

Engaging School Districts in Early Childhood Collaborations

The Benefits of Collaboration

Getting Started

Making the Case

Keeping Schools Engaged

Partner ★ Plan ★ Act

an Illinois Action for Children Community Systems Development Initiative



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Purpose of the Toolkit

Through our partnership with the McCormick Foundation, Illinois Action for Children has developed the Engaging School Districts in Early Childhood Collaborations Toolkit as a resource to support local early childhood collaborations leading community systems efforts that deepen engagement with school districts. Illinois Action for Children convened a series of focus groups and interviews with community and school leaders at different levels of engagement with school districts to inform key insights offered in this toolkit. We believe this toolkit will be useful to early childhood local collaborations and their evolving needs for many years. If a community discovers or creates additional resources that could serve other collaboration leaders, please share with Illinois Action for Children staff at partnerplanact@actforchildren.org

The Benefits of Collaboration between Early Childhood and School Districts (K-3)



"[We] have moved from half day to full-day Kindergarten and added a play component to the day. Full school day gives us the opportunity to do all. This [idea] came from preschool programs and a lot of urging from [the] collaboration."

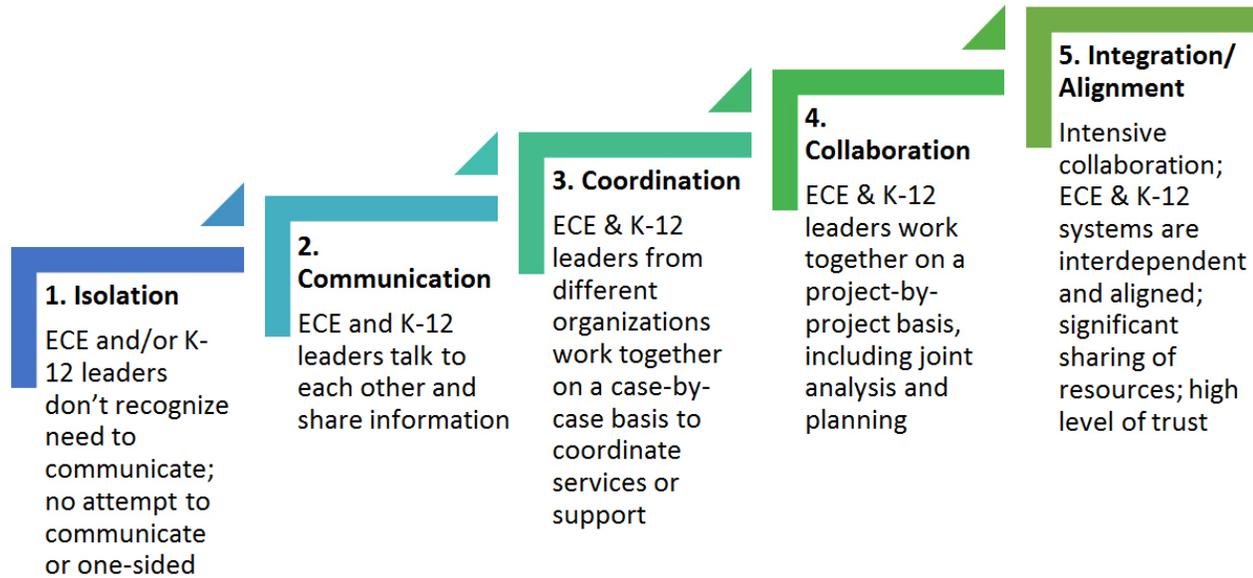
School district leader

Early childhood collaborations in Illinois vary in their level of engagement with school districts. Some collaborations have had success in engaging school leadership to develop a shared vision and implement new strategies to improve outcomes for children and families. Members of these collaborations identified positive benefits of partnerships between early childhood and school district staff across the early childhood and K-3 education system:

