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Volume 15 Number 2

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Strategies for Enrolling Traditionally Underserved Families in Early Childhood Education Programs

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Abstract

Six agencies in Illinois received 18 months of funding from the governor's office to develop effective and innovative strategies to recruit young children from traditionally underserved families into early childhood education (ECE) programs. The five agencies that provided families with immediate follow-up and some services shortly after recruitment were able to maintain contact with families while those families waited for their child to be enrolled. Most agencies reported enrollment delays because of waiting lists. Agencies that provided "interim services," such as weekly preschool activities or a monthly home visit, reported retaining the largest number of families for future enrollment in ECE programs. In addition, agencies indicated that it was essential to "go to" families to assist them with enrollment-related paperwork and not expect families to come to the agency. Collaborating with other agencies that provide additional services to families living at or near the poverty level was another important factor for retaining families for future enrollment.

A research team at the University of Illinois conducted the evaluation of the program. Each of the six agencies participated in three evaluation interviews scheduled at the beginning, middle, and end of the funding period as well as an optional monthly teleconference call to share information and solve problems. The research team used the interviews and teleconferences to evaluate the effectiveness of the six agencies' recruitment strategies.

Introduction

Consensus has been reached on the importance of high-quality early learning programs to bridge the social and preacademic gaps between children living in poverty and children whose families can afford to pay for preschool services. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has stressed that "high-quality early learning is the best education investment we can make in our children, our communities, and our country" (Duncan, 2013). His statements are based in part on economic data regarding the return on investment for ECE services (Burchinal et al., 2009; Temple & Reynolds, 2007).

While not every child experiences the *same* benefits of a high-quality early childhood setting, all children are likely to gain *some* benefits from participation in one. Many studies throughout the last 50 years have demonstrated that high-quality early childhood programs can help young children develop social skills as well as increase test scores and impact high school graduation rates and lifetime earnings. They also report a decrease in crime, teen pregnancy, and smoking rates as well as grade repetition (Barnett & Masse, 2007; Cooper & Costa, 2012; Temple & Reynolds, 2007).

An important question is, "Why are some families living in poverty not accessing these public programs for their preschool-aged children?" Some identified barriers have included affordability of the program, lack of transportation, stringent enrollment requirements, need for nontraditional child care hours, distrust of public programs, and a desire for family members to care for their children at home. In addition, parents report that

they do not know what constitutes high-quality early care and do not understand the benefits of early childhood education for their children. Program policies regarding enrollment (e.g., required forms, immunizations, and documentation of income) also can be difficult to understand and navigate (Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011).

Enrollment opportunities in ECE programs vary across communities depending on program funding and resource allocation from state and federal governments. Kagan (2009) reports that "children's access to preschool programs varies dramatically by their race, socioeconomic status, parents' education, mothers' employment, English proficiency, and geographic locale" (p. 7). These factors, whether alone or in combination, widen the gap of school readiness/preparedness. This sustained gap in services has and is likely to continue to affect children and families for generations unless it is addressed now. The purpose of this study was to identify specific activities and strategies that participating programs reported to be effective in recruiting traditionally underserved families in their communities as well as sustainable activities and strategies to be used once external funds were no longer available for the pilot efforts.

Methods

Characteristics of the Six Agencies

Based on a statewide request for proposals, 22 organizations submitted applications to the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Education, which then asked a team of external experts in ECE to evaluate the applications according to a set of guidelines. Six applicants were chosen, based on the extent to which their proposals addressed a statement of need for their service area and a plan to recruit and retain families identified as traditionally underserved, or "hard to reach." The plan required inclusion of the following: How do you talk about quality early learning with families? How do you identify "hard to reach" families? How do you successfully reach these families? What is your experience helping families access services of any kind? How will you recruit and retain these families? Table 1 provides a brief description of the sites.

Table 1
Characteristics of the six agencies involved in pilot program

Agency	Community Type	ECE Services Offered
Agency A School district	Large suburban	2.5-hour prekindergarten sessions
Agency B Large agency providing range of family services	Urban	4 hours of Head Start, 2.5 hours of prekindergarten, full- and part-day child care, home visiting program
Agency C Large agency providing range of family services	Large suburban	4 hours of Head Start, home visiting based on HIPPY model
Agency D Privately owned child care	Rural	Center-based child care or group family child care for full day or part-time
Agency E Large agency providing range of family services	Urban	4 hours of Head Start, 2.5 hours of prekindergarten, full- and part-day child care, home visiting program
Agency F Large agency providing range of family services	Urban	4 hours of Head Start, 2.5 hours of prekindergarten, home visiting

Definition of Traditionally Underserved

The six agencies varied somewhat in their definitions of traditionally underserved, highlighting whom they considered the most vulnerable children and families in their service areas. All identified families living in poverty plus one or more risk factors: Parents who were single, teenaged, homeless, marginally employed, unemployed, or lacking transportation. Two agencies' (Agency A and Agency B) definitions also included immigrant families who were English language learners.

