

Learning Community Background

The Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties is a political subdivision created by the Nebraska legislature. Our mission is, 'Together with school districts and community organizations as partners, we share, demonstrate and implement more effective practices to measurably improve educational outcomes for children and families in poverty' and our vision is that all children achieve academic success without regard to social or economic circumstance.

One of the primary and most innovative features of the Learning Community legislation is the Elementary Learning Center Levy which is intended to provide innovative and demonstrative educational solutions for children in poverty, particularly in the highest areas of poverty. The levy generates approximately \$5 million per year which is allocated to the Learning Community Centers in South and North Omaha, as well as pilot programming in other areas of the city. The levy also generates an additional \$2.5 million earmarked to support the Superintendents Early Childhood Plan which is facilitated by the Buffet Early Childhood Institute.

Learning Community Center of South Omaha

In the heart of Omaha's Hispanic community, the family learning program at the Learning Community Center of South Omaha (LCCSO) is designed around the importance of a parent's role in their child's education. Latino parents learn English as it relates to supporting their children in school as well as navigating local schools, communicating with teachers, advocating for their children and setting high expectations for educational success.

The family learning program at LCCSO is based on research from the Even Start and National Center for Families Learning models, and has been tailored to meet the local needs of the South Omaha community. The program has shown strong evaluation results over the past three years and, most recently, received national recognition through the Bright Spots in Hispanic Education from the White House.

The next phase in demonstrating and sharing what works is to bring this model into a public school setting which is happening this year at Gateway elementary, one of the largest schools in Nebraska. More information about the LCCSO can be found on our website at <http://www.learningcommunityds.org/family-learning/>.

Learning Community Center of North Omaha Background

Determining how to design innovative and educational solutions for children in poverty in North Omaha was a much more difficult challenge. North Omaha not only has the vast majority of poverty, but it also has the deepest pockets of poverty in the city and state. The population is largely African American, with a strong history of generational poverty, but also encompasses many refugee populations.

After a comprehensive needs assessment of the community and research review, members of the governing entity established three guiding design principles, including a targeted geographical focus, dedication to leveraging resources from key partners and a strong commitment to supporting the adults who impact the lives of young children in poverty.

LCCNO Core Programming Components

Shortly after the design principles were determined, LCCNO members learned about the results of Educare's long term study which showed intensive coaching, family support and professional development were critical components to children's academic success. While outside opinions seemed to suggest such strong results could only be gained with the help of philanthropic dollars, members of LCCNO talked to the leadership at Educare who generously offered their intellectual property and also informed us the operational funding for this unique program were comprised solely of braided federal and state funding. Leaders from the LCCNO, Educare and the Omaha Public Schools quickly began talking about ways to demonstrate how the same research used by Educare could be used in a public school setting to create an intensive early childhood program which could ultimately be replicated throughout other districts.

Intensive Early Childhood in a Public School setting (supporting existing teaching teams)

The eight intensive early childhood classrooms at Kellom and Conestoga elementary schools are designed to include the key features of the Educare model, including teaching teams (early childhood and resource teachers, paraprofessionals and family support workers), an inclusive model, and up to 15 days of additional professional development for the entire team. The teaching teams are supported by two staff who provide family support, including crisis management when needed. In order to provide a continuity of care, the before and after school programs are led by the same paraprofessionals who are in the classrooms, and all of the families are eligible to participate in the Parent University, a program tailored to meet their needs.

Parent University (supporting parents and families)

Listening closely to the families of children in the Early Childhood program, we heard consistently how much each parent wanted to engage in their child's education. When asked what we could do to support that engagement, four themes emerged, from which we researched and then designed the Parent University:

1. *Parenting:* Parents learn effective ways to parent their child(ren) and ways to support child development and learning through classes and individualized home visits; both designed to strengthen the parent-child bond and interactions.
2. *Life Skills and Wellness:* Understanding families need stability in order to support their children's education, Parent University partners with organizations to provide family self-sufficiency such as adult basic literacy, ESL classes, employment skills, etc.

3. *School Success:* In order to become full partners in their child's education, parents have access to classes and workshops which emphasize the importance of their roles, responsibilities, and engagement opportunities.
4. *Leadership:* Classes are available to empower parents to take on more active roles in their child's school and in their community.

In addition to group classes and individual support, Parent University partners with organizations to provide free and immediate access to mental and behavioral health services as well as crisis support. Families also have access to their own library, and we purchase materials based on their needs.

Childcare Director Training (supporting directors and staff)

Knowing most babies and toddlers with a working parent spend three-quarters of their waking hours in childcare, LCCNO members realized coaching childcare providers to support early learning is a powerful way to help children. Many of the childcare providers in North Omaha are in poverty themselves and do not have high school diplomas. The staff in these centers want to help kids do better in elementary school, but training is not always affordable. Working with Early Childhood Services, we provide high quality training to directors using the model of "My Teaching Partner." What we quickly learned, is that the staff turnover was nearly 70% so in order to affect change, it was important to work with the childcare director of the center. The biggest challenge in working with the childcare directors seems to be the time commitment, as many are responsible for wearing multiple hats. The first cohort of directors completed a year's worth of training, and we'll know more when we receive our evaluation results.

Clinical Site (supporting future teachers)

Hearing all too often that urban classrooms challenge and often overwhelm new teachers, we began talking to Metropolitan Community College and Educare about how we might work together to better prepare college students to teach in high poverty, early childhood and pre-school classrooms. We borrowed the concept from the medical residencies of successful teaching hospitals nationwide to provide a clinical experience for soon to be teachers. With guidance from experienced faculty, college students work directly with teaching teams at Educare. The Educare classroom at LCCNO is linked to the Metropolitan Community College classroom via robotic cameras and audio, giving students a unique opportunity to learn while getting real time feedback from their instructors and classmates.

LCCNO Evaluation

As with all of our programs, we work with UNMC Munroe Meyer for a third party evaluation. Using a continuous improvement model, our evaluators provide us with key feedback which we then use to change or improve the program along the way. The evaluation component has been critical to our parents' success at the South Center and we're anxious to use the results the same way at the North Center.