- **Mutual gains** – By working together, schools and early childhood leaders were more effective in understanding the root causes of community issues and developing common goals. They shared resources such as information about community services or donated space for events. They were more willing to share data such as enrollment numbers or demographics of the community and coordinated professional development opportunities. They were also successful in engaging more families and increasing access to high quality early childhood programs for children as a result of working together.
- **Better coordination of services for families** – School districts and early childhood leaders coordinated their outreach and enrollment strategies. They also coordinated developmental screenings for children and developed shared intake processes that allow for a single entry point for services.
- **Building trust between partners** – Community leaders openly shared preconceived notions about "other" programs in their community and what these programs were or were not doing to serve children. These assumptions and misperceptions sometimes got in the way of working together. As trust was built, they learned that the collaboration provides a space for school and early childhood leaders to hear the different perspectives and gain appreciation for the role and value of each organization, person, and service.

Stages of Collaboration with School Districts: Where does your collaboration fall?

The stages of collaboration range from “Isolation” all the way to “Integration.” Where does your collaboration with school districts fall on this spectrum? Assessing your engagement level will help you think about how to deepen your relationship.



Source: Adapted and revised from systems of care stages of collaboration based on Burt, Spellman (2007).

As you think about your stage of collaboration, use the following guide to navigate this toolkit.

Beginner's Phase:

In this phase you may be at the “Isolation” or “Communication” portion of the continuum. You may have started to reach out to school district leaders or there is minimal communication with them. The insights in this toolkit from “Getting Started: Do Your Homework” may be useful to collaborations in this phase.

Intermediate Phase:

At the “Coordination” or “Collaboration” phase, there may be some limited interaction and partnerships between early childhood collaborations and school districts. You may have done a few events together or one-time collaborations. At this phase, you will find insights from “Making the Case” helpful for your work.

Advanced Phase:

The “Integration and Alignment” phase is where local collaborations have a strong partnership with school districts. The findings in “Now Schools are at the Table: How to Keep them Engaged” may be useful for collaborations at this phase.

Building relationships with school districts evolves over time and requires trust and patience. Local collaborations move up and down this continuum, but this toolkit will help early childhood leaders with how to strengthen their school partnerships.



Reflection: What stage is your collaboration with school districts?

- Engage your collaboration to ask, what stage are you in based on this continuum?
- Why are you at this stage?
- What stage would you like to be at, and why?
- What are some ideas for moving up the continuum?

Getting Started: Do your homework



Early childhood leaders caution against approaching school districts without adequate preparation. The benefits of collaborating with the early childhood community may not be immediately apparent to school leadership. Collaborations, therefore, need to make the case for why districts should participate, given a context of limited resources and competing priorities. Do your homework to develop your case for partnership and enhance your credibility. Consider the following:

1. **Identify common interests, values and goals:**

School leaders will want to know what is in it for them. The more you can learn about their own priorities, the easier it will be to demonstrate areas of intersection. Tap into the strategic vision or plans that may exist in your districts.

Five areas of collaborative work valued most by the district representatives we talked with were:

- Family engagement strategies, especially with transitions to kindergarten.
- Community outreach/awareness of services or coordinating enrollment efforts, with focus on reaching at-risk children.
- Knowledge/resource sharing about supportive community services.
- Opportunities to understand and meet evolving community needs.
- Improving kindergarten readiness/increasing access to high-quality early childhood programs.

Some of these areas of collaborative work may interest your school district leaders.



Reflection: What are the interests, values, and goals of the school districts?

- What does your school district value in the community?
- What are your school districts main goals and interests?
- How do your goals overlap with school districts?

2. Determine the role you envision school districts playing:

Be prepared to answer school leaders' questions about the purpose and goals of the collaboration and what role you see the school or district playing. Present your goals in a way that shows flexibility. You want to demonstrate that you are open to new ideas and a meaningful partnership rather than simply being interested in advancing your own agenda. One way to show your openness and flexibility is to include school districts early in your planning process, rather than at the end when decisions are already made.



Reflection: How would you like school districts to participate in your collaborative work?

- Why is it important for your collaboration to engage and involve school districts?
- What role do you want them to have in your work?
- What are the top three goals or interests that you want school districts to know about your collaboration?
- What does your collaboration offer school districts?
- What could school districts offer local collaborations, and why?

