



Young students at the Acorn School at Vanderbilt University explore math and science concepts with Samantha Barclay, preschool teacher and teacher cadre member.

Nashville has a blueprint to address early literacy

BY JOSEPHINE APPLEBY AND RENÉ DILLARD

Developing early reading skills is important for long-term academic success. Too often, however, young children do not have the foundations of literacy they need.

One-third of Tennessee students read on grade level (Tennessee Department of Education, 2021), and in the state's capital city of Nashville, three out of four 3rd graders are not reading on grade level. These students

represent some of the most vulnerable populations — students of color and English learners.

In response to the critical need to improve early literacy, a coalition of community partners developed Nashville's Blueprint for Early Childhood Success to identify key levers and align city resources to achieve strong results. Over 200 community leaders, national experts, and researchers spent more than six months developing the six pillars of the blueprint. They are:

1. Strengthen birth to age 3 supports.
2. Improve quality and access to prekindergarten.
3. Strengthen the district's literacy tactics.
4. Reduce chronic absenteeism.
5. Address summer reading loss and maximize out-of-school time.
6. Rally the community to support all children.

The blueprint launched in 2018

with the broad goal of doubling the number of 3rd graders reading on grade level by 2025. It is now housed within United Way of Greater Nashville. United Way provides backbone support, including managing logistics and providing facilitators, facilitates the steering committee, and ensures alignment with collective impact frameworks.

Because we recognize that ours is a lofty goal, we scaffold the work and work collaboratively across the city to develop strategic priorities and implementation plans. Part of what makes the blueprint so successful are the valuable partnerships and relationships built over time. We work intentionally with the local school district and elevate the work of other organizations that support education within the city. This is a citywide initiative, and we are dedicated to drawing on local talent, expertise, and opportunities for collaboration.

An integral part of our plan has been ensuring that Nashville early childhood educators are well-equipped to serve students' literacy needs. We prioritize professional learning to build the capacity of early educators so that all children can thrive academically.

TEACHER-DRIVEN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Early childhood educators in Nashville work in a variety of settings, including local school district sites, Head Start centers, home-based child care, community-based centers, and

private preschools. For the sake of this project, early childhood educators are defined as any teacher who teaches pre-K ages 2 to 4. We want to ensure that all students have equal opportunity to enter kindergarten with the requisite foundational literacy skills, regardless of their educational setting.

One potential barrier was that each of the early childhood sites conducts its own professional learning and has varying levels of resources and capacity. To create more coherence and consistency, in late 2019, the Blueprint for Early Childhood Success team convened a workgroup of representatives from over 20 community organizations to map out professional learning opportunities across the city, identify gaps and needs of students, and provide free professional learning to educators regardless of school site.

The workgroup represents organizations in the nonprofit space, public policy, early education, post-secondary education, and other affinity groups. Together they created a common purpose and strategic plan. The workgroup developed a partnership with Lipscomb University's Ayers Institute for Teacher Learning and Innovation to build out early childhood professional learning resources on the institute's website, edutoolbox.org. United Way of Greater Nashville provided facilitation support, connections to funding opportunities, and the framework to track success.

Realizing how valuable teacher

EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCES

The Ayers Institute offers a free comprehensive professional learning program for early childhood educators working in a variety of settings. The professional learning program includes model lesson videos, an online learning module, and a resource library with over 100 resources created through a collaborative partnership with educators across middle Tennessee. Visit edutoolbox.org/earlylearning.

Learn more about the Blueprint for Early Childhood Success at www.blueprintnashville.org.

voice would be in the success of this project, we wanted to make sure that teachers were integrally involved in creating professional learning resources. In the first phase of the work, we connected with early childhood leaders across Nashville to conduct a needs assessment. We based topics for professional learning resources on data gathered from community conversations and surveys, then created a teacher cadre to inform the development of professional learning.

We selected members of the teacher cadre through an application process that included a written application, classroom visit, and interview — and we made it a priority for the teacher cadre to be representative of diverse, citywide pre-K providers. We selected eight teachers representing Metro

Nashville Public Schools, Head Start, United Way's Read to Succeed program, a private child care provider, a university child care provider, and a faith-based child care provider. Members met formally over eight months, working both together and independently to create high-quality, standards-aligned lessons and resources.

Within the first few months of meeting, the teachers determined that the resources they were being asked to create did not directly align with classroom needs. This was an important turning point in the project because it opened up space for teachers to become more invested and passionate about their content creation.

The teacher cadre revamped the original list of expected resources to better represent the urgent needs of early childhood providers in Nashville and partnered with each other to develop high-quality lesson plans and instructional resources.

They wrote lesson plans, interactive repeated read-aloud guides, family engagement materials, classroom management materials, and social-emotional learning resources. The resources then underwent extensive peer review by other teachers in the cadre as well as Ayers Institute faculty.

Three teachers also created model lesson videos that provide footage of authentic classroom lessons as well as teacher vignettes explaining their methods. The videos cover writing and math opportunities in a pre-K classroom as well as child-led inquiry through an emergent curriculum. We included a facilitation guide for early childhood professional learning communities.

While the teacher cadre worked, we developed an online learning module on fostering language development in a pre-K classroom. This online learning module earns six hours of professional learning credits in Tennessee.

A COMMUNITY COLLABORATIVE

The teacher cadre was valuable not only for the professional learning resources it created but also because

it quickly evolved into a community of collaboration for early childhood educators working to better their own practice — something that had been missing in Nashville.

"I've really loved collaborating with the other teachers and getting to know other pre-K teachers in the Nashville area," one member said. "That's something I've struggled with since I've moved here. Just finding my people and finding people who think similarly, and it's made me think a lot about who I am and how I teach and why I teach, so I think it's made me a better teacher."

This community became particularly important in spring 2020 when the world began to change due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers were closing out the school year like never before, many of them unable to say goodbye to their students. Although the teacher cadre commitment was wrapping up as we prepared to launch the next phase of the project, members expressed their desire to stay connected with each other and expand their network to other early childhood leaders across the city as we grappled with navigating the pandemic.

We created a virtual professional learning community that met weekly in June to foster collaboration and launch the Ayers Institute's online learning module on fostering language development in a pre-K classroom. Seventy-one early childhood educators registered for the professional learning community. While it centered around the online learning module, it served as a community space specifically designed for early childhood educators to reflect, collaborate, and learn.

Funding for the pre-K professional learning program ended in July 2020, but the relationships among teachers in the teacher cadre held strong. During a time of uncertainty and learning a new way of teaching virtually, members of the teacher cadre have remained in communication with each other, meeting informally to connect, share ideas, and celebrate success in an unprecedented time.

NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, the Blueprint for Early Childhood Success will continue to work collaboratively to create change for Nashville's students. Creating literacy-based professional learning is just one aspect of the work, and, as we move forward together, we will continuously improve our programming, processes, and initiatives.

We have identified next steps to continue promoting the professional learning partnership with Lipscomb's Ayers Institute and plan to build a pathway to a more formal community of practice for early childhood educators. We will continue to advertise the expertise of local educators through a variety of outlets. This will eventually include a hub for free and accessible professional learning across the city, a newsletter, and opportunities for educators to share their expertise.

The professional learning program materials are timely, relevant, and unique because they were developed by practicing early childhood educators and address urgent needs in the Nashville community. We hope this collective impact initiative will serve as a model for future professional learning communities across the country and an exemplar of what can happen when a variety of stakeholders unite to support students.

REFERENCE

Tennessee Department of Education. (2021). State of Tennessee 2018-19 achievement – ELA. reportcard.tnedu.gov/state/0/achievement-ela

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