46 years ago and has operated ever since.

If you dug a little deeper, it became clear the \$15 million grant was actually a complex and incredibly ambitious bet on expanding a PreK-3rd grade model originally designed largely for Chicago's poorest African American families to suburban, rural, and urban schools home to dozens of cultures and languages.

Today, the i3 plan is playing for even higher stakes. At a time when the public is more focused on the benefits of preschool than it has been in decades, this grant is asking whether Child-Parent Centers and PreK-3rd grade in general could play major roles in reforming public schools.

"The spotlight is definitely on us. We are trying to figure out if it works. Show how it works and why it works, so we can (expand) it to other kinds of families in other regions," said Mallory Warner-Richter, the i3 grant's project manager.

The Child-Parent Center model certainly deserves part of the spotlight, but too rarely gets it. As Congress reviews new proposals to dramatically expand public pre-kindergarten, legislators are citing Michigan's HighScope Perry Preschool, North Carolina's Abecedarian project and New Jersey's Abbott programs. But they rarely mention Illinois's less expensive Child-Parent Centers.

It is often overlooked, even though it's the only research-reviewed PreK-3rd grade program that can show decades of positive outcomes among its former students, ranging from better high school graduation rates to less time in jail. If the grant proves CPC works in new types of communities, that could well change.

*The Child-Parent Center model certainly deserves part of the spotlight, but too rarely gets it.*

## **A Good Start**

During its first two years, the i3 work got off to a quick start. Within eight months, the project team helped open pre-kindergarten classrooms of no more than 17 children each at 26 sites, serving 2,350 students. These classrooms were spread across six school districts in two states. In Chicago, they set about restoring Child-Parent Centers that had been eroded by years of budget cuts.

In the first year, the team created pre-kindergarten leadership groups – a Head Teacher, Parent Resource

Teacher and School Community Representative – at each school and began offering focused professional development in that grade. One of the grant’s key partners, the Erikson Institute is developing comprehensive professional development in PreK-3rd work for 13 schools and sites. Schools also started aligning curricula and family engagement between pre-k and kindergarten. Each year, the team will expand these efforts to the next higher grade, until they reach third grade and a total of 9,000 students in the grant’s fifth and final year.

But outside forces threatened to derail the work almost before it got started. In the first year, for example, Chicago teachers went on strike for eight days and Chicago Public Schools decided to close roughly 50 schools, including those with new or revived Child-Parent Centers.

“That could have crushed just about any project. Despite all of that they were able to get five districts in two states going, and in most of these schools they had not seen the CPC model before,” said Erika Gaylor, who is leading an outside evaluation of the project for SRI International.

What also threatened to slow things down was measuring the progress and impact of the grant’s changes on students from often highly mobile poor families. One of the goals of the federal 13 program is to expand evidence-based and evaluated programs. But the 13 grant was trying to evaluate some tricky practices, such as parental engagement.

“We are measuring every way we can. Parents reporting on parents. Teachers reporting on parent involvement. Principals reporting on parent involvement,” Gaylor said.

*The magic grease that kept things moving, and a lesson for other regions considering similar work, was flexibility.*

The magic grease that kept things moving, and a lesson for other regions considering similar work, was flexibility. The CPC model prescribes six core strategies: high-quality PreK-3rd grades; aligned curriculum; parental involvement and engagement; collaborative

leadership teams; continuity and stability; and professional development. But it lets schools decide how to implement these ideas. The approach, for example, doesn’t require a specific curriculum, though a school needs to align whatever it chooses from pre-K through third grade.

Another reason the grant went relatively smoothly was that its team chose schools and districts that had already committed to early education. This meant school leaders and teachers were often receptive to CPC ideas.

“There had to be buy in before we even got started,” said Erin Lease, assistant project manager on the 13 grant.

This early work is already producing promising preliminary results.

In 13 schools, children who participated in all three defining elements of Child-Parent Centers – full-day pre-K, high family involvement, and enrollment at centers with full-time outreach staff – had a rate of chronic absences that was 65 percent lower than students who didn’t participate in programs with the three elements, according to University of Minnesota Professor Arthur Reynolds, who is leading the grant work. Absenteeism in preschool can set a pattern for chronic absenteeism in elementary, middle, and high school and has been associated with higher high school dropout rates, he added.

Far bigger tests loom in the future. At the beginning of kindergarten, first, second, and third grade children will be assessed on early literacy, reading, math, social skills/ problem behaviors, and school readiness. Students will be tested every year.

