

Expanding Prevention Partnerships to Become an Early Learning Community: Two West Virginia Counties' Experiences

Efforts to improve child and family well-being have often focused on delivering programs and services to families, such as by increasing the availability of high-quality early care and education and reaching more families with home visiting services. In recent years, growing numbers of organizations and advocates who work on behalf of children have begun broadening their focus to also think about the communities in which families are raising their children, and the many ways that community conditions can either make it easier or harder for families to support their young children's health, learning, and well-being.

In 2020, two county [Partners in Prevention \(PIP\)](#) teams in West Virginia received support to expand upon their ongoing efforts to strengthen families and prevent child abuse and neglect—engaging a wider set of partners and considering how their communities could better support families with young children, beyond formal programs and services. This report tells the story of how each of these teams used tools from Early Learning Nation, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), and the National League of Cities to develop and begin implementing an Early Learning Community Action Plan.

How this Project Came About

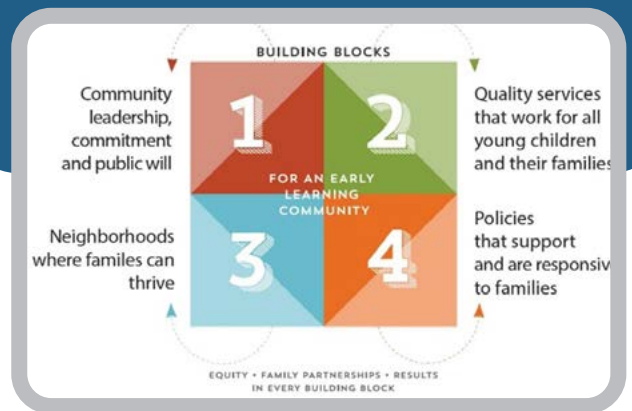
In early 2020, [TEAM for West Virginia Children \(TEAM\)](#) offered an opportunity for their existing grantees to develop and begin implementation of an action plan to become an Early Learning Community (ELC).

TEAM is a non-profit organization whose mission is to work with communities and families to promote and advance the well-being of children, making their needs and healthy development a priority. Through its Prevent Child Abuse West Virginia program, TEAM uses a combination of public and private funding to support PIP teams in 42 counties throughout the state. The PIP teams have used CSSP's [Strengthening Families](#) framework and approach to guide their efforts over the past decade, largely focused on supporting early childhood programs to better support parents by using a strengths-based approach and helping them build key protective factors.

TEAM saw the ELC process as a way to help local PIP teams extend beyond the usual early childhood and prevention stakeholders to others in the community and consider how parent and family protective factors are being supported—not just through programs and services, but in the other Building Blocks of an ELC. TEAM sought to pilot this approach with selected communities to learn whether it would be an effective way to promote broader system building at the community level.

Early Learning Nation

As part of the [Early Learning Nation](#) initiative, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) and the National League of Cities are working to help communities across the country become “Early Learning Communities.” An ELC is a place where families have all the opportunities and supports they need to nurture and promote their children's early learning and healthy development. CSSP and NLC worked with community representatives to define four Building Blocks of an Early Learning Community (shown below) and developed a set of tools for communities to use to assess their current efforts and work toward becoming Early Learning Communities. This includes the [Early Learning Community Action Guide](#) and a [Progress Rating Tool](#) which is available as a free, interactive, digital tool that guides stakeholders to identify ways that their community could better support young children's early learning and healthy development. Built around the four Building Blocks of an ELC, the tools call stakeholders to consider how their efforts can advance equity, family partnerships, and a focus on results.



An Opportunity to Expand on Existing Work

The opportunity for these communities to engage in becoming an ELC was designed to advance an understanding that it takes the whole community to support young children's early learning and development. PIP teams were invited to apply to join an ELC cohort that would build on their Strengthening Families work to address community needs with a broader set of partners—putting in place community-wide strategies that support all parents' protective factors and improve outcomes for children and families. Specifically, county PIP teams were tasked with identifying gaps in supports for families and developing an action plan to fill those gaps using the ELC Action Guide and Progress Rating Tool. TEAM provided a modified template for the ELC Action Plan which was organized by the Building Blocks of an ELC but also asked the grantees to identify how and in what ways their planned actions would promote protective factors.

