

-The Kittitas County Early Learning Coalition provides a direct-service program designed to address early childhood learning and parent engagement. Our Jump-start to Kindergarten program prepares children for entry into kindergarten by: recruiting families with children ages birth through five with outreach directed to underserved families from rural and low and middle income families; and providing 18 free parent child STREAM (Science, Technology, Reading, wRiting, Engineering, Art and Math) early learning events each year.

Jump-start to kindergarten:

- teaches parents how to engage their children in learning;
- affirms parents as their child's first and most influential teacher;
- supplies tool kits to continue the learning at home;
- provides developmental screening and early intervention;
- assesses learning targets and home learning activities; and
- revises activities and facilitation techniques to improve kindergarten readiness.

Understanding that parents often experience depression, anxiety, and social isolation, we built a community of support for families raising young children. When families miss an event, we reach out to them, tell them we missed them and invite them to come again. The coalition is known to parents as "the people who give books" and welcome their children to messy and wonderful educational STREAM hands-on play activities.

The coalition was established in response to the community's need for high quality early learning programs. How did we move from individuals on a continuum from not concerned about early learning to very concerned about early learning to a cohesive coalition passionate about early learning and able to provide high quality services? The path was rocky and required hard work, collaboration, and charismatic leadership.

In 2011, an agency in an adjoining county received a grant to organize an early learning coalition in our county. Every month, agency staff came to our county and led community members in a discussion of early learning. This lack of communication resulted in a lack of commitment and ownership of the coalition's mission. With out of county leadership, the group did not own the endeavor.

Despite the problems with leadership and communication, participants were able to identify obstacles to quality early learning. However, they were unable to collaborate and to develop an action plan. For example, preschool teachers complained about the lack of partnership with the school districts. The preschool teachers did not know if they were teaching children what they needed for kindergarten success. Although some elementary school teachers attended the coalition meetings, no one from district administration participated resulting in limited collaboration and no action plan.

When a professional facilitator was hired, the process improved. The group established a mission statement and identified four strategic goals that are relevant seven years later. Although we identified goals, we needed passion/commitment to achieve these goals. The coalition benefitted from a common experience with the deficits of early learning. This experience was provided by a parent.

A community health nurse invited the mother of a four year old to the coalition's meeting. The mother was fluent in Spanish and English. Her husband and father of the child spoke Spanish only. The mother knew that her child was not learning words, numbers, or colors despite her efforts. The mother sought and received an evaluation by the school district but the child was deemed not eligible for services. The district recommended that the child hear one language only. A year later, despite being exposed to Spanish only, nothing had improved. The mother then sought help from the nurse. When the nurse visited, there were no books in the home and the toys were "glitter toys," not educational toys. The nurse observed that the child was not retaining information. She contacted the district and requested re-evaluation which was refused because of district policy. There were no other community resources.

This mother's willingness to tell her story in person helped to motivate the coalition to create an on-going free program open to all early learners. At that time, the coalition was offering a yearly "fair." This opportunity to hear from a parent opened the coalition's members' minds to evaluating early learning and designing an early learning program appropriate to the needs of the families in this community. It enabled the nurse to share her observations visiting other families in their

homes and to persuade the coalition to offer monthly parent child early learning events where relationships with parents and early learners could grow. In addition, the coalition decided to provide books and home tool kits with educational toys such as math manipulatives. These resources are particularly important in our county since you cannot purchase a children's book in Spanish and the availability of educational toys is limited.

Mostly importantly, a local member of the coalition suggested to the group that local leadership was needed and offered to step us to facilitate meetings. The offer was accepted and communication and focus improved.

We had the idea for programming but when we received a large planning grant, we encountered more obstacles. The grant attracted new coalition members and again we lacked a shared vision of what early learning should look like in Kittitas County. Once again, we faced the challenge of collaborating to develop a plan. There were people who wanted to host a huge event with a hired performer that would use the majority of the funding for one event. The people providing direct services advocated for on-going, small events where the priority was on building relationships, providing developmental screening, linking families to early intervention services and teaching parents how to provide high quality early learning at home. The coalition was divided and the key committee lacked the leadership needed to achieve consensus. The future of the coalition and early learning events was in jeopardy.

