

Sandbox Synergy:



La Crosse Launches Innovative Preschool Partnership

Public school choice has taken on a double meaning in the La Crosse area. Not only can parents here, as elsewhere in Wisconsin, enroll their children in schools outside their residential boundaries. Come next fall, some of the district's 4-year-olds will attend public school in a child care or community-based center, possibly even a church building.

If that idea sounds strange, it is in part because it's rarely been tried. Yet whenever public school districts do opt for more flexibility in the delivery of services, they benefit themselves, their communities and, most importantly, families and children. This is why state education officials are calling the La Crosse School District's experimental partnership with private child care providers and community agencies a model program. They hope the La Crosse story inspires other communities to rethink the way *they* teach and care for their youngest residents.

The key word to remember is "collaboration," a word taken so seriously by the La Crosse partners that its very definition has been analyzed, fine-tuned, and purposefully differentiated from similar terms—such as cooperation and coordination—in order to convey to the public just how dramatic an educational change it represents.

How dramatic? Picture a place where children can come to learn and receive a variety of other services, from all-day child care and transportation to immunizations and health care. This place offers food service, nutrition education, counseling, social work, a resource library, parent education, family networking, and vision and hearing screenings—in addition to licensed care and a free, accredited 4-year-old preschool. Now picture several



School district buildings will no longer have a monopoly on providing educational services to 4-year-olds under the collaborative approach approved by the La Crosse School Board.

by Nanette Bulebosh

of these “one-stop” children’s centers throughout the community, in schools and other locations, large and small.

Not all the sites offer every service, but there is more convenience, accessibility and support for families than ever before. There are more choices available to everyone, regardless of family income or socio-economic status.

Community Collaboration

Moving this vision of the future of La Crosse closer to reality hasn’t been a quick process, nor an easy one. Everyone involved—teachers and union leaders, administrators, providers, and municipal agencies—had to be willing to compromise and change the way they do business. Serious concerns and differences had to be addressed and, for some participants, skepticism and distrust had to be overcome.

Now that the plan has been approved, the community’s excitement is indisputable.

“I think this will raise the bar for collaborative efforts,” says Neil Duresky, the enthusiastic school board president, of the district’s new voluntary plan for

4-year-olds. “We’re looking at a unique situation wherein preschool, child care, Head Start, and public education can all work together, so that children aren’t shepherded around in order to get all their needs met.”

“We’re looking at a unique situation wherein preschool, child care, Head Start, and public education can all work together.”

“La Crosse has the big job of trying to create something new in Wisconsin,” says an equally enthusiastic Jim McCoy, a consultant with the Department of Public Instruction. “We haven’t seen this kind of

inclusive collaboration yet in such a large community. ... Their conversation alone can be an inspiration to others.”

La Crosse calls its new plan the “Community Collaboration for Four-Year Olds,” which is also the name of the committee that spent nine months developing it and will now oversee its implementation. The group includes parents, teachers, elementary school principals, child care providers, Head Start, and other advocates for young children. The facilitator is Gerald Kember, associate superintendent of instruction for the La Crosse School District.

A Quality Learning Experience

The project’s primary goal is to give every 4-year-old in the community access to a quality early learning experience. Here, as in other communities, such access has often been limited to either the affluent, whose parents can afford one-on-one care or private preschool, or the poor, who qualify for Head Start or Title 1. The district’s Title 1 program currently has room for only 165 4-year-olds; recently 40 were turned away.

The Community Collaboration preschool program will offer three different operational models, or program types, for those forming partnerships to choose from as they design their educational programs. All three models require the entities providing the services to offer children at least 12.5 hours of preschool instruction per week (typically 2.5 hours each day) by a certified district teacher and an aide. The curriculum in all the models must be developmentally appropriate, with a focus on language experience, social competence, and active, exploratory learning. Class size will be limited to 18 students, and there will be a strong family support component, with home visits, parent education, parental involvement in setting learning goals, and access to various services such as transportation, Head Start, and public health. Any partnering agency applying to be part of the

collaboration project and receive public funding must agree to provide at least the above requirements.

Where the three models differ is in management structure, the range of services provided, and location.

A preschool adopting a Model I structure preschool, considered the most conservative option of the three, will be located at one of the district’s 11 elementary schools, with before- and after-school child care provided by non-district staff. A Model II preschool will be located at a “Partnering Agency” site, such as a child care center, nursery school or community center. Instruction will be provided by district teachers; other services will be provided by the agency. A Model III preschool, as designed, represents a radical departure from most publicly funded programs. This type of preschool will be managed by a non-district Partnering Agency, such as a private preschool or non-profit organization, which would also provide the facility. The instruction component will be contracted through the district.