PIP teams from the two selected communities, Randolph County and Cabell County, each received a \$3,000 grant to support activities to develop the action plan, and an additional \$500 to support implementation activities. To support the communities' efforts, TEAM brought the communities together for monthly cohort calls, which focused on each of the four Building Blocks of an ELC and the action planning process. County teams also received individual coaching calls and email exchanges with experts from TEAM and CSSP. A representative from TEAM also participated in one stakeholder meeting for each community to introduce the opportunity and share the statewide perspective on early childhood system-building.

In selecting a very rural and a more urban (by West Virginia standards) community for the initiative, TEAM sought to identify the support needs and technical assistance required for different types of communities in the state. TEAM was also interested in identifying how the process could assist communities in their planning to meet the needs of children and families during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, which grew exponentially as the initiative was launching.

CENTER FOR THE STUDY
OF SOCIAL POLICY'S
strengthening families
A PROTECTIVE FACTORS FRAMEWORK

Strengthening Families™ is a research-informed approach to increase family strengths, enhance child development, and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. It is based on engaging families, programs, and communities in building five protective factors:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Social and emotional competence of children

Using the Strengthening Families framework, more than 30 states are shifting policy and practice to help programs working with children and families focus building families' protective factors. States apply the Strengthening Families approach in early childhood, child welfare, child abuse prevention, and other child and family-serving systems.

Increasingly, the Strengthening Families approach is being applied at a community level, exploring how well a community supports parents' protective factors—not just within child and family serving programs and systems, but in the neighborhoods where families live, informal community institutions, and the policies that shape families' opportunities and circumstances.

Cabell County

Cabell County includes the city of Huntington and has about 91,000 residents, alongside the Ohio River at the western edge of West Virginia. Cabell County has a long history of implementing Strengthening Families, beginning as a pilot for an innovation grant from TEAM and the West Virginia Children's Trust Fund between 2007-2010 to integrate Strengthening Families into early care and education centers in the county. Work has continued along with other initiatives to promote high quality programs. Debra Harris Bowyer, Coordinator of Cabell County Family Resource Network, Inc., took the lead in identifying the ELC initiative as an opportunity to take a broad look at everything happening in the county, identify gaps, and develop next steps for a comprehensive approach to promoting protective factors and supporting optimal child development.



Downtown Huntington, WV
Photo by Brett Fuller

Partners and Approach to the Work

A team of approximately 25 partners participated in the ELC process, including TEAM for West Virginia Children's Mountain State Healthy Families (an in-home family education program using the Healthy Families America model), Playmates Child Development Center of Ceredo, the United Way of the River Cities, Mission West Virginia, Aetna, Unite West Virginia, Valley Health Systems, Unicare, the West Virginia University Center for Excellence in Disabilities, Information and Referral, Contact, Head Start, Family Resource Center, and First Choice. These partners were already connected through Partners in Prevention and Strengthening Families implementation in the county.

The ELC team held three discussion groups with partners to work through the Building Blocks. They used the [Parent Discussion Guide](#) developed by CSSP, rather than the formal Progress Rating Tool, to examine aspects of the county's early learning system in a more conversational way. The team leads did ask their partners to complete the online [ELC Progress Rating Tool](#) to supplement what was discussed in the meetings, but they only received eight responses on that platform. Results of the rich discussions about each Building Block are posted on the Cabell County [FRN website](#).

“When it comes to early childhood services and resource sharing, the work is never done. You can always keep building upon the foundation of successful work and needs assessments that have been done to inform your next steps.”

**–Debra Harris Bowyer,
Coordinator, Cabell County
Family Resource Network, Inc.**

Parent Engagement in the Process

The ELC team also recruited a group of parents to participate in a series of discussions, also using the Parent Discussion Guide, to talk about the strengths of the community and the changes they would like to see related to each of the Building Blocks of an ELC. Parents were recruited from the Healthy Families program and the Playmates Child Development Center of Ceredo. They were offered a \$25 stipend to attend each of the four focus group sessions.

Action Plan and Next Steps

Discussions with parents and partners identified several action areas, including some ideas that were identified in multiple building block discussions. The Cabell County team is in the process of finalizing its ELC Action Plan built around those action steps, which were primarily centered around Building Blocks 1 (Community leadership and commitment) and 2 (Quality services that work for all families).

One strategy identified for action from the parent focus group is the use of media to share information about early learning. This aligns with the Strengthening Families protective factor of knowledge of parenting and child development. For example, the team is considering using social media and public service announcements to spread the word about early learning opportunities in the community. The team will use the \$500 implementation stipend from TEAM for West Virginia Children to get out messages about early childhood tips and community resources. Another strategy is to assess how families are acquiring and viewing information about early learning, child development, and community resources, which relates to concrete support in times of need. In support of this strategy, Cabell County has received a mini-grant from the Pallottine Foundation of Huntington to conduct strategic public relations planning, informed by parents and community agency representatives.