The conflict was broader than the design of events. Would we devote our efforts to engaging the highest risk families? Would we reach out to members of the Hispanic community? Or would we design a program to appeal to white middle class families like our own families. We argued about whether to charge families for participating, whether to fund dinners for the coalition members or put all resources into programs.

The service providers to underserved communities advocated for families who were underserved. They believed that these children had the highest probability of entering kindergarten unprepared for success. They were wrong. Once we had monthly early learning events where parents completed an assessment, we learned that all the children needed our early learning events because all of the families shared a common approach to parenting. They did not consistently read to their children.

The funding required that we keep going, so we did. The families we visited inspired us to collaborate and to create a free program that parents could consistently access. Leaders emerged and we reached agreement on frequent events facilitated by volunteers. Conflict continued. Some members were comfortable with an informal approach to event planning and outreach while others sought a systematic approach to outreach, event planning and data collection and analysis. This conflict probably emanated from our backgrounds. Service providers often had to reach out to their clients whereas, teachers were more apt to have a captive audience.

We needed to apply for grants to support our program. The coalition's grant writers included a service provider and both people were leaders in the coalition. They articulated a program designed for our specific community and included data collection and analyses. They attempted to design a program that would appeal to grantors. The grant was awarded and the coalition was committed to a model for programs for one year. Implementing the grant required volunteer commitment because we could not hire all the staff we needed. Members persuaded people to take up the cause and provided a systematic approach to planning and implementing events.

Eventually, we hired a very talented early learning event planner, well respected by the early learning community and a strong advocate for parent and child learning/playing together. Her leadership enabled us to move forward because most people were relieved to have someone take on all the responsibilities for planning, organizing and leading events. We still needed coalition members who would volunteer at events and we needed to increase their engagement.

Coalition members encouraged more people to join and the President of the coalition took on the role of Executive Director without the title. She opened communication channels and analyzed the program using a parent completed assessment form and parent surveys. In addition, the coalition hosted parent focus groups.

Our struggles included developing an effective outreach plan. We designed a monthly event flyer that was haphazardly delivered to preschools, childcare centers and businesses. We experimented with having events on different days of the week and times of day. We tried different formats for events. We pushed to build a base of families who

consistently participated. To achieve this, we needed the entire community to value early learning opportunities for parents and children. We needed people to spread the word and we needed events to be in a place where people felt cared for and safe. We enlisted students and members of the Hispanic community to facilitate events. We invited teens from the Hispanic community who were members of a leadership club to help at an event and they brought their families. Slowly we grew. But the data analysis indicated that families did not attend consistently and we believed that consistent attendance was key to school readiness.

In our county, members of the Hispanic community are isolated from the non-Hispanic community and often not comfortable in settings outside their neighborhoods. Those neighborhoods lack physical locations for group events. Therefore, we systematically looked for ways to increase the families' comfort in coming to locations outside majority Hispanic neighborhoods. This included recruiting interpreters from the Hispanic community and providing written materials in Spanish. Our facilitators at check in and check out are the same people at each event in order to increase familiarity. These facilitators are also health care providers who are well known to families who are underserved.

We live in a community where not everyone values or there is token support for participation by Spanish speaking people who may be in this country illegally. Often people say the right thing but go on to provide all services in English. The coalition has a rigid policy that all materials are in English and Spanish, interpreters are present at events even when we typically do not need interpreters. We meet in neutral settings where people are more likely to feel safe. We know that churches are not neutral settings. In Ellensburg, we avoid schools because we offer services to the entire county including adjoining school district and if we meet in a school, people will perceive the event as open only to families living in the district. In Kittitas, we started in the community center/library and when we outgrew the facility, we moved to the school. The school is the largest community building and the center of activities in this community. And we talk about how we value everyone's participation. We promote our events through WIC which is a trusted agency where people living in poverty and Spanish speaking parents seek services. Recognizing the importance of fathers' engagement in early learning, we intentionally work to welcome fathers to our events. We have a male volunteer who consistently staffs the check in and check out table.