Models II and III, in other words, will have the teachers come to the students, instead of the other way around. This will reduce the number of transitions, which has long been a concern of parents and children’s advocates. Transitions are the moves many young children make in a day, from child care to Head Start to school and so forth that can interfere with a feeling of security.

“(Too often) we take some of our youngest, most fragile people and move them around, several times a day in some cases,” explained Kember of the La Crosse District. “Once it became clear that it was going to take all of us (in the community) to put something



The project’s goal is to give every 4-year-old in the community access to a quality learning experience.

together, the vision started growing that ... wouldn’t it be wonderful if parents were able to bring their children to one place for an entire day, and get all their needs met?”

Getting Started

In early April, the La Crosse School Board gave the go ahead for Phase I, which calls for one to two classrooms of each model (or a total of three to six sections) to open next fall. Phases II and III, to take place over the next three to six years, will expand the number of collaborating partners and enrolled children so that eventually all families who wish to participate may do so.

“We opted for a phase-in because it became clear that this thing is huge,” Kember explained. “No one else in the state is doing anything like this, so we’re going at it slowly.”

The day after the board approved Phase I, the committee sent letters to all licensed providers, elementary schools, and children’s agencies in the community, roughly 200 in all, inviting them to

apply for a chance to participate in the program’s first year, using one of the three models.

“We’re inviting absolutely everybody,” Kember said. “We said ‘Here’s what we’re doing. Here’s how you can join us. Tell us about your plan.’” The group hosted a workshop in mid-April to explain the models and to offer help with the application process before the May 1 deadline.



Diane Ladwig, director of the Gundersen Lutheran Child Care Center, is one of those applying for a first-year slot. “I have a quality environment. The school district has a staff that is compensated well. I’d like to bring all that together,” she said. “I can only see this as a wonderful way to branch out.”



A committee of parents, teachers, principals, child care providers, and others met over nine months to develop the program.

What's In a Name?

Many communities choose to call their program for 4-year-olds by a name other than "kindergarten." La Crosse uses the term "preschool" to differentiate it from its 5-year-old kindergarten and to avoid misunderstandings about the 4-year-old program's intent. Using a different title is fine with the Department of Public Instruction, as long as the essential requirements of the 4K funding are met. (See page 11).

What the DPI and other early childhood organizations are supporting is the coming together of many of the different state and federal funding streams at the local level. Funding sources such as state 4K aid, Head Start, special education, Title 1, child care, and so forth would be aligned.

These funding sources/programs would then work together so that, from the perspective of the parents and the child, there is a single early childhood program (a single name) with different variations (models) available at different locations (site-based management) and delivered by a team of people working together (collaboration).

This team may be funded by a variety of different sources with different eligibility and service requirements, but those issues should be addressed at the adult level (administrators, teachers, and parents), without having to separate the programs at the child level.

"To kids, it's all the same thing," DPI consultant Jim McCoy said. "The name thing, with the separate identities and all the different rules and requirements ... that's all purely an adult problem. From the kids' point of view, they just want to learn, have fun, be in stimulating environments, and do less running around than they do now."

—Nanette Bulebosh

Ladwig, who also serves as the president of the Wisconsin Child Care Improvement Project, said she understands why other providers are taking a wait-and-see attitude. Some fear losing clients, but to her this seems unlikely, given the fact that the preschool will only encompass a small portion of the day.

"I also think some providers are not looking enough at the long-range future," she said. "I truly believe that the only way child care can survive is if we all make some changes. Parents cannot continue

to absorb all the costs of quality care, and we can't continue to pay our teachers low wages. ... We need comprehensive quality service for all children, and (this project) may help get us there."

Julie Herwig, project director of the Head Start Collaboration Project and an ad-hoc member of the collaboration committee, said she sees a definite role in the plan for Head Start, a federally funded, comprehensive program for low-income children. Head Start agencies throughout Wisconsin are currently

involved in several community collaborations, but none to the degree called for in La Crosse.

"Just the idea of the school district's contracting with Head Start to actually provide programs is quite unusual," Herwig said. "In other communities, there has been less focus on how to make it a community program. Other districts have simply gone ahead with 4-year-old kindergarten. So La Crosse is to be commended for saying 'We're going to try to look at different possibilities and see what works.'"

"It's a recognition of the quality programs that we and others provide."

Expanding the Options

"What we're doing is trying to move away from a one-size-fits-all mentality and trying to expand people's options," Kember said. "All the things that are currently there for families will still be there. There will still be a place for private preschools, just as there will always be a place for private K-12. We just want to make sure that every child has the same opportunities."

"Also, we all had to give up something," he added. "This is why we call collaboration the highest order. All organizations truly have to shift from a we/they mentality to we/us. Over time it's been proven that we needed to have that understanding."

