Title: **Building Opportunities for Teacher Voice within a Collective Impact Initiative: How Partnership Fostered Accessible Professional Learning**

Authors: Josephine Appleby, Rene Dillard

The theme and date of issue for which the manuscript is being submitted: April 2021: Early learning

Authors’ Contact Information:

Josephine Appleby, 843-696-2280, josephine.appleby@lipscomb.edu

Rene Dillard, 903-399-2005, rene.dillard@unitedwaygn.org

Authors’ current professional position:

Josephine Appleby, Pre-K Professional Learning Program Director, Ayers Institute, Lipscomb University College of Education

Rene Dillard, Manager, Early Literacy, United Way of Greater Nashville

Word Count: 1464

*We would like to submit the resource hub for our professional learning resources:* [*https://edutoolbox.org/earlylearning*](https://edutoolbox.org/earlylearning)

Approximately one third of Tennessee students read on grade level.  In the state’s capital city of Nashville, three out of four third graders are not reading on grade level. This is systemic, historical, and just one indication of a larger issue of inequity within the city. Nashville and its children are in crisis, and the importance of developing early reading skills and building foundations of literacy with children from birth cannot be overstated . In response to this critical need, Nashville’s Blueprint for Early Childhood Success was developed to identify key levers and align city resources to achieve strong results. Over 200 community leaders, national experts, and researchers spent over six months developing the 6 pillars of the Blueprint. They are:

1. Strengthen birth-age three supports,
2. Improve quality and access to pre-k
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 officially launched in 2018 with the broad goal of doubling the number of third-graders reading on grade level by 2025. Since then, it has transitioned through different agencies before finally landing with United Way of Greater Nashville (UWGN). UWGN provides backbone support, manages and 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. This is a city-wide initiative, and we are dedicated to drawing on local talent, expertise, and opportunities for collaboration.

An integral part of improving quality and access to pre-k has been wrapping our arms around Nashville early childhood educators, and ensuring that they are all well equipped to onboard students to literacy. Early childhood educators in Nashville serve in an array of site-types, including the local school district, Head Start, home-based, community-based and private schools. Each of these sites conducts its own professional development and has varying levels of resources and capacity. In addition, Metro Nashville Public schools serve only a fraction of four-year-olds in the city. We wanted to ensure that all students had equal opportunity to enter Kindergarten with the requisite foundational literacy skills. In late 2019 the Blueprint for Early Childhood Success convened a workgroup of representatives from over twenty community organizations to map out professional development opportunities across the city, identify gaps and needs of students, and provide free and publicly available PD to educators regardless of school site. They call themselves the Staffing and Professional Development (Staffing and PD) workgroup.

The Staffing and PD workgroup quickly identified a partnership with Lipscomb University’s Ayers Institute for Teacher Learning and Innovation to build out early childhood professional development resources on their website, edutoolbox.org. The Ayers Institute secured a Pre-K Professional Learning Program Director, Josephine Appleby, to facilitate the development of the learning platform and manage a Teacher Cadre to inform the work, produce resources, and create webinars and online model lesson videos. United Way of Greater Nashville, as the backbone agency, walked alongside them in this process and provided facilitation support, connections to funding opportunities, and the framework to track success.

 Appleby realized how valuable teacher voice would be in the success of this project. It was important to make sure that teachers were primarily involved in the creation of the professional learning resources. The first phase of the work was to connect with early childhood leaders across Nashville and conduct a needs assessment. Topics for professional learning resources were based on the data gathered from community conversations and surveys.  A Teacher Cadre was created to inform the development of professional learning. A priority for the Teacher Cadre was to be representative of diverse city-wide Pre-K providers. Members of the Teacher Cadre were selected through an application process that included a written application, classroom visit, and interview.  Eight high-quality teachers representing each of the following sites were selected to serve on the Teacher Cadre: Metro Nashville Public Schools, Headstart, United Way Read to Succeed, a private childcare provider, a university childcare provider, and a faith-based childcare provider.

The Teacher Cadre was originally created to inform the professional learning resources but quickly evolved into a community of collaboration for early childhood educators that had been missing in the Nashville area.  The Cadre met formally over 8 months, establishing relationships and developing content for the resource library. The Teacher Cadre worked together during face-to-face meetings and independently to create high-quality, standards-aligned lessons and resources. The resources then underwent extensive peer review. The Cadre provided a platform that allowed teachers to imagine and create resources while staying within the guidelines for the mission and vision of the project.

 Within the first few months of meeting, the teachers shared that the resources they were being asked to create didn’t directly align with classroom needs. This was an important turning point in the project. The Teacher Cadre decided to revamp the original list of expected resources to better represent the urgent needs of early childhood providers in Nashville. This shift in the work opened up space for teachers to become more invested and passionate about their content creation. Teachers partnered with each other to develop high-quality lesson plans and instructional resources. A community of teachers working to better their own practice as well as the quality of early childhood education in the community emerged. One member stated, “I’ve really loved collaborating with the other teachers and getting to know other pre-K teachers in the Nashville area. That’s something I’ve struggled with since I’ve moved here. Just finding my people and finding people who think similarly and so really 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”.

 The Teacher Cadre worked diligently, writing lesson plans, interactive repeated read aloud guides, family engagement materials, classroom management materials, and social-emotional learning resources.  Three teachers were also filmed for model lesson videos. These model lesson videos provide footage of authentic classroom lessons as well as teacher vignettes explaining their methods. The topics of the videos are “Writing Opportunities in a Pre-K Classroom,” “Math Opportunities in a Pre-K Classroom,” and “Child-Led Inquiry through an Emergent Curriculum in a Pre-K Classroom.”  The videos were published alongside a facilitation guide for early childhood professional learning communities. While the Teacher Cadre worked, Program Director Appleby also managed the development of an online learning module, titled, “Fostering Language Development in a Pre-K Classroom.” This online learning module was approved for six hours of professional learning credits in the state of Tennessee.

In the Spring of 2020, 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. The Teacher Cadre commitment was wrapping up and the project was preparing to launch. Although the commitment was ending, teachers expressed their desire to stay connected with each other and to expand their network to other early childhood leaders across the city. In order to promote community and launch the online learning module, Appleby created a virtual professional learning community that met weekly during the month of June to foster collaboration. 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 between teachers created in the Teacher Cadre held strong. During a time of uncertainty and learning a new way of teaching virtually, the Teacher Cadre has remained in communication with each other, meeting informally to connect, share ideas, and celebrate success in an unprecedented time.

 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. The Staffing and PD workgroup has identified next steps to continue to promote it’s professional learning partnership with Lipscomb’s Ayers Institute, and plans to build a pathway to a more formal community of practice for early childhood educators. They will continue to advertise the expertise of local educators through a variety of outlets.  The professional learning program materials are timely, relevant, and unique because they have been developed by practicing early childhood educators and address urgent needs in the Nashville community. This collective impact initiative will serve as a model for future professional learning communities across the country.