3. Identify the right people to be at the table:

Engaging school district leadership is ideal to ensure buy-in at other levels, but deep participation of leaders may not be necessary for successful collaboration. Leaders can set a tone of importance or urgency and weigh in at key moments that require high-level perspective or decision-making. However, superintendents are busy and cannot always make meetings. They might not have the on-the-ground knowledge necessary to move projects forward. Early childhood collaborations have found that connecting with school districts on multiple levels can be an effective approach. For instance, they connected with teachers, middle management, social workers, and parent engagement coordinators. However, program staff might be the more appropriate representatives at the collaboration table depending on your goals. It was also suggested that school staff be encouraged to share the collaboration efforts with their workplace colleagues so that supervisors and decision-makers are aware of local efforts.



Reflection: Who needs to be at your early childhood collaboration 'table'?

- Who do you need to engage?
- What can the specific individuals and their corresponding job role bring to the collaboration?
- If you don't need a school decision-maker, who else could help advance the collaboration efforts such as teachers or social workers?

Based on the role you envision for school district:

- Whose buy-in is needed?
- Whose decision-making authority is needed?
- Whose expertise is needed?
- What type of communication channels need to exist to facilitate ongoing communication about the collaboration efforts?

4. Leverage champions to engage school districts:

Leverage your collaboration members who have positive relationships with the district and are champions of your work. They can talk about the value they get from participation. One community leader described their multi-pronged approach:

"I'm at the podium to present at the township meeting and [my colleague] is taking them out to lunch." Also, having other respected leaders at the table offers incentive to districts to become involved. One collaboration member described that when "some school districts came on board [she] saw others join kind of as peer pressure. When higher education schools joined [it] encouraged schools to do so as well."



Reflection: Who can help connect you to school district leaders?

- Are there collaboration partners at your table that know the school district leaders through other work that they are doing?
- Who are the natural champions of your work that can help make a case for partnership?

5. Craft your Message:

Carefully prepare your messaging in advance after thinking about your interests, values, and needs. Consider the context of your audience. The next section highlights messaging that you might consider, as suggested by the focus groups.



Reflection: What's your message?

- Why should school districts care about your collaboration? What is in it for them?
- What are the shared interests, values, and needs that you want to communicate to build support from school districts?
- Are there specific ideas of collaborative work that you anticipate would interest school district leaders such as improving kindergarten readiness or developing shared professional development opportunities for staff on topics like family engagement?

Making the Case: Messaging to Encourage School Districts to Collaborate with Early Childhood



Early childhood collaboration leaders spoke of their need for well-crafted messages in order to engage school districts in their efforts. They focused on messaging that reflected school districts' values as well as clearly articulated the benefits of collaborating with others.

1. We can help you help families and children: Tap into Shared Values

Overall, early childhood collaboration leaders and school districts care about the families and children they serve and meeting their needs. Everyone is generally invested in helping families address the daily challenges they face and crises that emerge – such as issues of poverty or violence. School districts are eager to connect families in crisis with the services they need. Early childhood collaborations, comprised of diverse stakeholders like social service agencies, can play a role in providing school districts with knowledge and relationships that they need to make referrals for children and families.

"When I was a principal, it was so challenging to think about what to do for families in crisis. We struggle a lot, but now we know who to contact to get information for families, for homeless families, for families moving to other schools..."

School district leader

Many local collaborations and school districts are concerned that they may not be serving all children and families, or may be aware of whom they may not be engaging as well. Working through a local collaboration has encouraged partners to share data, such as information on race/ethnicity, gender, and poverty, to show disparities and inequities or conduct a needs assessment to understand the gaps in services. Collectively, they can work together to identify creative strategies to engage with families underserved by community systems.

2. We Can Offer a Broader Perspective and Resources: In selling what your collaboration can bring to the partnership, emphasize your system knowledge, ability to bring different perspectives to the table to gain a deeper understanding of a problem, and your ability to leverage financial or other resources.

