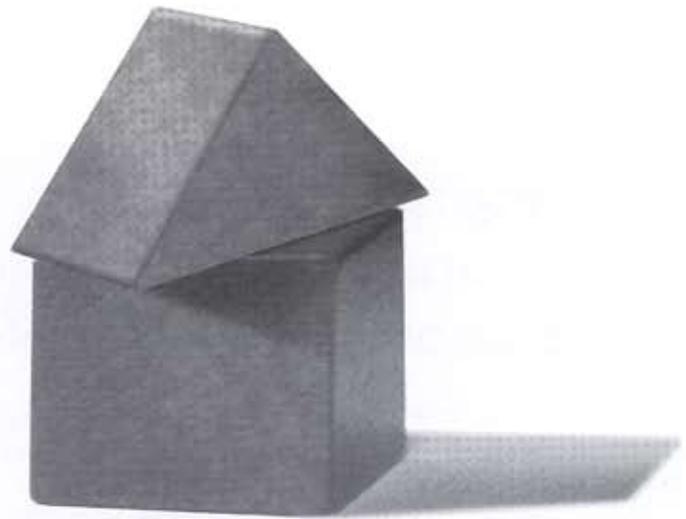




by  
Ruth Anne Landsverk



# Has a Cooperative Attitude

## Wisconsin Communities Embrace the Community Approach To Serving 4-Year-Olds

Three years ago, the La Crosse School District quietly launched a new, innovative plan to offer all 4-year-olds in the community access to quality preschool education. Much like the proverbial pebble in the pond, the influence of La Crosse's "Community Collaboration for Four-Year-Olds" Initiative continues to ripple and be felt statewide. At least seven Wisconsin communities have implemented or are planning to implement similar efforts of their own.

A statewide coalition, Wisconsin Forces for Four-Year-Olds, has formed to promote what it calls "the community approach" to 4-year-old kindergarten. Over one-third of Wisconsin's 426 school districts presently offer some type of kindergarten for 4-year-olds, and the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) estimates that an additional one-third of Wisconsin districts are presently considering starting education programs for 4-year-olds.

Wisconsin is one of only a few states with the foresight to build 4-year-old kindergarten into the state school aid formula.

Early childhood advocates involved

with the coalition hope that districts with existing programs or those contemplating new programs will give serious consideration to embracing the community approach, which they regard as the more difficult, yet a markedly more effective way to provide universal access of 4-year-olds to quality preschool opportunities.

"The issue is, can school districts alone serve all of the children in a community and give them all a chance to start their education at the same level?" asked Donna Sorensen, principal of Wileman Elementary in the Delavan-Darien School District. "If not, then the community approach is likely to be much more successful from a community, family and child point of view because it looks at everyone's needs," said Sorensen, who represents the Association of Wisconsin School Administrators in the coalition.

State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster is also encouraging Wisconsin school boards to use the community approach to implement 4-year-old kindergarten. "We know clearly that quality early education opportunities have profound lifelong benefits for children, as well as for the communities

**"... Although universal 4-year-old kindergarten will look and feel different in each community, there is one certainty: the goal of helping every child achieve a good start cannot be accomplished by schools alone."**

**- Elizabeth Burmaster**

## Getting started on the community approach: Who should be at the table?

Following is a list of key stakeholders to who should be invited to participate in community efforts to serving 4-year-olds. Begin by creating a mission or vision to focus the groups initial discussions on the well-being of children and families:

### Include:

- school board, administrators and principals
- child care providers – group and family
- private preschools
- Head Start
- parents
- teachers
- parochial/private schools
- child care resource and referral agencies
- family resource centers and support agencies
- county health organizations
- county human services
- transportation providers (public and private)
- groups that offer assistance and networking to different cultures in the community, i.e. Hmong Associations
- businesses
- media representatives

in which they live. We also know that not all families are able to provide such opportunities for their children. Although universal 4-year-old kindergarten will look and feel different in each community, there is one certainty: the goal of helping every child achieve a good start cannot be accomplished by schools alone," she said.

Not everyone has greeted the idea of 4-year-old kindergarten with open arms. Among the most vocal critics of 4-year-old kindergarten are Wisconsin child care providers.

Child care administrators maintain that the results can be financially disastrous for child care providers in communities where school districts have started public school 4-year-old kindergarten in a non-collaborative manner.

The loss of 4-year-olds added to the already tenuous financial structure of child care may force some child care centers to close their doors, said Mary Madsen of the Wisconsin Child Care Administrators Association. She explained that when child care centers close, it jeopardizes the availability and quality of child care for children aged birth through three in a community, providing working parents with fewer options.

Child care providers have generally used 4 and 5-year-olds to offset the cost of providing infant care, which requires one caretaker for every four infants. The state requires only one teacher for every 13 4 to 5-year-olds in child care centers.

Although two state child care associations are represented on the Wisconsin

Forces for Fours steering committee, the associations are reserved in their support for the community approach to 4-year-old kindergarten.