The group made a point of distinguishing the terms cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. Cooperation, members determined, involves the simple sharing of resources without any major changes. Coordination entails more of a commitment; it requires each organization to change slightly. Genuine collaboration, the most difficult to achieve, requires large-scale compromises, perhaps a major shift in outlook among stakeholders. It may involve joint grant applications, rewriting mission statements, the abandonment of titles, or the giving up of "turf." There is a role for all three types of partnerships in the



The collaborating committee's approach was to treat children as children first—not as a condition, says project facilitator Gerald Kember.

preschool plan, but the group sees collaboration as the most beneficial for children and families.

"Our effort has been to take the whole competitive nature away from this thing," Kember said. "Frankly (the district) isn't prepared to do all-day child care, nor do we want to do it. We're concerned with curriculum. ... It became clear early on that not any one of us could do what the others were doing. So really it needed to be a collaborative effort."

"I think the providers realized that we were sincere when they saw the models we were proposing. They said, 'They're not kidding. They really do want to collaborate. There really is a place for all of us in this plan.'"

Kember praised the La Crosse School Board for its courage in endorsing such an unusual, never-before-tried plan. He also praised the teachers association for its open-minded support, since the project won't immediately benefit its

members. "It was a leap for the union, but they still recognized it as a win-win situation that will help kids and ultimately benefit the district. I have to give them credit for supporting this."

Financial Benefits

Financially, the district will come out ahead over time, because the increased enrollment will bring in more state aid. Kember said this will enable the district to use the federal Title 1 funding

it now spends on preschoolers on other programs. "So we're not only benefiting the 4-year-olds, but also K-8," he said.

McCoy, who oversees the state's

4-year-old kindergarten program, says he hopes that the La Crosse project inspires collaboration in other communities.

Launching programs for 4-year-olds



All three models approved by the school board will offer a developmentally appropriate curriculum with a focus on language, social competence, and active, exploratory learning.



Under two of the models, the teachers will come to the students, instead of the other way around, reducing youngsters' travel to day care to Head Start to school, and so forth.

is one way for a school district to address declining enrollment issues, but many districts back away because of opposition from the private sector, he said. This is especially true in large communities where many early child care and education services are available.

"You can justify a district-sponsored 4K program by saying that you're trying to level the playing field, but basically the private providers still have to give up space," he said. "But that's where collaboration comes in. Why not meet and find a way for everyone to benefit?"

He added that not enough school districts realize that the funding help from state and federal sources does allow for some flexibility.

"The funding streams do have some specific requirements, but they actually give you enough wiggle room to put together a model that works for everyone, without getting hung up over things like titles and role responsibilities," McCoy said. "It's the people who have only done things a certain way who get hung up or think it can't be changed."

"With public school choice, we're entering a whole new arena of possibilities," he said. "One problem with educational research is that it's always trying to find the one thing that works best for all kids. There is no one way. That's the thing that everyone forgets. You've got to provide choices at every turn."

Duresky, the school board president, agrees. "There's a wide spectrum of things that can be done in public education," he said. "And especially these days, with budgets so limited and spending decisions so important, I don't think we should leave any stone unturned."

Thinking Differently

Asked whether he had any advice for other districts interested in collaborating, Kember said the two things that made the difference in La Crosse were the district's determination to look for community-driven, rather than school-driven, solutions and the Collaboration

continued on page 12

Wisconsin Is a Leader in 4K

Wisconsin's commitment to early education dates back to 1848, when Article X of the Constitution called for school districts to be "as uniform as practical and free to all children ages 4 to 20." A provision for state funding was included. The number of 4-year-old children in public schools began to decline in 1920 with the rise of the nursery school movement, although four school districts in the state have always had 4K programs. The state stopped funding 4K programs in 1957, in part a response to the post-war baby boom as well as the Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik, which brought more attention to US science and math programs.

Since 1984, when the state renewed 4K funding, local 4-year-old kindergartens have been steadily growing in number, with tremendous growth seen in the last three years, according to DPI consultant Jim McCoy. More than 130 public school districts in Wisconsin (roughly a third) are now receiving 4K membership aid, and 100 more communities are discussing the possibility. School districts that elect to operate a 4K program receive one-half to two-thirds funding per student, depending on local property values.

Wisconsin is currently the only state in the nation that maintains state funding for open-enrollment 4K programs. Other states may offer early childhood programs, but they limit eligibility to children with special needs or those from low-income families.