Supports for Agency Planning and Information Sharing

Four members of the research team, who were all experienced early childhood professionals, contacted each newly funded applicant to identify the person who would serve as project coordinator for the agency and to discuss with the coordinator ways to measure their proposed strategies for reaching traditionally underserved families. The team helped coordinators organize their work plans according to proposed resources and outcomes using a logic model developed by the Kellogg Foundation (2004). This was accomplished via a webinar and individual phone calls to review the work plans. Agency D also received a site visit to support the coordinator's planning.

The same four team members also provided opportunities for each of the project coordinators to share information through 12 scheduled monthly teleconference calls. All coordinators participated in at least half the

calls; the average attendance for each call was 70%. The networking calls provided an opportunity for coordinators from the agencies to share milestones and to seek clarification of state policy related to child-care assistance funds. Notes from each call were completed and made available to the participants.

The Evaluation Process

A team member who did not engage in the planning process with the agencies conducted all of the phone interviews with the agency coordinators at the beginning, middle, and end of the project. The first interviews occurred early in the project (May and June 2012). The second interviews were conducted midway through the project (October and November 2012), and the third interviews were completed at the end of the project (April and May 2013). Interviewees consented to being audio-recorded during the 30- to 45-minute phone calls. In addition, notes from the monthly teleconferences were used as a second source of data to expand on information obtained from the evaluation interviews and to look for congruence (or lack of congruence) between the interview data and teleconference notes.

Data Analysis

At least two team members listened to each interview to summarize the interview and to identify themes related to the activities or strategies used by the agencies to find, recruit, and retain families. They read and reread the interview summaries and notes multiple times to identify themes. One or two additional team members checked the summaries and themes against the audio recordings for completeness. When discrepancies were noted, both sets of team members met to discuss the discrepancy and to reach consensus on the summary and themes. As needed, members recoded earlier interviews as themes were refined over time.

Summaries of the second and third interviews were e-mailed to the agency coordinators, who were asked to make corrections or additions to ensure that the summaries reflected their intent. Most approved them without changes. Additions typically included providing specific numbers related to caseloads, families contacted, children served, or participants at events.

Results

Five major themes were identified from analysis of the interviews: strategies for identifying and recruiting families; strategies for bridging identification to enrollment; retention of children after enrollment; collaborations within and across agencies to improve and expand services; and sustainability of the recruitment and enrollment efforts after funding ended.

Successful Identification and Recruitment of Families

All agencies noted that it was critical to designate a staff member, either half or full time, to coordinate their efforts and to help families enroll in services. Only one agency (Agency F) was able to hire a new staff member; the other agencies rearranged current staff responsibilities to set aside staff time for the project.

To assist with locating families, three agencies (Agencies B, C, F) recruited volunteers, usually parents whose children had received services from the agency. They provided training and, in one case, incentives for them to serve as ambassadors for the agency. The "ambassadors" attended community events and went door to door to talk with families about the importance of helping their children become ready for kindergarten by enrolling them in a high-quality ECE program.

All participating agencies used some of their grant funding to advertise their services or create recruitment fliers, information packets, and, in one case, a community resource book. One agency (Agency B) created a video about its early childhood program (in Spanish with English subtitles) to add to its Web site and take to events in the community. It also produced a video in English to share with the local business community for fund raising and increasing community awareness. Another urban agency raised awareness about the importance of early childhood education services by purchasing advertising space on city buses.

Strategies for Bridging Identification to Enrollment

The second overarching theme included efforts to maintain contact with families until their eligible children could be enrolled. As a condition of receiving funds for this research, agencies were required to use a data system to track and stay connected with newly identified families. Several agencies assigned staff members to make weekly calls to the families until services could be provided or the children could be enrolled. Participants reported that without ongoing contact, they lost their connections with newly identified families. The tracking systems varied greatly, ranging from a Microsoft Access database to a simple "pen and paper" system. Agency C modified its existing database by adding a new field to identify those specific children who were recruited and enrolled through this project versus through other efforts. This allowed the agency to differentiate among families who were eligible for services and already seeking them from the traditionally underserved families

who did not seek services independently. The agency identified 110 children reached through its funded recruitment efforts and reported that at the completion of the grant, 89 of those children participated in some form of services.