Another aspect of the Cabell County ELC action plan is to support the United Way's Super Kid Saturday event, which takes place annually on the Saturday before the Superbowl. Typically, 400-500 people attend this event. Due to COVID-19, the event will be held virtually this year. Early learning centers will share special activity boxes with families that engage young children in early learning.

The Cabell County team identified creating a mobile-friendly family resource directory as a long-term goal. The Family Resource Network currently maintains the "Cabell County Quick Guide" that is downloadable from its website, but it will take additional work and resources to convert the PDF format into a searchable website accessible by smartphone.

The Partners in Prevention Team will continue to oversee implementation of the action plan as part of its course of business in the coming year.



Randolph County



Randolph County, WV
Photo by Dorothy Romanek

Randolph County is a geographically large, rural county with approximately 3,000 residents living in 1,000 square miles, about 200 miles east of Cabell County and close to West Virginia's border with Virginia. Randolph County applied for the ELC grant opportunity because they saw it as an opportunity to identify gaps in their early childhood system. The county PIP Team took the lead in applying and implementing the effort, with leadership from Margot Evick, Executive Director of the Randolph-Tucker Children's Advocacy Center. Other members of the PIP Team include the Randolph County Family Resources Network, Centers Against Violence, Youth Health Services, and West Virginia Healthy Families. Everything that the PIP team does is influenced by its 10 years of experience using the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework, and they welcomed the opportunity to expand that work to a broader community level.

Partners and Approach to the Work

The PIP Team members identified several community leaders as key partners for the initiative and used the relationships they had to leverage contacts. They reached out to the County Commissioner's Office, representatives at City Hall, school personnel, the United Way, a Family Court Judge, and other community members. During the recruitment process, some partners readily signed up while others took some cultivation. Many of the new partners are not typically considered when communities talk about early childhood. However, they do have significant influence on the conditions in which families are raising their children. Engaging such partners is an important part of becoming an ELC.

Through the outreach process, the PIP Team learned about a local Brain Development Task Force stemming from a Chamber of Commerce effort to build a vibrant community. The newly developed Task Force seeks to build a foundation for future learning, health, and life success. Volunteers on the Task Force include representatives from the Board of Education, the City Council, the medical community, and higher education. It focuses on hospital-based and community-based solutions—but had not yet connected to the PIP Team. The Task Force became an important partner in the development of the ELC Action Plan.

The ELC planning process was implemented through an engagement process that used a combination of scheduled calls with partners, email exchanges, and outreach volunteering at partners' events. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most of this outreach was conducted via virtual calls and some outdoor events. Community partners were invited to regularly scheduled PIP meetings and joined the conversation about the initiative. Partners were asked to complete the ELC Progress Rating Tool and participate in action planning conversations.

“The ELC process helped us to identify and expand our partnerships to reach beyond direct service providers of young children and families, including local government, health care, and business partners.”

**–Margot Evick, Executive Director,
Randolph-Tucker Children's
Advocacy Center**

Parent Engagement in the Process

The PIP Team also directly engaged parents in the community. They identified several parents who were connected to programs participating in the PIP Team, and hosted an outdoor dinner in which parents were invited to discuss the four ELC Building Blocks and what they would like to see happen in Randolph County. The PIP Team used the Parent Discussion Guide as a road map for the discussion with parents.

The PIP Team also used social media to solicit parent responses to the ELC Progress Rating Tool. They posted an invitation on Facebook and offered a gift card for completion of the survey. They received 128 surveys in response, many more than they expected. To put that number into perspective, it represents a response from one in 24 residents in the county.

Action Plan and Next Steps

Based on discussions with partners, the parent discussion group, and the responses to the digital Progress Rating Tool, the ELC team developed an ELC Action Plan incorporating strategies that align most with Building Blocks 1 (Community leadership and public will) and 3 (Neighborhoods where families can thrive).

A main priority of the plan is to disseminate information to the community about resources and activities for families with young children. This priority aligns well with the protective factors, including social connections and knowledge of parenting and child development. The planning team recognized that there are many things going on in the community, but not everyone knows about them. There are several smaller groups in the county working to support families and children's development, so the challenge is to reach out and collaborate with them to get the word out. A part of this work is building commitment from more than just the key players on the PIP team.