The most important test, though, will come 30 years from now, when researchers will learn if early intervention from pre-K through third grade led to long-term success among alumnae, such as higher rates of high school graduation and homeownership and lower rates of incarceration and drug use.

That is exactly what researchers found when they followed children for 25 years after they left Chicago’s Child-Parent Centers. A landmark study reported students who spent four to six years at a Child-Parent Center – roughly equivalent to PreK-3rd grade – were more likely to graduate from high school and reach higher socio-economic status and less likely to have

been arrested or incarcerated, compared to a control group.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this success, the Child-Parent Center program was a shell of its former self by the time the University of Minnesota won an i3 award in 2011. At the program's highpoint in the mid-1980s, Chicago boasted 25 Child-Parent Centers that ran from preschool through third grade and served 1,500 students. By 2009, there were 10 centers left that offered only pre-k to 670 students. (For more details, read "What's Been Cut: The Story of the Child-Parent Centers".<sup>11</sup>)

The man who led the breakthrough research on CPC's impact, Professor Arthur Reynolds of the University of Minnesota's Human Capital Research Collaborative, was determined to reinvigorate and expand the program with an i3 grant.

When Reynolds and a team of 10 education and non-profit agencies, including Chicago Public Schools and Illinois State University, applied they weren't interested in simply restoring the old model. Instead, the group wanted to update it to reflect decades of research on high-quality early learning and demographics of the modern family. Overall, he wanted to position CPC in the middle of the education debate, and that meant putting principals at the middle of the CPC model.

With the principal as a linchpin, "the main thing was to re-establish a lot of the culture of the program, the leadership team," Reynolds said. "The leadership team, in a lot of ways, was lost in the CPC program."

### **A Lesson of Flexibility: One Size of Parental Engagement Doesn't Fit All**

If you want to understand the i3 grant, and why flexibility is perhaps its key ingredient, you need to understand how it is spreading the Child-Parent Center's approach to parental engagement to new schools.

Parents are at the heart of the CPC. If you can engage parents in their child's education in pre-K, the thinking

goes, they are more likely to stay engaged through the first four years of elementary school, giving their child a better chance of success in school and ultimately life.

*If you engage parents in their child's education in pre-K, the thinking goes, they are more likely to stay engaged through the first four years of elementary school.*

So, in the CPC model parents have their own classroom – a Parent Resource Room often complete with cribs, washers and dryers – and teacher charged with encouraging parents to take an active role in their child's education. This Parent Resource Teacher does everything from recruiting classroom volunteers and chatting with parents at drop-off to visiting families at home and helping them find needed services.

Sometimes they simply help a child get to school.

One morning at Peck Elementary School's Child-Parent Center in Chicago a student did not show up because his family's car broke down. The Parent Resource teacher picked up the phone, called a few families she knew in the neighborhood, and found the child a ride to school.

A key to spreading the Parent-Resource idea is flexibility. The grant team leaves a lot of the execution to individual schools. In fact, the term Parent Resources is only mentioned a handful of times in the i3 grant application.

Why? What engages parents in inner-city neighborhoods of Chicago may not work in Saint Paul Public Schools, where nearly half of the 39,000 students speak foreign languages, ranging from Laotian to Spanish. If the i3 grant is going to successfully expand the Child-Parent Center model, it has to adapt.

10. Foundation for Child Development. Latest findings from chicago longitudinal study published in science magazine. Available from <http://fcd-us.org/whats-new/latest-findings-chicago-longitudinal-study-published-science-magazine>.

11. Guernsey, Lisa. What's been cut: The story of the child parent centers. in Early Ed Watch [database online]. Washington, D.C., 2009 Available from <http://newamerica.net/blog/early-ed-watch/2009/whats-been-cut-story-child-parent-centers-10341>.

“We know parent involvement is important...However, what specifically parent involvement is that looks different culture to culture,” said Momoko Hayakawa, a research scientist at the Minneapolis-based Human Capital Research Collaborative, which is leading implementation of the grant.

## *Building a sustainable PreK-3rd grade system is work that can take years, if not decades.*

So, the grant team suggested that each Parent Resource Teacher start a school year by conducting a needs assessment that asks parents what type of workshops and activities they want. Then the teacher can develop a parent-involvement calendar that reflects those interests.

At one school, parents may want GED classes. At another they may come for Zumba. And somewhere else they may ask for parenting classes.