Our approach to early learning is both systematic and fluid. We create a friendly, family atmosphere. This year, the largest school district in the county required that their early learning coordinator staff the events in Ellensburg. The coalition asked her to review the assessment form completed by each parent, to engage the parent and offer a "tip" for early learning at home. These conversations have proved worthwhile with the coordinator checking in almost every month. Parents are developing a relationship with school staff and receiving affirmation that their role in teaching their child is highly valued. Currently, we are exploring how to motivate parents to read to their children with a "Reading Matters" campaign. We are finding that the approach "we are not asking you to do more but to add to what you are already doing" is well received by parents. For example, we encourage counting plates as you set the table, reading while your child is in the bath, and pouring two glasses of milk and comparing amounts.

Over time, members demonstrated an increased commitment to members of the Hispanic community. In addition, they showed an increase in understanding of the culture and values of the members of the Hispanic community. When attendance was low from the Hispanic community, we wondered aloud the reason and a mother from the Hispanic community told us, "you know us, we don't go out in the rain. Our kids might get sick." It has pouring that day. People who initially expressed frustration that parents did not behave in ways that they valued, that is, consistent attendance, now explain to others that the reason for lack of participation is not a lack of interest but a cultural belief. They no longer express frustration. A recent decrease in attendance by members of the Hispanic community appears related to recent political developments that remind people of the 2011 ICE raids in our community. We continue outreach to this community. We are aware that any participation by law enforcement at our parent child events will increase fear of arrest and decrease participation. A number of our event facilitators have a significant history of supporting members of the Hispanic community during times of arrests. This has fostered positive relationships with members of the Hispanic community. When volunteers

work side by side with volunteers who value participation from the Hispanic community, those volunteers adopt the commitment to the Hispanic community.

Outreach is an on-going challenge and requires consistency and a commitment to exploring new ways to engage families. Slowly, we convinced members that we needed a systematic approach to outreach. We needed one person to take responsibility to deliver event announcements on a specific date. At first, we produced posters which were not enough. We then made a monthly small handbill announcing the next month's events and gave them to parents. The handbills were colorful and seemed to be working. When our major grant ended, we looked for ways to reduce costs. We made a calendar for all the events and distributed it to parents. We made a monthly theme poster to show the public that our events were on-going with varied themes. Parents loved the calendars and did not need duplicates. They requested days off so they could attend events and did not schedule "dental appointments" on the event days.

We had struggled with inconsistent attendance. Members suggested incentive awards/bribes. It required many hours to track and did not improve attendance. The calendar helped and as parents experienced more events, attendance became a habit. We also learned that when you write 4:00-6:00, parents think that they must arrive "on time." Open 4:00-6:00 is much more effective. Having a male and female greeter who is consistent is key. Men especially appear to like seeing a male as they enter the room.

We encouraged parents to sign up for a free text messaging service to remind parents of events and we used social media to spread the word about our events. Although most people agree that every organization needs a good website, we decided not to create a website because of the high cost and the need to have someone to update the web site. We enlisted volunteers who would come every month to provide continuity, a familiar face. We designed an assessment tool and we analyzed, learned, adapted and kept our sense of humor. We celebrated everyone's contribution and capitalized on unique skills that our volunteers brought to us.

In late 2017, a parent with professional expertise volunteered to create and maintain a coalition website. We jumped at the opportunity. We had enough cash to pay the website fees, this provided an opportunity to involve a parent, and a website would advance our development efforts and improve communication with families. Although having the time to provide the information for the website is a challenge, we have now captured our history in writing and have avenues to provide more parent education. We also learned that parents wanted a website with easier access to the event calendar than Facebook provides.