Project coordinators also reported barriers that sometimes prevented parents from completing the required paperwork for establishing eligibility and enrollment. These included lack of transportation, need for childcare during the enrollment process, nontraditional work hours, and fear of working with publicly funded or government-related agencies. Agencies that expected parents to come on site to enroll their child reported losing parents between the point of recruitment and the point of enrollment. The agencies that sent staff *to the families* to help them complete paperwork typically reported successful enrollments. They observed that families often were overwhelmed by the amount of paperwork required for completing enrollment, as well as the need to obtain health records and, in some cases, employment records. These families often needed the support of a staff member to guide them through the forms and to help make medical appointments so families could meet the health and child immunization requirements.

One multiservice agency (Agency F) coordinated services with its medical and dental clinic. The medical clinic set aside two days for families enrolling in its ECE program to see a health care provider. For families identified later in the year, the clinic provided "VIP" appointments so that new families did not have to wait long to get their children's required health exam and records. The same program provided transportation over a four-day period for 50–60 newly recruited children to visit a dental clinic.

A challenge for five of the six agencies was providing immediate placements for eligible children. These agencies had few available openings because they had not initiated recruitment efforts for the project until late summer, in part because of the timing of their funding. New families were placed on a wait list until new slots opened. For programs with transient families and frequent turnover in enrollments, the wait was less than three months. In other programs, families might wait the entire school year for open slots for their children.

To bridge the gap between identification and enrollment, three agencies (Agencies A, C, E) used pilot funds to create interim services for wait-listed families. The school district (Agency A) set up weekly activities for children and parents within local housing developments or at community centers. These weekly "drop-in" preschool sessions expanded its weekly service from 5 sites to 12 within the funding period, serving 164 children. As a result, the district planned to enroll all children who were 3 or 4 by fall 2013 into its Pre-K program or another ECE program. These sessions introduced adults and children to ECE activities (book reading, coloring, singing, and learning rhymes) that supported school readiness. The weekly scheduled activities, which occurred at the same time each week close to homes, were targeted at preschool-age children but were also open to caregivers and siblings. The same staff members participated each week, spending time with the caregivers as well as the children. The district used the grant funds to pay for the two staff members (a teacher and a parent educator) who conducted the small drop-in groups. The district reported that the weekly gatherings provided families an opportunity to learn more about their services and become comfortable with the concept of preschool itself. To encourage regular attendance, the agency provided healthy snacks for children and parents and during winter offered free hats or mittens during some sessions.

Agency C offered monthly home visits and a weekly play group to newly identified families. Again, this provided a sampling of what its ECE program could offer. As enrollment slots opened, these families could choose to enroll their child in a center-based ECE program or a home-based option (a weekly home visit and a monthly play group). Several parents voiced appreciation for having a choice that best met their personal preferences.

Collaborations Within and Across Agencies

All agencies engaged in collaborative relationships as part of the funding stipulations of the project, using both internal and external collaborations to better serve the families. Internal partnerships included collaborative work across programs housed within the same agency (Agencies B, C, E). External partnerships included collaborative work with other community agencies, organizations, or child-care providers. The most common collaborations included dissemination of information throughout community venues (stores, bus stops, medical clinics), providing information about the importance of early care and education at community events (fairs, open houses) sponsored by other agencies, or requesting training for agency staff and parents by an advocacy organization.

Agency C increased staff awareness of the importance of ECE services in its Workforce Development Program, which prepared adults for employment. The Workforce Development Program referred clients with young children to the ECE program; likewise, ECE staff also referred parents for job training or employment assistance to the Workforce Development Program. The grant coordinator also developed a relationship with personnel involved with providing housing services and through this relationship was able to recruit families who lived in locked or gated housing developments.

Agency B focused on collaborating with the business community to raise money for "scholarships" for families who often had fluctuating eligibility for CCAP (child care assistance program) funds. Agency B staff created and premiered a video describing its ECE services at its annual fund-raising dinner attended by community leaders

and business owners. The financial contributions received were used as "scholarships" to support enrollment of several children who would have left the ECE program when a parent temporarily lost eligibility for CCAP funds.

Another collaborative partnership was formed between Agency A and its local housing authority. As previously mentioned, Agency A recruited families in local neighborhoods by providing weekly drop-in preschool activities—using public spaces such as parks and sidewalks. Representatives of the housing authority were impressed with the benefits provided by the agency and sought out a formal agreement to provide future space in the development for a Pre-K classroom.

