

This is one brief in a series of four case studies that was developed to document strategies used by elementary school districts in Illinois, to promote an integrated educational experience for children from birth to 3rd grade. Research has shown that children who have access to well-aligned and cohesive learning environments are more likely to achieve academic proficiency and sustain growth over time. The brief below highlights one community – West Chicago – and the impacts that school district leaders and their partners have made to enhance early learning as the first step along children’s educational pathway from birth through elementary school.

West Chicago’s comprehensive approach to birth-3rd grade education began when WeGo Together for Kids: The Department for Partnerships for Wellness, Safety and Achievement was established and housed at District 33. Guided by the community-school model, WeGo Together is the facilitator for a partnership between the public school sector and local entities that support children and families, including services focused on children from birth to kindergarten. WeGo Together provides important connective tissue for the other two efforts we describe in this paper, District 33’s innovative Dual Language program, which is aligning instruction from early childhood programs to elementary school and making connections with community partners, and the new Educare of West Dupage, a high-quality early childhood program which feeds into District 33’s schools and is providing West Chicago’s young children with enriching care and education.

West Chicago Community Snapshot – 2013-14

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District Enrollment: 4,182 PreK – 8th grade • Community: City • Low income: 61% • Student mobility: 12% • English language learners: 51% • Students with disabilities: 13% | <p>Percentages of students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White: 19% • Black: 3% • Hispanic: 75% • Asian: 2% • Multi-race ethnicity: 1% • Homeless: 1% |
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West Chicago’s Birth to 3rd Grade Highlights

- *Cross-Sector Work:* WeGo Together for Kids is a partnership between the public schools and community-based supports for children and families that is housed at District 33.
- *Instructional Tools:* District 33’s innovative and research-based approach to educating Dual Language Learners for bilingualism, biliteracy, and biculturalism is the common thread for aligned instruction and family support beginning with the District’s Early Learning Center and extending through elementary and middle school.
- *Learning Environment:* West Chicago has expanded access to educationally connected early childhood services by developing a new Educare site: a state of the art, comprehensive, full-year, full-day early childhood program for 150 children at-risk for not being prepared for success in school and their families.

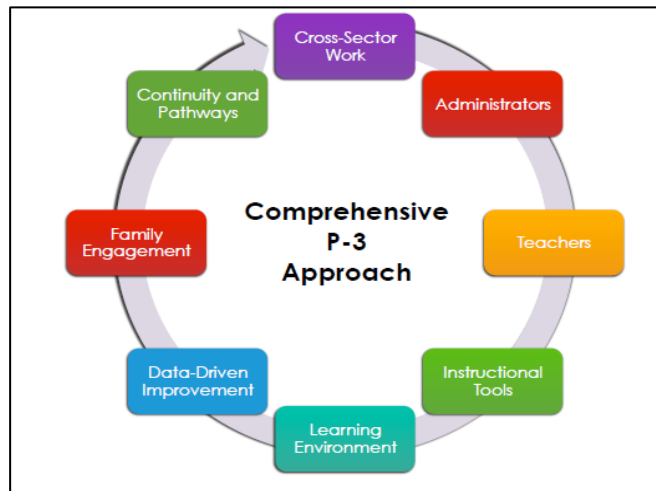
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West Chicago's Birth to 3rd Grade Reform Highlights

Below are *some* of District 33's important achievements in several areas: (1) cross-sector work, (2) Instructional tools, and (3) learning environments. As depicted in the figure to the right, these areas are integral to a comprehensive approach to birth to 3rd grade reform.¹

Cross Sector Work: Establishing a Home for Collaboration at District 33

District 33 made a commitment to cross-sector work when it invested in WeGo Together for Kids: The Department for Partnerships for Wellness, Safety and Achievement. WeGo Together implements District 33's programs related to early childhood, safety, wellness, and social and emotional development. The Director reports directly to the District 33 Superintendent and works in partnership with community-based organizations to provide a continuum of services to children and their families in West Chicago. The Director has been a key proponent of early childhood services and oversees the District's Early Learning Center, which houses District 33's Preschool for All Program. WeGo Together facilitates horizontal connections between District 33 and community-services and vertical connections to support continuity for children as they transition from early childhood programs into elementary school.



Instructional Tools: Supporting Dual Language Learners

District 33 has expanded its Dual Language instructional program, in which children become proficient in Spanish while they gain proficiency in English. This approach begins with the Early Learning Center and extends through elementary school, providing a common thread for instruction. District 33 has built capacity for delivering Dual Language instruction by hiring bilingual educators and providing comprehensive integrated professional development for early childhood and elementary school teachers. District 33's approach guides the community-based service providers' work as well. Courtney Simek from Positive Parenting DuPage shared that District 33's approach to Dual Language instruction informs her work: "One of our projects offers parenting resources and now ... we're thinking about how our next set of materials are culturally sensitive and meet the needs of our families."