Sharing Insights on How the Systems Work: Early childhood and educational systems are large, often bureaucratic, and difficult to navigate for staff and families. By working together, people can communicate their knowledge of their own systems to increase everyone's understanding of how these systems work. With more knowledge of policies, procedures, and programs, collaborations are better able to identify opportunities for alignment and integration of services. Some leaders also shared that working together helped to significantly shift their own mindsets and perceptions of the "other" systems.

Leveraging More Resources: Early childhood collaborations that have their own non-profit status can also serve as a fiscal agent for joint community efforts. As a result, local collaborations can be a powerful partner for school districts interested in seeking grants or private funding for additional programming for families and young children. As one district representative said, "[It's] great to have another entity that can act as fiscal agent to get around some of the regulatory challenges that schools face with grants." Collaborations also provided greater efficiencies – such as the coordination of community outreach efforts or parent engagement activities, thereby reducing costs and minimizing duplicative efforts.

3. We have a track record of success: While early childhood collaborations are in various stages of formation, some collaborations that have been working locally long enough to demonstrate some successes in how they engage community members, leverage funds, and impact the lives of young children and families. Some leaders shared that these successes helped to sell the value of collaboration to school district leaders.

Now Schools are at the Table: How to Keep them Engaged



Early childhood and school district leaders discussed their efforts to maintain trust, sustain engagement, and stay connected to collaboration efforts. Based on the findings, school districts joined local collaborations primarily to meet the needs of their changing community. They stayed connected to the collaboration efforts because of the knowledge gained and the access to additional resources that collaborations brought.

What was the impetus to begin?

What keeps you coming back?

Rank	Motivation	Rank	Motivation
1	Organic-evolving community needs and priorities	1	Knowledge and resource sharing
2	External funder direction	2	Leveraging authority and resources
3	Desire to do more for children and families	3	Long-standing commitment to collaborate
4	Community planning efforts	4	Showing progress
5	Desire to find better ways of working together	5	Structures – collaboration serves as fiscal agent, can project manage efforts and advance shared vision
6	Competition for enrollment		

Source: Adapted from GCIC Research Summary

Cultivate and Maintain Trusting Relationships

“Trust building is huge and you cannot do that in a day.” – Community Leader

Building trusting relationships was frequently cited as pivotal to strong partnerships and collaboration. Despite the intuitive knowledge that trust is important, the act of building trust can be challenging. It is an ongoing process of cultivation. Some examples of how to build trust:

- **Vary your approaches to engagement** – Community leaders shared that they deepened their relationships with school districts by varying their approach and not simply setting up formal meetings. For instance, they would have lunch or offer to present to school districts as a way of providing information. These interactions, both formal and informal, helped to strengthen the relationship.
- **Support your partner's work** – Some leaders shared the importance of supporting other partners' events and being visible at community events. Being visible communicates that they care about everyone's efforts and not just their own.
- **Foster transparent and regular communication** – Engaging in transparent and regular communication with partners helped to keep communication channels open. School district leaders shared that regular communication helped them to know more about the collaboration's efforts.



Build institutional relationships

Some school and community leaders shared challenges related to staff turnover which resulted in disruptions in participation at collaboration meetings. They suggested that early childhood collaborations cultivate relationships at multiple levels within a school district. They also encouraged local community partners to integrate collaborative efforts into job functions where possible. This creates an expectation that new staff participates in local collaboration efforts and minimizes the negative impact of staff turnover and loss of institutional memory. It also establishes institutional commitment to the local collaboration.

Include Schools in Goal Setting and Strategy Design Process

Insights from focus groups encourage local collaborations to engage with school leaders in the early stages of a strategic planning process. Early involvement in identifying the needs of a community and discussing common challenges helped develop a shared understanding of the root causes of issues and build buy-in and support from school districts. While it is ideal to engage school districts early in the process, it may not always be possible. Regardless, the findings suggest that local collaborations benefited from engaging school districts in simple, shared goals to deepen a partnership – for example, goals of creating a common definition of kindergarten readiness or offering family engagement training. Even if it was not possible to engage school districts from the beginning, it was still helpful for local collaborations to identify common goals as a way to build the relationship.