Without a 501(c) 3, we had to enlist other non-profits to serve as our financial agent. It was an awkward process and sometimes, expensive. An individual asked someone for financial support. We received enough cash to fund the 501(c)3 application and we wrote by-laws. We leaned on members' connections to get free expert advice. An experienced non-profit treasurer helped us to create the infrastructure. We partnered with a local education foundation and that enabled us to get low cost insurance. We learned and we had a professional grant writer and a passionate, well-organized leader who valued everyone's participation and clear and inclusive communication. We had fun and we celebrated our growth. Instead of focusing on all the work that we needed to do and the obstacles to receiving funding, we celebrated every success, even the smallest. We described challenges as successes because it meant that we were "growing up." We remained steadfastly positive. We told the stories of parents sharing what they learned at our events and what activities they added to their family life. And our parents and children responded and inspired us. They were so appreciative.

In November of 2014, we designed and trialed a written check in/assessment form that allows us to get to know the families attending our events better. We had to figure out how to analyze the information. At first, we thought that we could hire someone to do data entry. Hiring people just to enter data did not work. They did not understand the purpose and did not know what to look for. Our Board member who had research expertise took over the task and used her qualitative and quantitative research experience to analyze the data and share insights that altered program design. We have a wealth of information about the lives of families with early learners.

Our leaders listened to ideas and kept us focused. We fought the impulse to spread ourselves "too thin." We explored our values and in 2018, we revised our mission to reflect our deeper commitment to the program we offer. For example, we

added that our mission was to provide “free” events. As major start up grants ended, we engaged in seeking individual and business donors and held small fundraising events.

Some coalition members have seen non-profit organizations die. They work intensely to keep our early learning events going, to create a sustainable coalition and program. They believe that sound programming that continues to be open to input from parents and new coalition partners is key to sustainability.

We probably will never have the means to measure outcomes, to know if a child who came to events did better in school than a child who did not come. We do know from our observations of parents and children engaging in learning that children are closer to achieving success in kindergarten. We are confident that our parent child early learning events do give children a **Jump-start to Kindergarten**.

Passion and commitment drive our members to annually host 18 free parent child early learning events in two locations. Steps to insure sustainability include building a Board of passionate and committed individuals and not just “deep pockets.” The Kittitas County Early Learning Coalition reaches out and engages partners by inviting people to our open Board meetings where everyone is invited to share ideas, information and engage in discussion. We have voting Board members, Friends of the Board and guests. We invite people to come when they can and to stay as long as they are able. We do not designate anyone as “late” or “leaving early.” We just ask that everyone is available if we need their particular expertise. Some coalition members are unable to attend meetings but are available by phone, email or appointment. A coalition member shared, “thanks for letting me know that you really needed me.”

We have several parents on the Board who attend meetings as part of their professional responsibilities. It is difficult for parents caring for children at home or working to participate in Board meetings. We hold focus groups with activities for children where parents have shared their input. A board member has met with families in a home and solicited their views on events, strengthening the coalition and fundraising. After each event, parents complete a short survey which is carefully analyzed. The feedback is shared with the event organizer and Board and suggestions are implemented.

We limit emails to the Board to once a month and provide a detailed Board meeting agenda that allows everyone to read exactly what we are doing to follow our four strategic goals. This open communication prevents us from having insiders and outsiders. The detailed agenda also protects/prevents us from dropping ideas and goals. Even if we are not able to address something that month, we list it so we do not forget to address it in the future.

And we open every board meeting with a story of how our efforts impacts families with early learners. We keep people informed, invite individuals to coffee to catch them up on the coalition activities and to seek their input. We get to know each other and match the person’s interests to our request for help. We have a community that provides volunteers for our early learning events, a community that supports us financially, and a community of families that attend our events. In this small, rural community, we greet each other in the grocery, at the market, at the park. And if you are the parent of an early learner, we greet you and comment, “I don’t think I’ve seen you at our early learning events. We’d love to have you join us.”