Learning Environment: Investing in the Educare Model

The establishment of the Educare of West DuPage is another key step toward creating a comprehensive birth to 3rd grade continuum in District 33. Educare is a national early childhood program that requires a partnership between the local school district and philanthropy. District 33 owns the land and building that houses Educare of West DuPage, and the WeGo Together for Kids partnership was a key player in

¹ See eight reform areas displayed in the figure from, Kauerz, K. & Coffman, J. (2013). *Framework for Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating PreK-3rd Grade Approaches*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington.

bringing the center to the District. Educare is a full-year, full-day early childhood program for 150 children at risk of poor school outcomes and their families. The program serves children from birth to kindergarten entry with research-based services that build on child and family strengths. Educare's focus on continuity means that children stay in the same group with the same teachers from the time they enroll until kindergarten entry. The focus on continuity also means using similar instructional strategies and professional development as the elementary schools. For example, District 33's Dual Language program is integrated into the Educare center's approach. According to Jeannie Matula, Educare's Executive Director, "Educare serves a population with 94% native Spanish speakers. The hiring has always been three adults with two native Spanish speakers and one English speaker...the parents who are native English speakers are made aware that their children are going to be learning a great deal of Spanish." Educare is an active participant in the WeGo Together partnership.

Pivotal Opportunities For Birth to 3rd Grade Reform

WeGo Together for Kids partners noted several key events that moved them toward a well-coordinated birth to 3rd grade educational continuum. Some of these opportunities may resonate with other communities that are pursuing birth to 3rd grade reform.

Creating and Sustaining WeGo Together for Kids

District 33 began laying collaborative groundwork when school and community leaders applied for a Safe School/ Healthy Student federal grant award, which gave District 33 and their partners an opportunity to create a coordinated system of care. Beginning in 2005, WeGo Together for Kids developed strategic relationships with over 50 partners from the public and private sectors, and community-based non-profits to bring comprehensive services to the community and schools to improve child well-being. When the grant ended, District 33 invested resources to maintain WeGo Together for Kids and solidified its commitment to the partnership. This group has been instrumental in overcoming challenges that occur in collaborative work. As Marjory Lewe-Brady, Director of Partnerships for Wellness, Safety and Achievement shared, there were "territorial issues because people were used to working in silos." The partnership helped them to "negotiate and communicate through the resistance" and brought new programs, like the Educare early childhood center, to the community.

Developing District 33's Strategic Plan by Looking Critically at Students' Needs

Another pivotal opportunity occurred in 2011 when District 33 took on a strategic planning process that guided its recent birth to 3rd grade strategies. Kristina Davis, the Assistant Superintendent for Learning, shared that in the process, the District staff looked at the data and their student population and came to the agreement that "We really want children to learn both languages." With an increasingly greater percentage of their students coming from Spanish-speaking families, supporting students' educational needs with a Dual Language approach made the most sense. She added, that the old system wasn't working: "We did an internal audit and learned a lot. We saw that we all had a different curriculum. So the first thing was to bring that together district-wide and align our instruction with the Common Core. And then we developed our language allocation program." Marjory Lewe-Brady concurred that students' and families' needs drive their goals. She shared, "We have had situations when children had lost their Spanish and had mental health issues and could not communicate with their parents." Early Learning Center Principal Sandy Warner was on board, "When the whole district developed a language allocation program, we adopted it too."

Lessons Learned

In reflecting on their work, Collaboration members shared insights for other communities focused on connecting birth to 3rd grade initiatives.

Take the Time to Build Solid Relationships

The partners agreed that developing trusting relationships is foundational to collaborative work; participants attribute their successes to these relationships. One of their members shared that “Relationship-building propelled the process to start. At the beginning stage...there were territorial issues, but this felt different. It felt comfortable. And that’s what really propelled us forward.” Courtney Simek from Positive Parenting added: “It takes the time to build the relationships” that are going to carry you through the hard work of developing and implementing new child and family approaches over time.

Use Structures to Sustain Commitment

Another lesson is that collaboration should be structured and purposeful. The WeGo Together for Kids monthly service meetings provide a regular opportunity for identifying and sustaining the work of developing enriched learning environments. According to Courtney Simek the meeting “structure and frequency of the meetings helps keep the momentum. The relationships are constant and top-of-mind.” Marjory Lewe-Brady shared that with every meeting, “We have an agenda and we work with purpose.”

Say Yes: Be Willing to Innovate and Accept New Opportunities

A key feature of WeGo Together for Kids’ work is a “positivity to want to make it work and not just do the bare minimum. They have the outlook that it will go well” shared Sarah Smith, WeGo Together for Kids’ Coordinator of Partnerships. Sandy Warner added to this idea when she said “there is a family atmosphere that people have here and the encouragement to try new things and to take risks and to be a pioneer.” Tammy Charvet added, when opportunities arise, “You always say yes and great things just happen.” The structure, relationships, and commitment of the partners enables District 33 to embrace new opportunities that will support the needs of the West Chicago’s children and families.

Conclusion²

As West Chicago’s birth to 3rd grade stakeholders look to the future, they anticipate doing more to build a strong birth to 3rd grade pipeline. They are specifically interested in identifying ways to connect to the broad community of early care and education providers in West Chicago as they move to integrate professional development for early childhood and elementary school staff and expand their community-wide commitment to educating and supporting their diverse student population.

² We are grateful for the insights shared by several key members of West Chicago’s community including Becky Beilfuss, Yessenia Carillo, Tammy Charvet, Kristina Davis, Helen Figaro, Marjory Lewe-Brady, Jeannie Matula, Courtney Simek, Sarah Smith, and Sandy Warner. For more information about West Chicago’s WeGO Together for Kids, please visit <http://www.wego33.org/wegotogogether>