The rules for receiving 4K state funding are actually minimal:

- A district must operate a program a minimum of 437 hours per year (175 days times 2.5 hours).
- Up to 20 percent of the 437 hours can be used for outreach activities such as home visits or parent conferences.
- The district must make the program available to all children in the community who turn 4 by Sept. 1. Large districts sometimes need to phase a new program in over several years using attendance areas or a lottery. Two warnings about such phase-ins: These approaches are not popular with families who are excluded, and if a district loses its way on the way to full implementation and cannot demonstrate a good faith effort, it is in jeopardy of having to repay any funding it received in previous years.
- Most other regulations are handled the same as with 5-year-old kindergarten.

"We've tried to make the formula flexible from the state's end," McCoy explained, "but La Crosse is the first district to really take advantage of this flexibility." He believes that too many districts get hung up by questions of church and state separation, disagreements with the teachers unions, or concerns about pushing private providers out of business. Those are important concerns, he said, but with collaboration and a little

creative thinking, they can be addressed.

What does the ideal 4K program look like? McCoy recommends getting a copy of *Guiding Practices in Early Childhood Education*, on the DPI Web site (see accompanying resource list). A good 4K classroom should have a low student-to-teacher ratio (McCoy favors 20 students per room with three adults, or a 7-1 ratio). The program should offer an array of learning opportunities that celebrate diversity and nourish the talents and strengths of each child. Instruction should be integrated, geared to language acquisition, problem-solving, and decision-making, and use concrete materials, quality literature, and appropriate technology.

Perhaps most important, McCoy said, learning should be treated as a cooperative journey, not a competitive race. He pointed out that the word "kindergarten" means "child's garden." The original European model took advantage of children's creativity, curiosity, and thirst for knowledge. "My experience is that most people really don't want to run (kindergarten) like a race. It doesn't have to be. ... Parents certainly don't want to see that happen."

McCoy concluded, "Let's get back to beginning these early years with some excitement and openness about how kids learn."

—Nanette Bulebosh

Resources and Contact People

On Early Childhood Education:

Jim McCoy, early childhood consultant, Department of Public Instruction, 608-266-1000; james.mccoy@dpi.state.wi.us.

Gerald Kember, associate superintendent/instruction, La Crosse School District, 608-789-7654; gkember@mail.sdlax.k12.wi.us.

DPI's Early Childhood Web site: <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dpiresvcs.html>.

S. Bredekamp, and T. Rosegrant, ***Reaching Potentials: Appropriate Curriculum and Assessment for Young Children*** (National Association for the Education of Young Children: Washington, DC 1992).

The High Scope Press Catalog. High Scope Press, 600 North River Street, Ypsilanti, MI 48197; 313-485-2000. A complete listing of High Scope publications, brochures, videos, assessment materials, and resource materials for early childhood and elementary programs.

National Association of Elementary State Principals (NAESP), ***Early Childhood and the Elementary School Principal: Standards for Quality Programs for Young Children***, 1990, 1615 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Brochures, papers, and videos. 1834 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20009; 800-424-2460.

On Collaboration:

Julia Herwig, Head Start Collaboration Project, 608-261-4596 or 800-862-3725.

Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners. Contact: **Jill Haglund**, Department of Public Instruction, PO Box 7841, Madison, WI 53707-7841; 608-267-9625; e-mail, jill.haglund@dpi.state.wi.us; Web site, <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/dlcl/bbfcsp/eccophm.html>.

Building Villages to Raise our Children (Series includes: "Collaboration," "Community Outreach," "Evaluation," "Funding and Resources," and "From Programs to Service Systems"), (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Family Research Project, 1993).

Collaboration: Because It's Good for Families and Children. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Great Lakes Resources Access Project, Fall, 1999.

A Traveler's Guide to Creating Community-Based Early Childhood Curriculum. CESA 4. The Bright Beginnings Curriculum Project, 1998 (revised edition), \$15. Ordering information: CESA 4, PO Box 157, West Salem, WI 54669. Attn: Gaye Tylka.

Together We Can—A Guide for Crafting a Pro-Family System of Education and Human Services. US Department of Education and US Department of Health and Human Services (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1993).

Committee's efforts to keep the public informed throughout the process.

"We had monthly public information meetings for anyone who wanted to come," he said. "It was a good opportunity for those with the deepest concerns to step forward. ... And by going out and working with our child care providers, we really knew what the issues were. Nothing jumped out from behind the bushes at us."

What excites Kember the most? "All the possibilities. ... Just imagine, a place where people can get all these services in one place. And where children are treated as children first. Yes, you need to look at individual needs and address those, but look at them as children first, not as a condition."

"We just have to think a little differently than we have been," he said. "Get out of our old ways of doing things." ▀



Bulebosh is a free-lance writer and former teacher. She currently serves on the Elkhart Lake-Glenbeulah School Board. This is the first in a series of DPI-sponsored articles on hot topics in early childhood education.