

# INNOVATION ZONE CASE STUDY



## NORTH LAWNDALE

**T**he community of North Lawndale located on the west side of Chicago with a population of approximately 25,000. As of 2012, 3,692 children under the age of five were living in North Lawndale, with 76 percent of these children in low-income families. A decline in industry and thousands of job loss significantly impacted this area of Chicago over the last 30 years.

North Lawndale has a strong history of collaboration, with many people coming together to help serve its families. But it is a community plagued by violence and many of the children being served are dealing with challenges such as incarceration of family members, drug raids, substance abuse and transportation issues. Additionally, many of the community's families are unaware of the early learning and development opportunities available to their young children.

The North Lawndale Innovation Zone, created by the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant, was led by a diverse coalition of community organizations and partners dedicated to building a comprehensive community infrastructure to ensure

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During the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant, the North Lawndale team engaged diverse organizations as partners to incorporate early learning and development referrals and information into their work with families and create the pipeline leading to a system of coordinated referrals to quality early learning and development programs.

To accomplish their objectives, the coalition implemented outreach strategies and coordinated across community systems that serve high need children to facilitate communication, referral and enrollment.

### **BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE CROSS-SECTOR PIPELINE**

To increase awareness of existing early learning and development opportunities among pipeline partners and the families they served, the North Lawndale team provided community agencies and schools with early learning enrollment information for the 2015 school year. They created and distributed information packets with a list of available schools, the number of classrooms in which each school with full-day or half-day options,

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eligibility requirements and contact information for each site.

At the beginning, working with partners was a slow process

because collaborating for referrals was a change to how all the organizations had previously operated. Through monthly meetings, relationships with and among partner organizations got stronger and cross-referrals began to happen organically. “The coalition made sure all partner organizations were focused not just on their own programs, but on getting children referred to the right programs,” explained Aminah Wyatt-Jones, North Lawndale Innovation Zone lead. “A child’s success depends on not just getting enrolled, but also on attending every day.”

One important pipeline came through partnerships with local homeless shelters, A Safe Haven and a North Lawndale Shelter now operated by Primos. These organizations help families make sure they have a place to live, and help them think about the early learning and educational needs of their kids as they are getting back on their feet. “We created partnerships with them to help their staff think about making intentional referrals to families,” said Wyatt-Jones. “Making referrals was a challenge for the homeless shelter staff because they already had a big job to tackle completing the initial screening work for families.”

Through testing ways for the shelters to most effectively refer appropriate families to early learning and development programs, the coalition found it worked best to have the shelters provide families with their contact information so families could reach out to the coalition directly. The coalition would then work with the families to get their children into the right programs. In total, within a year almost 20 children were referred to early childhood learning and development programs through the pipeline from these shelters.

As a result of their work, the North Lawndale team has built a systematic referral partnership with the Lawndale Christian Health Center, TRI4M (mental health collaboration), A Safe Haven Foundation and St. Anthony Hospital. This pipeline of partners creates

an ongoing, fluid system of coordinated referrals to quality early learning and development programs, and increases the numbers of referrals.

## INCREASING ENROLLMENT

The North Lawndale team strives to enroll families in quality programs that fit the unique needs of each family, especially families with non-traditional work schedules and other specific needs. “Historically, a lot of the high need children in North Lawndale have not been enrolled in high quality programs,” explained Aminah Wyatt-Jones, North Lawndale Innovation Zone lead. “One of our goals was to make sure these families could get their children into these programs.”

Early in the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant period, parents in the community faced the limitation that enrollment days for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) enrollment (including Pre-K programs) was available at only a few schools. Although families could enroll their children in any CPS school at these enrollment days, they had to get to the schools hosting enrollment events to do so, and these were not always geographically-friendly for families to access. “The way we saw ourselves contributing, was to make it easier for families to enroll,” explained Wyatt-Jones. “We evaluated the current situation to see how we could help. Having only a few specific CPS enrollment locations, was helpful for families so we asked, ‘what else can we do?’”

In researching ways to help address this issue, the team learned that all CPS schools could request permission from the district to hold to an enrollment day at their location. So, the team reached out to principals about this opportunity and offered to manage the on-site events for their schools. The result was 10 additional enrollment locations across the community, increasing access to families who wanted to enroll their children.

