

INNOVATION ZONE CASE STUDY



Pilsen and Little Village

The communities of Pilsen and Little Village are located on the near south side of Chicago. Both communities have a high percentage of children under five years old living in low income families (69 percent in Pilsen and 82 percent in Little Village). Pilsen and Little Village are primarily made up of Spanish-speaking Latino families. The two communities face distinct challenges. Pilsen is experiencing high rates of gentrification. Little Village tends to have more young children living at or below poverty, as well as families challenged by language isolation, undocumented immigration status and issues with the safety of their community. Families in both communities are also challenged by how to navigate the early education system and become aware of the other services available.

Low-income children are at a disadvantage in terms of skills, behavior and health, according to the Brookings Institution. Immigrant children often face unique barriers that elevate their risk of developmental delays and lower academic performance when entering school (Karoly and Gonzalez, 2011). These may include language barriers and parent education level.

The Pilsen and Little Village Innovation Zone (PLVIZ) discovered effective strategies for connecting Latino parents with early childhood education and development programs. Their work suggests that understanding the values of Latino culture is critical to engaging hard-to-find families. The PLVIZ team found that

cultural values influence childrearing, socialization, communication and mindsets about formal education. Many of the cultural values that characterize Latino families are connected to strong family relationships, a belief in family loyalty and strong support of community life. The team found Latino families in their community prefer personalized interactions, and responded to more informal communication.

PLV INNOVATION ZONE

The two communities came together in 2013 to form the PLVIZ. Supported by the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant, they worked cross-systems and cross-sector to design strategies to increase enrollment in high quality early learning and development programs. The PLVIZ focused on the following local challenges:

- Children under the age of five living at or below the Federal Poverty Level in the PLVIZ are under-represented in early learning programs, notably undocumented children.
- Families experiencing poverty are often unaware of the early learning and development programs available to them.

PLVIZ MISSION: Using a culturally respectful approach, our mission is to support families in the enrollment process of their young children in early learning programs as well as their engagement with the school and the community. Our collaborative group includes partners in the consular, faith-based and business field.

VISION: Every child in the state of Illinois enters kindergarten safe, healthy, ready to succeed.

- Families isolated by language and culture often do not know how to access available early learning programs.

During their work, the PLVIZ team remained highly aware of the cultural context, political environment and safety issues impacting trust between residents and formal agencies. The team tailored and adjusted strategies appropriately throughout the initiative. Addressing new ongoing and emerging obstacles allowed the PLVIZ to reach more parents in this community.

“We always need to be reading the community—getting out of the building in our Innovation Zone,” explained PLVIZ Leader Dr. Cary Rositas-Sheftel. “This means not only the community, but also the macro-level systems affecting it. For example, how the political environment is affecting the trust in the community, about the violence and safety concerns, and impact of immigration policies to be able to tailor our strategies appropriately. We needed to reach families where they felt safe.”

BUILDING PIPELINES THROUGH COLLABORATION

In 2014, the PLVIZ began engaging regularly with diverse community stakeholders to share knowledge and resources. They built a shared vision to support the kindergarten readiness for all children from the region, with particular attention to those children and families from priority populations. The planning team included leaders from civic and economic development initiatives, early learning programs, housing services, hospitals, community organizations and parents. Together, they designed strategies to make a collective impact. Early meetings brought in experts in special education services to share insights and strengthen referrals.

The Parent Ambassador (PA) program was launched in 2015, with PAs acting as community liaisons going door-to-door to reach families in their homes and attending local events. Using a GIS map from Illinois Action for Children, they identified the pockets where children and families from the priority population live. The PAs mapped their route according to the pockets identified by the map, to ensure focus on the priority population. Parents helped to improve the outreach campaign. “The Parent Ambassadors were our right and left hands, our eyes and ears in our efforts to reach and engage fam-

ilies in our community,” said Dr. Rositas-Sheftel. “Without them we would not be successful.”

During the first summer, they collected information from more than 255 families. The PLVIZ team followed up with the families

to connect them to early learning experiences. The members of the Innovation Zone created a central database to track the engagement and follow-up with the families. The partners worked in collaboration to place all of the interested families in early learning programs. They discovered many more infants and toddlers live in the region than there are available slots for enrollment.

In 2016, they used data to reflect on the outreach campaign with partners and parents. They adapted their approach by hiring mother advocates as a full-time position in one of the partner organizations, adding faith-based settings to their engagement route and adjusting the script for outreach. They trained new advocates on process and outreach techniques using the framework provided by the Innovation Zone initiative—using data, testing small experiments, using action-learning cycles—to ensure continued alignment and improvement.

