

“And how are the children?”



MICHIGAN Listen and Learn Symposium

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“And how are the children?” That is how the Maasai people of Kenya greet each other - whether the person they are greeting has children of their own or not. They ask this because they know children are a barometer of a society’s health; if children are succeeding then families are succeeding, and the ecosystem around them is healthy. So the desired answer to this question is always, **“The children are well.”**

Michigan’s Office of Great Start is always asking, “And how are the children?” On July 22, 2020, the Office hosted a Listen & Learn Symposium for early childhood practitioners and families from around the state, creating an opportunity for communities to learn from each other about best practices in helping children to be well.

The Symposium featured two keynote speakers: Dr. Cristina Pacione-Zayas, Associate Vice President of Policy at the Erikson Institute, and Tonja Rucker, Program Director for Early Childhood Success at the National League of Cities. It also featured breakout discussions on five separate tracks: “No Wrong Door,” Family and Community Engagement, Early Literacy, Universal Behavior and Developmental Screening, and Transitions. In each breakout discussion participants heard from providers and parents engaged at the community level to improve child outcomes.

Throughout the day some consistent themes emerged. Unsurprisingly, those themes focused on relationships. Dr. Pacione-Zayas emphasized that relationships are about the responsibility we have to each other - and that the people closest to the problems need to be part of the solution. That means listening to parents and providers. And indeed, the need to listen to parents and providers was highlighted in breakout discussion after breakout discussion. In every conversation, the need for respect and understanding is at the heart of success.

Both keynote speakers also talked about systemic racism and its insidious effects. Dr. Pacione-Zayas told us to attack the root causes of systemic racism, using both data and stories to build the case for better policies. Tonja Rucker echoed the call for better data, and acknowledged the complex and mistrustful relationship governments have had with communities of color. She told us that putting families at the center of the work is essential to achieving the desired results.

The breakout conversations for each respective track drilled deeper into specific activities that can improve conditions for children and families in communities around the state.





No Wrong Door

No Wrong Door strategies are meant to help families access the services they actually need - no matter where they make their initial contact with the early childhood system. That requires bringing providers together to help families, which is hard with limited resources. The state could do more to remove barriers that communities then are expected to overcome. The process of developing shared enrollment can take a lot of time, as each provider needs assurance that the final process will meet its needs.

Partnerships are at the heart of No Wrong Door approaches, and those partnerships take place in unique community contexts. Providers need to understand the stresses families face, and seek to develop a system that helps mitigate the impact of those stresses. Families should be engaged in the process of designing No Wrong Door systems, and providers should use that design process to build the relationships needed to sustain the work on an ongoing basis.

“Understanding that mental health of our parents is important and how to help reduce stress to make sure our parents are at their best for their children.”

— Aarie Wade

One approach providers can use is to print out provider verification forms for families to include in their applications to the Department of Health and Human Services; this can help the applications be processed quickly. In some instances providers may provide email or fax support to parents for submitting applications.

“It was a hurdle to get past the policies and coordinating the organizations and took time. Also, we involved families in the process of developing the portal, this was an ongoing feedback process, and we knew families needed to be a deciding voice in the development of the portal.”

— Sue Clark





Family and Community Engagement

Family and community engagement cannot focus on talking at families and communities - it has to be about multi-directional communication, listening to families to hear what they actually need and then communicating back to them about how they're going to get it. This kind of communication is most effective in the context of relationships, and needs to be strengths-based so that families feel appreciated. That requires providers and community leaders to be open-minded and not make assumptions about families seeking help. Presenters emphasized that community leaders can be strong ambassadors for early childhood, and local school leaders can play a constructive role in that work.

Parents are so important, you have to get their ear, their trust and their heart. You have to go to where the parents are, you have to go to the gas stations, the dollar store, you go to where the need is, even if the want isn't.

– **Rachelle Morgan**

The first question we ask is, are you talking to parents and how often are you meeting with them? We found that many organizations are not reaching out beyond surveys, and then are not sure how to incorporate the information. We must create parent leaders and bring them into the organization, to build the trust and drive change based on parent input, rather than what agencies think they should do.

– **Mary Manner**

An important part of the work is meeting families where they are, both practically and in spirit. From a practical standpoint this means going to locations where families will already be going; home visitors have found that sometimes visits outside the home can be effective. Spiritually means taking seriously the good ideas families have about their vision of success, and building trust with them to keep them engaged. Each family will have its own style, and early childhood professionals need to respect that.





Family and Community Engagement

Schools play an important role in family engagement, and families benefit when schools are actively involved in working with stakeholders in the early learning community. For parents to see a superintendent who really values the early years sends a powerful message in the community. Schools should be among the organizations partnering to serve families effectively.

When we do good work with families they use word of mouth to move messages forward. Parents are the best advocates for our programs.

— Victoria Washington

Hope Starts Here parents are advocates, leaders, allies for policy makers, allies for educators, they hold in their heart community, they hold in their heart and in their vision the children. Our parent advocates are fighting for change, more funding, more seats, raising concerns, by using their voices and stories.

— Bernita Bradley

While providers will always play an important role in sharing information with families, they should be mindful of the fact that families play a valuable role in sharing information with other families. Indeed, families can be the most effective advocates for early childhood services. Not only are their conversations with each other essential and meaningful, they can also play a central role in educating politicians and other community leaders. Their honest and emotional perspective carries a power that even the best professional advocates cannot duplicate.





Early Literacy

Children should love learning to read - and they will if the process is interactive and relevant. Making it so requires listening to people in the community and collaborating with families. They will know how best to reach their children, and want to be trusted in the process. Understanding the community is also key to ensuring that funding gets to the people who are best positioned to help grow early literacy, which may require engaging new leaders and providers.