We invite people to volunteer at events by arriving at any time and staying as long as they are able. We have everything set up and volunteers select the particular activity that they feel comfortable facilitating. We have a simple sheet of tips for facilitators that focus on family engagement

To develop a program for training facilitators, we had a trained observer systematically record parent, child and facilitator engagement. We developed an observation tool for recording levels of engagement as a continuum from engagement to non-engagement that includes lack of interest, distraction, on-looker, doing for the child, doing with the child, engaging in parallel behaviors, etc. We captured comments and actions that engaged parents and enhance learning, such as, “It is great that you came today,” “Look at your child turning the pages! What a great job you have done teaching her to read!”

Providing specific examples of engagement enhances learning. In addition to verbalizing examples, we have used photos taken at the events to show our facilitators the concepts that we are presenting. At events, our leadership team models engagement techniques for facilitators and parents.

We established a collaborative partnership with Central Washington University. CWU students, faculty and staff and their families attend our parent child events. CWU students serve as event facilitators and receive academic and community service credit.

We partner with early learning specialists at ESD 401, Central Washington University, local school districts and the regional Investing in Children Coalition to continuously improve parent child early learning events. Community partners providing event facilitators and outreach include: Central Washington University, Community Health of Central Washington, Kittitas County Public Health Department, School Districts in Ellensburg, Kittitas and Thorp, Ellensburg and Kittitas public libraries, Head Start, WIC, 2-1-1, ESIT - Early Services for Infants and Toddlers, First Steps, and Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs. We actively participate in Investing in Children regional coalition. Our coalition is a member of the Kittitas County Chamber of Commerce. We participate in a county and regional non-profit group that strengthens our Board and fundraising efforts.

Our providers working in programs for children with special needs knew the value of developmental screening and early intervention. Therefore, we designed a program where developmental screening is available at every event and parents can talk with early intervention providers. Agencies designated to do developmental screening view their partnership with the coalition as a means to achieving their goals and therefore, provide staff to screen at Parent Child Early Learning events. These people train volunteer screeners to meet increasing demands for screening. At our Parent Child Early Learning Events, screeners employed by agencies that provide intervention services can provide parents with a smooth referral to resources. Parents leave events having made a personal connection and not just with a phone number to call. Experience has shown us that when parents are told to call for help, years go by without that call being made.

Our on-going assessment enables us to continue to adapt programming to meet the needs of the families. Information entered in our database enables us to assess changes in children's home STREAM activities and their success at achieving math and reasoning learning targets. The parents' post event surveys inform us of parents' likes and needs. The information received is incorporated into the design of Parent Child Early Learning events and the facilitator training.

We have learned that engagement requires:

- Treating parents with respect;
- Affirming parents' contributions as their child's first and most important teacher;
- Staffing events with volunteers and service providers who are consistent and dedicated to building relationships;
- Listening to and incorporating parents and coalition partners' perspectives;
- Doing what it takes to keep a high level of enthusiasm;
- Keeping your sense of humor;
- Remembering to enjoy the moment, the experience;
- Providing interpreters and materials in the participants' language;
- Sharing stories with the community; and
- Recognizing donors.

Aware of the limitations of our volunteers' time, we intentionally limit our focus to providing the high quality events. However, we keep the ideas and recruit volunteers to fill the new roles. For example, last year we staffed a booth for several week-ends at the Farmer's Market. The outreach was successful but we did not have volunteers for this year. We asked our volunteers and Board members and when no one surfaced, we agreed to recruit other volunteers as time allowed.

We are an open fluid organization that encourages any level of involvement and celebrates each volunteer's unique contribution. We are a no-fluff program. We bring everything to events including the tables, chairs and a broom. Our office is a storage unit and our cars. We are passionate about our mission of engaging parents and children in learning together.