Have A Purpose, Action Plan and Implement it!

Collaborations that have existed for several years should have a purpose, a vision and outcomes for children and families. They should have action plans to achieve these goals. However, some school district leaders said they were confused about their collaboration's overarching purpose and work. While they may attend meetings regularly, they didn't always have clarity about their role and how to contribute to the work.

Early childhood collaborations that have strong governance structures – a facilitator and clear process for decision-making and sharing responsibilities – helped communicate to school leaders that their time investment was worthwhile. It helped school districts to know that someone was responsible for keeping the work focused and on-track.



Toolbox: A tip from the ABLe Change Framework – Shared Meeting Agenda

Michigan State University's ABLe Change Framework encourages collaborations to develop a 'shared agenda' to keep collaboration efforts focused on the targeted problem and agreed-upon strategies. The ABLe Change Framework suggested that meeting agendas include the main targeted problem or goal at the top of each meeting agenda – to make sure collaborations don't lose focus of their goals. Additionally, the collaboration action steps and plan are key components of the meeting agenda to facilitate the meetings on the actual work. A common mistake of most collaboration meetings is to start a meeting with partner updates, which often take up a lot of time and take away from the action items on the agenda.

Keep School District Representatives Active in the Work

If collaboration members are engaged and have a voice in the work, they are more likely to remain at the table. You should leverage their expertise, skills, interests, and leadership to move the parts of the work they care most about. Local collaborations offered these examples of how they worked together to improve the lives of families and children:

- Developed a coordinated referral system to connect families and children to developmental screening services.
- Developed collectively-defined strategies to support kindergarten readiness goals – such as supporting high-quality early childhood programs, addressing preschool availability, and ensuring children in low-income families are enrolled in preschool programs.
- Worked together to develop family engagement strategies, such as best practices to support family planning for kindergarten or to gather family input when creating strategies.
- Implemented data-sharing agreements between partners, including school districts, to analyze trends and changes in the community and track progress.

"...[We] launched coordinated outreach and recruitment across all early childhood [programs such as] school-based, community, home visiting, and family child care. [We] have screened a huge number this year." – Community leader

Show Successes and Outcomes

Many community collaborations discussed the importance of developing measures of success, documenting small wins, and tracking progress. Collaboration goals and measures should focus on short- and long-term measures, since short-term measures can show progress and motivate people to work together. If possible, long-term goals should focus on child and family outcomes – particularly on serving families and children that are not otherwise being served. Short-term measures may include: numbers of children being served, tracking the engagement of new service providers, documenting efficiencies through coordination efforts, or survey results on positive changes to service delivery or referral processes.

Collaborations and their relationships to community stakeholders are fluid and constantly evolving as changes in leadership or shifts in community dynamics occur. Fostering and cultivating strong relationships takes time, trust, and sensitivity. Regardless of the collaboration's engagement level, communities are charged with keeping their partners engaged, excited, and motivated to improve outcomes for young children and their families.



Ideas from Communities: One community shared how they brought together community leaders to talk about a 'Cradle to Career' initiative. As part of their work, they convened a team, including school district leaders, to review and discuss best practices and research about kindergarten readiness. After several meetings and surveys of their community, they identified a gap in social and emotional skills development of young children as a major need in their community, among other issues. In some of their efforts, they implemented a summer family kindergarten readiness camp.

Acknowledgements

In partnership with Graettinger Cole Impact Consulting and with support from the McCormick Foundation, Illinois Action for Children engaged in a process of authentic engagement with local communities regarding the level and quality of partnerships between early childhood collaborations and public K-3 education leaders. In particular, we explored the strategies, approaches, and tactics that early childhood education leaders have used to engage K-3 leaders in their communities, as well as uncover gaps or needs for support to more successfully collaborate. As a result, we developed this toolkit and additional resources to offer insights on successful early childhood and K-3 collaboration.

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