Finally, for many families, a half-day program, albeit free, was not practical; they required full-day care for their children while the parents worked or attended school. The coordinators of the grants needed to consider the impact of adding ECE services to some families' current full-day child care arrangements. With other families, the coordinator needed to provide assistance and referrals for extended day care beyond the half-day ECE services. This required knowledge of other local programs and ways that the families might access child care assistance funds for the extended care.

Retaining New Enrollments

The fourth theme emerged from participants' descriptions of ways in which their organizations worked to keep children attending regularly. Several agencies reported that they closely monitored child attendance through their data systems. If a child missed several days of school, agency staff called the family and worked with them to keep the child in the program. This might require a morning wake-up call to parents who worked nontraditional hours or helping a family apply for a bus pass so the child had consistent and reliable transportation. Agency A provided Pre-K services in multiple locations and would transfer children to another school if they moved to another area in the school district.

Because many families needed full-time care, it was critical for the agencies to understand the state's eligibility policies for CCAP and to collaborate with other programs that could provide before and after school care for the children. Nearly all traditionally underserved families depended on CCAP funds to support their child's enrollment in a full-day or wraparound care program. Loss of those funds usually meant that a family also dropped out of a Pre-K or half-day Head Start program. For instance, staff at one agency misinterpreted CCAP regulations for parents enrolled in school and during a one-month semester break, it disqualified these parents for CCAP because the parents were not attending class daily. This error caused many families to lose the wraparound child care funding, and they withdrew their children from Head Start or Pre-K.

Sustaining Future Recruitment Efforts

The fifth theme that emerged during analysis of the data was concern about sustaining the recruitment of traditionally underserved families after the 18 months of funding ended. Several agencies planned to continue their efforts for recruiting traditionally underserved families and to maintain either part-time or full-time staff members for outreach work. Three agencies planned to reassign the outreach, recruitment, and enrollment efforts to existing staff. Agency D did not plan to continue efforts beyond distributing a resource booklet and its remaining fliers. Because all agencies had developed recruitment materials (fliers, posters, videos) with grant funds, they planned to continue to use these materials in the future, reprinting them as needed. All agencies recognized the need to start recruiting families earlier. Because of the funding timeline of the grant, five agencies began their outreach to traditionally underserved families after the start of the new school year when Pre-K and Head Start classes were already fully enrolled. Most noted that April and May were optimal times to begin recruitment efforts for the next fall.

Agency E had been under-enrolled for several years and, as a result, had lost Head Start funds. The grant funds enabled it to resume recruitment and to reapply for Head Start funds for new classrooms. This urban agency planned to serve 63 newly recruited children from traditionally underserved families in space provided by a city college. The agency had identified eligible children whose parents were enrolled in the college. College administrators were open to providing the required space. The 18 months of grant funding helped this agency move from "underserving" its community to more closely meeting the community's needs and potentially regaining Head Start funds through expanding its collaboration with the city college.

Agency A, which used pilot funds to support weekly drop-in preschool activities at 12 sites, planned to incorporate this approach into its next Pre-K funding application to the Illinois State Board of Education. Children who attended the "drop-in" preschool activities during the 2012–2013 school year were being enrolled successfully in the Pre-K program for the following year. Agency staff attributed their success in identifying traditionally underserved families to their strategy of "going to the families." The staff noted that their dream was to purchase a bus and remodel the interior like a preschool to go from neighborhood to neighborhood and deliver similar "drop in" services as a way to recruit families.

At times, the new focus on reaching traditionally underserved families revealed the ineffectiveness of common recruitment practices. For example, a staff member from one agency acknowledged that community fairs and similar activities had not been an effective way to find families who had not yet been served. She noted that "only the families who know about our services already come to our community events; the hard-to-reach

families either don't know about these events or don't see the value in them." She indicated that funds were best spent when agency staff knew the makeup of their community and could focus their recruitment effort by using volunteers who spoke the same language as the families, came from the same community, and had access to the housing where families lived. She noted that the volunteers not only recruited new families but became advocates for high-quality ECE as well.