"Right now, we don't have enough information to judge whether or not it's working," Madsen said of the community approach. Some collaborations to serve 4-year-olds fall apart while other child care providers fall victim to what Madsen called "the pick-and-choose problem." Child care providers chosen by the school district to participate in 4-year-old kindergarten survive, while those businesses left out fail.

Cindy Ericksen, early childhood community liaison for the La Crosse School District, said no child care centers participating in La Crosse's collaboration have closed as a result of the program since it began three years ago. In fact, administrators at some centers cite increased enrollment because they offer 4-year-old kindergarten programs, she said. The additional funds have enabled other centers to make physical improvements to their buildings, Ericksen added.

The La Crosse School District contracts for services with child care centers based on the number of children served. The number of sites at which La Crosse children attend 4-year-old kindergarten—five child care centers, one private preschool, and nine public school sites—has remained stable, and classrooms have become filled, Ericksen said. Next year, 4-year-olds may be served at one or two additional non-public school sites. The district also offers at-home educational support such as resources and workshops to parents who choose to stay home with their 4-year-olds.

In La Crosse, applications for 4-year-old kindergarten sites are mailed to child care centers and preschools nine months before the start of the next school year. Potential sites undergo an interview, licensing check, compliance review and walk-through inspection. Collaborative team members then come to a consensus on which new sites will receive services, based on the best fit with children's and

families' needs.

Madsen said her advice to child care providers in communities considering starting 4-year-old programs is to "be strong advocates for child care and get in there right from the start." Schools and child care providers "all have to sit down together to hear what our fears and dreams are. If we can get through the initial fear and talk about what is best for children and how to go about doing that, that's the key."

Jim Leonhart, a former school principal and a private education consultant working with the coalition, agrees. "Child care actually can be a friend of the school," he said. The mutual goals of schools and child care complement each other, he added, especially in light of what science says about the critical nature of quality early childhood experiences.

"Why wouldn't every school invite child care teachers to sit down with kindergarten teachers for in-service sessions and to review the curriculum? These things don't require a capital investment, but what a valuable bridge that would be for young children," Leonhart said.

The community approach is distinctly different from the largely district-driven programs many districts already have in place. "It's the best way because it's the only way that puts the needs of children and families first," said DPI Early Childhood Consultant Jill Haglund.

Haglund administers a grant from the Trust for Early Education, a national foundation, to spread the community approach statewide. She also facilitates the coalition efforts. Even when preschool, child care and family services exist in a community, she said, they may be fragmented, resulting in many daily transitions for children, varying quality and limited access.

Research shows that children left out of early learning opportunities often, even at the tender age of 5, start school behind their peers and are more likely to score lower on math and reading tests throughout their school careers, be

## Four-Year-Old Kindergarten Four Ways

Wisconsin communities conducting universally-accessible early childhood programs for 4-year-olds offer parents variations on the following four approaches. Partnerships with parents are an important component of each approach.

### 1. **Public School Site with School District Teacher**

Four-year-old children attend a two- and one-half hour program for four or five days a week in a school district building. The program is taught by a kindergarten teacher employed by the school district. Some districts offer additional child care or Head Start services for children at the school site. In other districts, the child goes to a community site for child care or goes home.

### 2. **Community Site with School District Teacher**

Four-year-old children receive education services in the child care center, Head Start facility or private preschool building. A school district teacher comes to the facility to conduct a two- and one-half hour program four or five days a week. Families may choose to have the child participate in additional child care at the site, and school district 4-year-old kindergarten funds support the program at its location.

### 3. **Community Site with a Licensed Pre-K Teacher**

Four-year-old children attend program in the child care, Head Start or private preschool setting for two- and one-half hours four or five days a week. The program is taught by a licensed, 4-year-old kindergarten teacher employed by the community site. Families may choose to have children remain at the setting and attend the program for the rest of the day. The school district contracts with the community site based on the number of children enrolled.

### 4. **At-Home Educational Support**

When the child does not attend a school district or community-site program, parents can choose to receive curriculum-related activities at home that support positive child development. Materials can be provided by the collaborative planning group or by another agency that serves families. Parents may also be informed of and invited to community programs sponsored by the collaborative, including family learning nights, parenting workshops and support groups.

retained or placed in special education, and drop out of high school, she said.

The community approach brings together a broad range of early childhood

stakeholders in the community—school district administrators, teachers, child care administrators, parents, family service providers and others—to offer

## How is 4-Year-Old Kindergarten Funded?

To receive 0.5 in membership aide, a district must operate a program a minimum of 437 hours per year (175 days, 2 1/2 hours per day). Out of that total, 87.5 hours (20 percent), can be used for outreach activities for the school staff to link to the child's primary caregivers.

To receive 0.6 in membership aide, a district must annually provide at least 87.5 hours of outreach activities in addition to the 437 hours of center based programming.

In the community approach, districts often blend state funds with Head Start, Title 1 and special education funds, as well as funds from local grants, child care subsidies, and parent fees for services delivered outside of the kindergarten program to offer universal access to 4-year-old kindergarten.

every 4-year-old preschool opportunities, a goal which most districts could not accomplish without using space, resources or staff from other sources in the community.