To improve awareness of local programs and resources—and touch on the protective factor of concrete support in times of need—the plan includes updating a Family Resource Guide with information about supports and services in the community and distributing it in waiting rooms at local agencies and physician's offices, and in grocery stores and convenience stores. It also includes seeking a newspaper series in the local newspaper, the Inter-Mountain, and educational video posts. As a first step, the ELC planning team is starting to work on developing a social media outlet, such as a Facebook page that families can follow with postings about resources, activities, and educational and informational material. They will use the \$500 implementation stipend from TEAM for West Virginia Children to put up billboards as part of this awareness-building work.

To increase activities and access to activities for families with young children, the plan seeks to create a protective factors focused parent social group and develop a list of free things for families to do in the community. It also includes coordination of guided hikes and backpacking trips to various free local spots like swimming holes, etc. The plan also seeks to coordinate with the Brain Development Task Force, which is using sidewalk decals to create sensory paths that families can follow to encourage active learning and providing newborn hospital packets to families.

The United Way connected the ELC Planning Team to the Randolph County tourism agency, which produces a local “Lizard Map” that identifies area hiking trails and swimming holes. The maps are available for \$15 each, and the ELC Planning Team is looking at ways to seek donations or to purchase the maps for distribution to families. In addition, the plan includes reaching out to City Hall to adopt a proclamation by the Mayor and County Commissioners supporting family-friendly policies such as flexible working hours and parental leave policies that would include biological parents, grandparents, foster parents, and others in the parental role. The team plans to develop a process by which employees can nominate their place of work for recognition as a family-friendly business.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Both counties faced some challenges as they went through the ELC planning process. These included a lack of time to devote to the process especially amid the interruption of normal ways of doing business during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Randolph County, change in leadership at one of the PIP partner organizations was also a challenge. Coordination of all the players is an ongoing struggle.

Some lessons learned include:

- **Build on previous assessments and community plans.** Some stakeholders were concerned that the ELC planning process would be duplicative of previous work, but leaders helped them to see that they could incorporate and expand upon existing plans and needs assessments to continue improving how the community supports early learning. The ELC planning process takes a broad view of the community and can identify new strategies to complement previous work.
- **Dedicate time** out of the workday to focus on the ELC planning process. It takes time to reach out to stakeholders and cultivate relationships.
- **Take it slow** over Zoom meetings and use breakout rooms to encourage sharing and build relationships. Breaking the planning team into smaller groups enabled participants to get to know one another and feel comfortable and able to share concerns and ideas.
- **Have a strong core team.** The PIP team in each of these communities was a well-established, strong partnership. Members were able to share the burden of reaching out to new stakeholders and leveraged existing relationships to welcome new partners to the table.
- **Offer incentives** for gathering public input. Cabell County offered \$25 stipends to parents who participated in an ELC focus group. The Randolph County ELC planning team offered gift cards to community members who completed the digital Progress Rating Tool. As a result, the Randolph County team received many more responses than anticipated. They also hosted a conversation with parents in the community and offered dinner, which encouraged participation.
- **Be flexible** in approaches to gathering feedback. Randolph County used the online Progress Rating Tool with its partners to collect their input on the Building Blocks. Cabell County had less success with the online tool and instead used the Parent Discussion Guide as a framework for holding conversations among stakeholders. Both strategies were effective in collecting input, based on the situation in each community.
- **Adapt the process** for rural areas. Randolph County is a more rural area, so the concept of neighborhoods as described in the ELC materials had to be adapted. The ELC planning team defined neighborhoods by school attendance area. Continuing to drill down into smaller jurisdictions will be part of the ongoing implementation process.
- **Participate in a cohort.** The communities benefited from checking in with each other as they went through the ELC planning process, especially in sharing strategies to overcome challenges that emerged along the way.

Conclusion

Each of these communities were able to broaden existing partnerships and to expand upon their ongoing implementation of Strengthening Families to ultimately consider how well their communities were supporting young children’s early learning and development. Despite the challenges of carrying out this work during the COVID-19 pandemic, both communities successfully developed ELC Action Plans that address needs in their communities, aligning with both the Building Blocks of an ELC and the Strengthening Families Protective Factors.

In addition to sparking new and important work in each of these communities, this pilot project showed that the ELC planning process is an effective way to promote system-building at the community-level in both urban and rural areas—and that partners currently implementing Strengthening Families can use this process to broaden the focus of their work and engage new partners in their efforts to improve outcomes for children and families.

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