With all this variety and flexibility it wasn't easy to measure parental engagement in the first two years of the grant.

Initially, teachers sent home parent surveys, but too many never came back. So, they began collecting sign-in sheets at parent events and recording who came, when they came and what they did. Then they used this information to build a database. Today, a Parent Resource Teacher can create monthly reports about which parents are coming to school and what they are doing. Then they can adjust their teaching.

Data collection, however, remains a work in progress.

“Really it is the data collection that has been the biggest challenge,” Hayakawa said.

### **Sustaining Early Progress**

Despite early challenges, the project is off to a good start. But the biggest challenges lay in the future.

Building a sustainable PreK-3rd grade system is demanding, sometimes tedious and occasionally frustrating work. In schools covered by the grant, educators need to align the often different worlds of preschool and K-3, connecting these grades with common curricula, professional development, and most importantly a shared sense of mission. This work can take years, if not decades.

And the project needs to keep students in the same school for four to five years. This is no easy task given that the project focuses on low-income families struggling with immigration issues, homelessness, illiteracy, or other symptoms of entrenched poverty. This may be one of the biggest challenges the project faces.

All of this alignment, professional development and student retention, demands a strong and sustained commitment from teachers, principals, superintendents, and policymakers, who are particularly important to future funding.<sup>12</sup>

And there is no guarantee the current commitments from all four groups will remain after the grant ends in 2017. But, there are encouraging signs.

By choosing schools that already supported early education, the project laid a solid foundation. Two years ago, for example, Saint Paul Public Schools committed Title I funds to preschool for the first time, following the lead of Chicago Public Schools, which was the first district to do that more than 40 years ago. Now other schools could tap Title I funds to finance work begun by the i3 grant.

“Schools have to come up with their own stakes,” Professor Reynolds said. “It is not just an appendage, it has to be integrated. Too often people see PreK-3rd as an early education issue. PreK-3rd is really a school reform model.”

In many ways, Saint Paul Public Schools and its superintendent Valeria Silva hold the future of the i3 grant. If the diverse urban school district can show that Chicago's Child-Parent Centers boosted academic achievement among its nearly 40,000 students, the program and the PreK-3rd grade model will gain attention and potentially bigger roles in the debate over how to reform public education.

12. Hage, Dave. Into the fray: How a funders coalition restored momentum for early learning in minnesota. in Foundation for Child Development [database online]. September 2012 Available from <http://fcd-us.org/resources/fray-how-funders-coalition-restored-momentum-early-learning-minnesota>.

*All of this alignment, professional development, and student retention demands a strong and sustained commitment from teachers, principals, superintendents, and policymakers.*



Superintendent Silva is clearly committed to early education – she has promoted preschool in her schools for years – and now she is committed to the Child-Parent Center’s PreK-3rd grade approach.

“We need more time with our kids, not more time in the day, more time in the year, more time to give them opportunities,” Silva said.

The University of Minnesota and the Human Capital Research Collaborative are leading the i3 grant project, but the initiative is the collaborative work of 10 current partners:

- Human Capital Research Collaborative at University of Minnesota
- New Schools Project at Erikson Institute
- Center for the Study of Education Policy at Illinois State University

- SRI International
- Chicago Public Schools
- Woodlawn Children’s Promise Community
- St. Paul Public Schools
- Bethel King Child Development Center
- St. Paul Promise Neighborhood
- District 65 (Evanston/Skokie, IL)
- Child Care Center of Evanston
- Unit 5 (Normal, IL)

Updated 12/11/13 at 1:00 p.m. to reflect project partners

This post is available [online](#).

# A SAN ANTONIO NEIGHBORHOOD WORKS TO TURN SCHOOLS AROUND ON THE AXIS OF KINDERGARTEN READINESS

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Leading up to its Promise Neighborhoods application, when school opened each fall in San Antonio's Eastside neighborhood more than two-thirds of the kindergarten students showed up in their classrooms unprepared.

In this historic community, many preschoolers traveled informal paths to kindergarten via family, friend, or neighbor child care that was too often disconnected from curricula, professional development, and supports essential for developing early learning skills.

This disconnect was a big reason why 69 percent of Eastside's incoming students were not ready for kindergarten, and fully 96 percent started without the necessary reading, listening, and comprehensions skills, according to the Eastside Promise Neighborhood. Even after kindergartners finished their first year of school nearly half of the students were not at grade level.