To further expand families’ access to quality early learning and development programs, in 2016, the North Lawndale coalition hosted an Early Learning Outreach Day at seven locations, including the local Family and Community Resource Center, a grocery store and four Chicago Public Schools during report card pick-up. The events were a major success for the community in connecting children to early childhood

learning and development programs. The team engaged approximately 100 families and identified 69 families in need of preschool/childcare and home visiting information.

In one day, the team made 35 preschool referrals, 34 home-visiting referrals and two referrals to Beacon Therapeutics home-visiting program. Several additional families received child care subsidy information. To-date, the team connected more than 300 families to early learning programs during Early Learning Outreach Days. Overall, the community's early learning providers have increased the number of priority families enrolled in their programs.

Another way the team reached high need families, was by connecting them in locations they frequently visited in the community. For example, by building a relationship with the Family Resource Community Center where families receive their public benefits, the team was able to schedule specific days when they could be on-site to talk to visiting families. During the first month of this partnership, the team was able to enroll 60 families in Home Visiting and other early learning and development programs. This outreach was so successful that the team replicated the effort with the Lawndale Christian Health Center, a local hospital with a health center, I AM ABLE offices and a local grocery store. Every outreach event in which the North Lawndale team participated included many of the coalition's partners, sharing the work among them.

Since July of 2014, more 300 families have been referred to early learning and development programs. As of fall 2016, all North Lawndale's public-based preschool slots were filled and 98 percent of priority population children were enrolled in early learning and development programs.

### SUPPORTING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

During the second year of the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant, the North Lawndale team had the opportunity to work in a program led by the Steans' Family Foundation, which was funding and launching a new literacy program, the Lawndale READS initiative. One component of this initiative was supporting and improving school attendance.

The coalition contacted the leaders of Lawndale READS offering a partnership to provide a case management approach to any families from Pre-K to third grade that were experiencing chronic absenteeism. Because the coalition was taking a two-generation approach to serving families, providing support for parents

with job opportunities and financial resources to help stabilize their families, the team was an ideal partner to help the initiative with their work reducing the number of student absences and supporting literacy.

Because of its own limitations, the Chicago Public School system often is only able to approach families with a one-size-fits-all approach. They are not able to identify and support the needs of individual families, or provide solutions for individual children. "Absenteeism hides in aggregate school data," said Wyatt-Jones. "A school may have 95 percent attendance rate, but that means five percent of students are not attending regularly. And if it's the same children absent all the time, then there is a need to look at each of these students, to find out why and how we can help."

The coalition provided their partnership and identified two point people to carry out the work with individual families to find out why their children were not attending school regularly to help remove the barriers that were within the coalition's capacity to address. For example, they helped a second-grade child who had glaucoma and had missed 45 days of school because she regularly experienced headaches and eye pain. The child needed glasses to get her back on-track with school attendance. Glasses are expensive and her mom could not get an appointment with an eye doctor through the public system for six months. The coalition worked with the family to get them an immediate appointment with a private eye doctor who prescribed the glasses she needed. Once this child had her glasses, her school attendance greatly improved.

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In 2016, by helping families remove barriers and support them with getting their children to school every day, the North Lawndale coalition helped 42 families improve attendance. The team's support also helped 14 families improve attendance to the point where they no longer need additional support. "Working with parents one-on-one gives us the opportunity to comprehend and support the needs of the family as a whole," said Wyatt-Jones.

### SUSTAINABILITY

The coalition partners continue to meet monthly, discuss enrolment goals and evaluate additional possible ideas for achieving them. "Our goal is to sustain this work, and we are currently cultivating

new relationships and writing grant proposals to keep the coalition moving forward with a continued focus on enrollment," said Wyatt-Jones.

The North Lawndale team's work during the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant continues to provide the community with benefits of the work the team completed, including:

- A strong community collaboration that has developed a more systematic way of sharing information and referring families.
- A pipeline of partners that are referring families to early learning programs.
- A feedback loop between Chicago Public Schools and the North Lawndale community collaboration.

In 2012, Illinois was awarded a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant to strengthen early childhood systems and kindergarten readiness for Illinois children. Illinois Action for Children coordinated statewide Innovation Zone activities to help the state test strategies to increase the enrollment of children with very high needs in high quality early learning and development programs. Illinois Action for Children supported each Innovation Zone in planning and implementing activities. The Innovation Zone model uses action learning cycles, an iterative process, to quickly learn and adapt strategies for immediate use in each community. [www.actforchildren.org/for-providers/innovation-zones/](http://www.actforchildren.org/for-providers/innovation-zones/).