Discussion

Locating, recruiting, and serving families who have multiple risk factors is a complex process (Bromfield, Lamont, Parker, & Horsfall, 2010). The findings from the six pilot programs indicate that the process must be individualized to the needs of families, focus on building a relationship between the family and a staff member, and be sufficiently funded for designated staff to coordinate outreach and provide frequent contact until enrollment is available. One of the most successful agencies (Agency A) invested most of its pilot funds in staff time and recognized the importance of building relationships with families who typically did not seek services. Throughout the school year, the agency consistently provided staffing for 1½ hours per week of preschool activities at the same locations, days, and times, which resulted in the identification of 164 eligible children who might not otherwise have been served. These interim services helped sustain family interest and contact so that when enrollment slots became available, children could enter a traditional Pre-K or Head Start program. Over the academic year, one-third of the children who participated were enrolled in the Pre-K program; the remainder were guaranteed enrollment in the subsequent school year.

The findings of this evaluation point to the need for changes in policy and funding if the state aims to serve its neediest children. Most early care and education programs are fully enrolled by the start of the school year and rely on turnover slots if new children are identified. The evaluation indicates that in high poverty areas, children continue to be without services, even once identified, because of enrollment limits tied to current funding and facilities. The following are recommended changes in state policy and local program practices. In many ways, these recommendations represent a paradigm shift in recommending that programs both find and go to the families instead of waiting for families to come to them. It also calls for flexibility in funding if programs are to serve the neediest families.

1. **Create incentives for programs to serve traditionally underserved families.** Programs have no financial incentives to target, recruit, and enroll traditionally underserved families in their service areas if they can fill enrollment slots with "easier to reach" eligible families. Because they risk losing full funding if they are not fully enrolled at the beginning of the school year, programs may focus their recruiting on easy-to-reach, traditionally served families rather than traditionally underserved families who may require more time and effort to reach. State agencies should consider developing policies that permit programs additional flexibility in allocating enrollment slots to traditionally underserved populations in early childhood programs. Additional options could include: a) prioritizing placement by the type and number of risk factors; b) increasing funding for additional enrollment slots; and c) permitting funds to be used for interim services until enrollment slots are available.

2. **Change the mindset about enrollment.** The most successful pilot programs shifted their recruitment, enrollment, and service provision from program-centric to family-centric activities, taking the paperwork, resources, and some services to where the families lived and spent their time. To accomplish this paradigm shift, these pilot programs recognized that personnel costs would increase as staff spent time traveling to the families to complete the enrollment process.

3. **Match services to family needs by acknowledging child care needs.** Programs reported that many families needed full-time child care and were not interested in a half-day ECE program unless it included care for the remaining hours of the work day. Some programs provided extended day care while others did not. Staff from programs with only half-day services reported that they were unfamiliar with child care funding and community options for wraparound services. These staff would benefit from professional development about the child care assistance program so they could encourage families in need of full-day care to seek funding. Professional development efforts should also encourage communication and coordination among programs when young children receive their education and care from multiple providers.

4. **Address transportation barriers.** To retain traditionally underserved families, agencies must look at options to provide services where the families live or provide transportation options (city bus passes, mileage reimbursement, vans or school buses). Staff from the six agencies described various challenges, ranging from a complete lack of public transportation in a rural area to the need for multiple bus transfers in one urban area. Agencies that also served school-age children provided bus service to and from school on the traditional school-day schedule, leaving children in the half-day classes with only one-way transportation services. Those attending morning classes rode to school but needed an alternate way home; those in afternoon sessions needed a way to get to school but could ride the bus home. All agencies that lacked convenient or round-trip transportation noted significantly lower preschool attendance during bad or cold weather. The alternative is to extend the half-day sessions to full-day sessions, requiring additional funding from state and or federal agencies.

5. **Focus on sustainable collaborations.** Programs should be encouraged to develop the intra- and interagency collaborations that can be critical to recruiting, enrolling, and retaining families who have multiple needs. Professional development to support collaboration should be offered to all agencies providing early care and education services. Agency staff reported that more formal collaborations such as agreements to refer families to other agencies (e.g., for health visits, for child care enrollment) enabled them to enroll identified families much sooner in their program. Agencies that had working agreements with housing programs were able to obtain lists of residents with young children and in several cases were able to provide interim services on site for newly identified families. In large agencies, collaboration within an agency was viewed as critical because families were able to have other needs (e.g., housing, employment, training) addressed in addition to receiving early childhood services.

Although the number of children living in poverty continues to grow, funding for services is being reduced in many locations (Heckman, n.d). The difficult decision of whom to serve—the neediest and hardest-to-find children or the most convenient, eligible children—poses a conundrum for programs whose funding is based on full enrollment at the beginning of the school year. To provide preschool for all eligible children will require a commitment not only at the state level in terms of increased funding allocation, but also at the local level to expand services. Several of the pilot programs demonstrated strategies that are well worth replicating in other communities if there are enough available enrollment slots.

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