So, when the United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County drew up its winning application for a \$24.6 million grant from the federal Promise Neighborhoods program, which supports comprehensive and community-based education reforms, improving kindergarten readiness was one of its main goals. In fact, the 2011 plan proposed reversing that school readiness number by the 2016-17 school year, setting the target that 66 percent of incoming kindergartners would be ready.

The five-year grant would reach this goal by repairing widespread weaknesses within Eastside's early learning infrastructure. It would build a state-of-the-art child

care center in the neighborhood's public housing development, Wheatley Courts, enroll more children in Head Start, and create more high-quality child care.

And progress is being made. Today, the center is being built as part of a \$30 million redevelopment of Wheatley Courts. Meanwhile, the project enrolled children in satellite pre-kindergarten classrooms and created more than 100 new child care and pre-kindergarten spots for children whose parents were in job training.

Architects of the plan quickly learned, however, that boosting kindergarten readiness in poor communities is as tough as it is important. In the project's first three years, its leaders learned a simple but crucial lesson: to listen. While leaders were listening to residents from the beginning – the federal Promise Neighborhoods program is based on the idea of community engagement – they gained traction when they invited parents to play even bigger roles.

“We have restructured how we view planning. The parents are extremely involved in planning,” said Judy Ratlief, director of operations for the Eastside Promise Neighborhood. “The greatest paradigm shift was to say to the community: Formal-based education is not the only way to raise a child, but they all must be ready for kindergarten.”

They also revisited their goals: Now, the project's target is that 45 to 55 percent of incoming students will be prepared to start kindergarten in the 2016-17 school year.

The neighborhood's deep, generations-spanning poverty also posed problems. Within Eastside's 3.5 square miles, 60 percent of children live below the poverty line and nearly half of all adults are unemployed, according to the Promise application. More than 60 percent of adults don't have a high school diploma.

But, Eastside has strengths that position the grant to succeed. Chief among those is San Antonio's mayor, Julian Castro, who was investing in early education before the community won its initial planning grant in 2010. He is pushing his own plan to dramatically improve kindergarten readiness and aligning it with Eastside's work.

## Building an Infrastructure

One of the main reasons the Eastside Promise Neighborhood (EPN) plan is based, in part, on boosting kindergarten readiness is that the community lacks some basic elements of a high-quality early learning system.

For starters, there are not enough affordable child care, preschool, and pre-kindergarten programs in the neighborhood, and providers who are there don't have access to enough resources and professional development.

"There is a dearth of skilled early education and child care providers, both among centers and FFN (the majority of care providers). This shortage, coupled with the large number of parents unable to afford early education for their children, causes most EPN children to enter kindergarten without sufficient early learning skills." – San Antonio Eastside Promise Neighborhood, implementation grant application.

Within the most popular child care option – family, friends and neighbors (FFN) – quality is inconsistent. So, the project focused on connecting those providers with high-quality early learning resources. It expanded Play and Learn programs – where FFN caregivers meet with an experienced early educator for developmental play and educational activities. It also plans to enroll FFN providers in a local childhood development certificate program. And it launched a 15-week class where parents can learn about childhood development.

There is a dearth of skilled early education and child care providers, both among centers and FFN (the majority of care providers).

That class addressed the need for better parental support in Eastside. Parents lacked critical information about their child's health milestones, nutritious meals, and the importance of their involvement in school. Plus, there are rarely enough books in the homes of future kindergartners, which may explain why only 40 percent of Eastside parents read to their child-care and preschool-age children three or more times a week.

Together, these factors leave many of Eastside's children unprepared for kindergarten. Even worse, it sets them up to struggle in elementary, middle, and high school.

"The lowest performing elementary students typically did not attend pre-school, meaning they began a trajectory of school failure and dropping out before they even enrolled." – San Antonio Eastside Promise Neighborhood, implementation grant application. "Pre-school participation was predictive of test scores, grade-to-grade retention, student age, mobility and absenteeism throughout elementary and middle school."

The end result of these weaknesses is clear each June at the neighborhood's Sam Houston High School: Only 46 percent of its students graduate in four years.

## Early Hurdles

When the grant team began trying to improve kindergarten readiness, however, they ran into challenges.

The local school district, for example, switched to a new kindergarten assessment system, which initially made development of longitudinal data difficult in 2013, and that, in turn, complicated efforts to set kindergarten readiness targets for the coming year.

So, the team adjusted some of their goals.

A "big challenge has been how to measure kinder readiness," said one staff member.