The community approach is "a true public-private partnership" in which "resources, power, information, and authority" are shared, according to a January 2003 report examining the experiences of seven Wisconsin communities implementing the community approach.

Report authors Anne Rodgers-Rhyme and Arlene Wright conducted focus groups with school and early childhood leaders in Montello, La Crosse, Wausau, Milwaukee, Portage, Madison and Eau Claire. Based on comments from focus group participants, they conclude that communities adopting a blended, public-private approach to serving 4-year-olds realize many benefits, including

- combining and achieving maximum use of existing federal and state funds;
- allowing affordable, quality education for all children, including those staying at home, regardless of disability, family income, or other criteria;
- allowing many children, especially those in child care, to stay in one setting;

- improving the quality of care and learning services for children, for example, reducing the child/teacher ratio, improving the environment and facilities, and increasing the number of teachers with degrees; and
- stabilizing the early childhood workforce through higher teacher salaries and better work environments.

Children with disabilities and those from low-income homes especially benefited from the community approach, according to the report, because they are not "labeled" or served separately. Research shows that these children do better academically when they are integrated into regular classrooms and interact with peers. Some Head Start, Title I and special education programs serve children based on economic status or disability.

The community approach is a "third way," said Montello's Cathy Arentsen, a Head Start director. "It's not compromise, which implies that people are willing to settle for a lower goal. But it's coming together, having lots of dialogue, and blending ideas, programs, and resources. You emerge looking different, better, with new ways of accomplishing your goals that take the best qualities of

each program and rise to the highest level."

Some communities use the community approach to launch discussions about serving 4-year-olds. Eau Claire, for example, began by sponsoring two community forums designed to elicit questions and concerns from parents, teachers, and child care providers right from the start.

Others find the community approach a natural outgrowth of what has already been happening. Montello, in its second year of implementing collaborative 4-year-old kindergarten, began its journey four years ago when Arentsen met with the then-district administrator and a Cooperate Educational Service Agency (CESA) 5 staff member to resolve long, daily bus routes for Head Start and public school children. "Eighteen months later, we realized we might be onto something. We stopped and decided this had to be a community conversation," Arentsen recalled.

A new, larger committee studied the issue for eight months before proposing a plan for universal 4-year-old kindergarten, complete with early childhood special education services for children and their families. The plan, which attempted to

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delete or minimize transitions between home, child care and school for youngsters, was approved by the Montello School Board and the Head Start Policy Council. "The collaborative effort is more time-consuming and requires more dialogue, but the quality of the resulting programs for kids, parents and staff is definitely worth it," Arentsen said.

While some communities can go from conceptualizing to opening 4-year-old kindergarten in two years or fewer, true collaboration can take longer, said Jim McCoy, an early childhood consultant working with some of the communities.

"The things we've learned from La Crosse are, you have to do something, start somewhere, and you will make many mistakes." The concept of a "model" does not apply here, McCoy maintained, because part of the challenge—and the fun—of collaborating in a community approach is finding your own way, not copying what someone else has done.

"There is no one-size-fits-all, and there are no shortcuts. That violates the principle of collaborating, which is, you need to work together on whatever you need to do," he said.

The community approach is "all about building relationships and trust," said Helene Stebbins, former grant coordinator for the Trust for Early Education. The personal interactions among participants lay the groundwork for the most effective efforts to succeed, Stebbins said. "Collaboration works where smart people are working hard and working together," she said.

"Trust-building comes with discussion, time, and a sincere effort to listen to everyone's concerns and ideas," Gerald Kember, associate superintendent for the La Crosse School District, concurred.

Kember, who spent nine months facilitating the formation of La Crosse's plan, said the time he spent making phone calls, attending meetings, and identifying early childhood leaders in the community was well worth the outcome. The diversity of participants created a wide

## Resources and Contacts

### DPI Kindergarten Web site:

<http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dltc/bbfcsp/eckindhm.html>. This site includes the DPI Policy Bulletin on 4-year-old kindergarten and information about 4 and 5-year-old kindergarten. Also find the following publications: *Community Approaches to Serving Four-Year-Old Children in Wisconsin: Lessons Learned from Wisconsin Communities*, January 2003; and *Public Awareness Packet: Creating a Community Approach to Serving Four-Year-Old Children in Wisconsin*, February 2003.

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base of community support for trying new solutions and redirected 4-year-old preschool from being a school-driven to a community-driven effort, he said.

Figuring out where 4-year-olds will learn, who will teach them, how they will get there, what space and resources will be shared, and how the plan will be funded is no easy task. It is a task that continually asks participants to be flexible, persistent and open to new ideas, collaborators agreed.

Whether a community's collaborative effort is three months or three years old, "new issues will continue to surface," Kember predicted. ▀

Landsverk is the family-school-community partnership coordinator for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). She also helped develop public awareness materials to promote the community approach to serving 4-year-old children in Wisconsin, funded by the Trust for Early Education.



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