Do not underestimate the families and children whatever their background is. They are very powerful and their role is powerful, we need to be sensitive to their need and position. Your relationship is not limited to literacy.
— Sondos Alhachim

Literacy can be taught in any scenario and any environment, so communities should shape the environments to fit their needs. It's not essential that children be in "traditional settings" to develop literacy skills; they can be anywhere that engages them. Making sure that access to literacy development opportunities meets the needs of both children and parents is key to getting families engaged.

Of course, for families to engage in early literacy requires more than making it convenient - it requires building understanding among families of why early literacy is so important. That understanding is frequently built through relationships with trusted providers and other families. If parents are empowered and supported, they can take a leadership role in their child's development as a reader and learner. Indeed, families must be engaged for the process to be successful, given the role of families in supporting literacy development.

Build the knowledge of WHY behind Early Literacy to increase buy in and strengthen the community. We need to explore non-traditional partnerships. It is a community need and we need to work together.
— Wendy Boyce

Keep the community involved and listening to the community, we serve them the way they way they want to be served and not the way we want to serve. It gets more people involved, and excited, it builds trust.
— Sondos Alhachim

At the community level it's important to have a plan. Understanding the early literacy needs of the community - and then developing a plan that meets those needs - is key to succeeding at scale. And underlying that plan must be strategies for building and maintaining relationships and trust, which is necessary for any plan to succeed.



Universal Behavior and Developmental Screening

Screening children and families is an important strategy for mobilizing resources on behalf of families. But successful screening requires an environment in which families are comfortable. Pediatricians need to be more involved in this work, and more effort needs to be made to ensure that families are able to access screening using their home language. And, of course, screening should be just one step in a larger process - the followup that uses screening results to connect families to services really leads to long-term impacts.

You have to have a plan for follow up. You have to have a plan for the back end. The screening becomes the door and there must be a plan to connect families with the appropriate resource.

— Veronica Pechumer

For many families, services will be most welcomed if they are provided in the home - that is where many families are most comfortable. In identifying families for screening, it is important to be equitable. Equitable access is different from universal access. Importantly, families must be assured that personal information about their children will not be used inappropriately; screening can generate very sensitive results, and families are rightly protective of child privacy.

In too many instances families have had to advocate for screening with pediatricians, when it should be the other way around. Pediatricians have not always been as knowledgeable as they could be, and this can lead to delays in services due to late diagnoses. Ideally pediatricians will not help only with the screenings but also with referrals; there used to be more consultants housed in pediatricians offices who helped with this process, but funds for those supports have been reduced.

Screening is a door through which families enter the system, and there need to be concrete plans for next steps. Professionals should be educated about community resources for screening that are available, so that families can come in through that door - and similar to No Wrong Door, providers need to know what services families can access so that those next steps actually get taken.



Transitions

Transitions can be times of stress. When kids are changing settings parents need to know what resources are available to them – and those resources need to be culturally relevant and responsive to their needs. Professionals need to be flexible and understanding in dealing with families and have real conversations with them to truly understand what will help them succeed. Building on existing relationships while creating new ones can provide continuity. Importantly in the current context, a lot of support can be provided virtually.

Successful transitions requires a team approach – professionals working directly with families need to bring in other colleagues when necessary to address particular family situations. Coordination and communication are all the more important when the work is being done virtually and in the current situation where supply chains and resources are stretched to the breaking point. A team approach also is the best way to ensure that parents understand what resources are at their disposal and how they can access them.

Of course, the approach to transitions should be respectful of family prerogatives – which means that professionals need to constantly be adjusting their practice based on family input, ensuring that it is relevant to the cultural context in which families live. Communication requires ensuring that families feel heard and service providers are cognizant of the limits of their own knowledge. It also requires flexibility, given that each child’s experience will naturally be different.

“The most important thing from our school district was flexibility, and learning what works for your child.”

– **Tori McIntosh**

“Help me Grow has always been by phone, and virtual so we have expanded hours to make sure we can be there for as many families as possible. All hands on deck working on making transitions as smooth as possible.”

– **Heather Eizinga**

One interesting development this year has been that virtual home visits have been a success; in fact, they’ve had lower no-show rates than in-person visits. This may be a useful service going forward for families who are interested in a relationship but who do not want service providers in their home. Relationship-building is most likely to be effective when families can relate to the staff reaching out to them.



Next Steps

- Communities should support efforts to bring providers together to form No Wrong Door collaboratives.
- Community leaders should include a focus on family engagement in their work, and make sure they are hearing from families regularly. They should also support efforts to connect families with each other.
- Programs should ensure that children can engage in early literacy programs in a wide range of settings, and help build family understanding of the importance of early literacy. Community-level plans are helpful to supporting this work.
- Communities should establish universal screening approaches, with the resources needed to connect families to the services they need.
- Transitions require collaboration across programs, and communities should provide capacity to manage the ongoing process of collaboration.
- In addition to providing support to individual communities, the state should create communities of practice and support ongoing opportunities for leaders from around the state to learn from each other.

In all of these areas the state plays a critical support role in helping communities succeed.

A group of four diverse children (two boys and two girls) are smiling and hugging each other outdoors. The background is a bright, sunny outdoor setting with green foliage. The children are of various ethnicities and are dressed in casual clothing. The overall mood is joyful and inclusive.

Conclusion

Dr. Pacione-Zayas began the day by telling the story of the Maasai and their greeting. We are not yet at the point where we can honestly answer that all the children of Michigan are well. But the commitment of the participants in the Listen & Learn Symposium is to get us to that point - and the Symposium highlighted some of the practices and approaches that will help children be better.

So ask us, **“And how are the children of Michigan?”** And we will answer, **“We are helping them every day - and we know more today than we did yesterday.”** The work continues.