The team also realized they needed to engage parents in developing the grant's early childhood work.

Two years ago, for example, the grant team was trying and failing to recruit families for a new pre-k program. They did the usual outreach, handing out fliers and putting up posters around the neighborhood. Team members got exercise but not much else, Eastside Promise's Ratlief recalled.

“Finally, the parents came to us and said: ‘That is not how you recruit.’ They told us the stores. They told us the beauty shops,” where parents were, Ratlief said. “Always ask the community. Listen to what they have to say and let them be part of the work.”

Over the last year alone, the grant team pulled parents into 11 different meetings to talk about the grant’s 10 core strategies. They asked: ‘Where are we? What do we need to set for our targets? Do we need to revisit those?’

“We have tried to build trust,” said Tony Leverett, director of the Eastside Promise Neighborhood. “Because of relationship building we are starting now to gain more momentum.”

## Lessons

In the first few years of the grant, the team was sometimes flying blind. Since the neighborhood was among the first 21 to win grants in 2010 there were not too many policies or guidelines, Leverett recalled.

This meant Leverett and his team learned valuable lessons during those years that could save other communities time and prevent more than a few headaches, including:

- **Be Flexible:** A recurring lesson communities learned in four federal education competitions – Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge, Social Innovation Fund, Investing in Innovation Fund (i3), and Promise Neighborhoods – is the importance of flexibility. These competitions are designed to reward ambitious proposals. But no matter how detailed an application is, implementation of those ambitions is bound to run into many unforeseen challenges.
- **Listen, Question, then Revise:** In San Antonio, grant leaders regularly review their work, asking: ‘Are we being reasonable? Are we being true to the grant’s purpose? Is the work sustainable? Can it be replicated?’
- **Reach Out and Plan:** “Before you do it, think about what you are measuring, what your desired result

is and how you are going to do assessment,” said one Eastside Promise Neighborhood staff member. “I would recommend reaching out to other Promise Neighborhoods.”

- **The Importance of Political Support:** San Antonio Mayor Castro’s support of early education, is critical to the grant’s success. Castro successfully pushed for a sales tax that will fund city-wide public preschool. Grant leaders, including early education staff, have seats on influential city committees that are working to align Eastside and city work in early education. These positions could help secure future local funding when the federal grant ends in three years.

## The Link Between Kindergarten and Community Readiness

Three years in, the Eastside Promise Neighborhood grant is gaining traction as its leaders refine their goals and gain confidence among residents. The project’s initial kindergarten assessment, concluded this fall, indicated incoming students were more prepared than in past years.

But, the general structure of the Promise Neighborhoods program sets this work apart from other Education Department competitions in early education, and could be what sets up this work for long-term success. The program is designed to help not just children and their families, but an entire community. That may be one of the best ways to prepare more children for kindergarten.

“Kinder readiness isn’t just about that child that is in kindergarten. It is about the whole family and the whole community really. All of those influence that child,” a key staff member said. “It is about the community.”

*Note on Sourcing: Data and other information cited in this report are from the San Antonio Eastside Promise Neighborhood grant applications and supporting materials.*

This post is available [online](#).



# FINAL THOUGHTS

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**W**hile the future of these programs may be bleak, they have helped to accelerate progress in early education in several states and communities. Some members of Congress have questioned federal investments in early education. And with the next Congress under Republican-control, it's unlikely for these competitive grant programs established by the Obama Administration, which only benefit a few states and communities, to continue. Additionally, unified control of Congress likely means a return to regular appropriations bills, decreasing the likelihood that Congress will simply maintain funding levels through temporary spending measures, as they have in the past.

There are important lessons to be learned, however, even if Congress does not fund future competitions. Flexibility is essential. Even the most detailed and thought-out

plans are likely to run into challenges along the way. The ability to adapt plans to address changing needs is key to successful implementation. Another challenge evidenced in these case studies has to do with evaluation and data collection. Grantees are charged with evaluating sometimes highly complex initiatives and determining what data to collect and how to measure success is not always easy. Finally, these case studies illustrate the importance of reasonable timelines for implementation.

Continued investment at the state and local levels, or from the private or nonprofit sector, will be essential if the work launched by these programs is to continue. And although these particular initiatives are less likely to receive substantial funding in this next Congress, the focus on outcomes and evidence-based funding is almost certain to continue into the future.

*The focus on outcomes and evidence-based funding is almost certain to continue into the future.*







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