Outreach tactics that worked in 2015 (going door-to-door, visiting homes) were less effective in 2016 due to a rise in immigration raids conducted in the community. As U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) knocked on doors to gain access to homes, many families became less responsive to the Parent Ambassadors. The team shifted their efforts to address these new challenges. In addition to going door-to-door, collaboration volunteers connected with families at locations where families already gathered such as health clinics, local businesses and the Office of the Mexican Consulate.

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY PIPELINES FOR ENROLLMENT

The shift in strategies allowed the PLVIZ team to begin cultivating new partnerships with organizations that shared a common concern for immigrant families with

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small children. Critical to this strategy was developing partnerships at locations where families felt safe. The operating philosophy was if a community organization was committed to serving these families, then they could be valuable partners in community outreach. The team also considered partners families believe to be very influential such as doctors, lawyers and the consul general.

Using the small experiments technique for problem solving, the team ran a pilot outreach program with the Esperanza Health Clinic. The PLVIZ designed bilingual posters for display in doctor offices that read: “This clinic supports preschool education and learning to read.” When families visited Esperanza with children under five years old, the primary service nurse, or those with the first contact in the doctor’s office, agreed to ask whether the child was enrolled in an early learning program.

If the answer was no, and the families were open to assistance from the PLVIZ, the family received a free, bilingual children’s book. Esperanza sent a weekly report to the PLVIZ Intake Specialist who followed-up with families. To close the loop and keep the clinic informed, the Intake Specialist reported back to Esperanza the results of the follow-up conversations and if their child had enrolled in an early learning program.

During the pilot program, the Esperanza staff became very engaged and committed to sharing the message about the importance of early childhood education with their families. They even made a friendly competition of whose referrals led to more children enrolling. At the end of the pilot, the clinic gave a gift card to the person with the most successful referrals.

Moving forward, the referral program will run twice a year (in August and April) to align with the staff’s heavy workload. Dr. Rositas-Sheftel explained, “Working with the health care system is very important and has been a success for us. When doctors make referring families part of their protocol, the response is better than at health fairs because there is an endorsement from someone they trust who is part of the health care system.”

A second partner organization was the region’s Consulate of Mexico. Applying for passports and other documents generally involves waits of 30 minutes or

more, while families sit in a waiting room. The Consulate allowed PLVIZ Parent Ambassadors to set up a resource table in the waiting room once a week. They delivered a short message to waiting families that focused on raising awareness about early childhood education and explaining the differences between the Mexican and U.S. education systems. They discussed the impact of attending preschool within the U.S. education system, and how and where to get more information. The Parent Advocates helped families complete Chicago Public Schools preschool enrollment applications onsite and helped families navigate the system. During each visit to the Consulate, 100-200 people—parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles from Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin—received this information.

The PLVIZ received recommendations from the Consulate of Mexico and the Little Village Chamber of Commerce to enhance their efforts. The team identified a local candy store and ice cream parlor that allowed the PAs to set up resource tables during the busy weekends. They shared information, spoke with families, made referrals and helped parents apply for Chicago Public Schools early learning programs on the spot using iPads. During the height of Chicago’s summer “block party season,” one PA spoke to 80 families in a single day.

The team partnered with local churches, as well, where they delivered a one-minute message about the importance of early childhood education to the congregation after a Spanish language mass, and were invited to Sunday School to speak one-on-one with parents to help navigate the process.

A key to the success of working with Esperanza Health Clinic, the Consulate of Mexico, Chamber of Commerce, local businesses and churches is their alignment with the community’s culture. Families respect these groups as influential

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community leaders and as safe places. These modifications helped the team successfully overcome challenges to door-to-door outreach. “The strategy to reach families where they feel safe was very important, and we were able to do this working with these pipeline partners,” said Dr. Rositas-Sheftel.

work, all of the programs available to children under three were full and families were put on waiting lists. Additionally, the data revealed that the PLVIZ team were able to engage more families working directly with a health care clinic than had been the case when participating in local health fairs.

USING DATA

The PLVIZ team embraced the importance of using data analysis in decision-making. They were diligent in documenting outcomes throughout the initiative. They used Pipedrive, an online customer relations management tool, to record family contact information and to track follow-up with these referrals. Using Pipedrive, the team was able to track each family that was referred and where they went; whether they did or did not enroll; if they did not then why, or if they were placed on a waiting list.

This data led to the discovery that there is a need to increase the number of slots and programs for young children in the Little Village community, especially infants and toddlers. During the Innovation Zone

The team and their collaborative partners spent time reflecting on the processes they were using, comparing expected results to what actually happened in their work during monthly meetings. “We learned a lot from the data and changed strategies because the quantitative data supported doing so, not because we felt something might be right or good to do,” said Dr. Rositas-Sheftel. Ultimately, the data is what told the team their work was successful.

SUSTAINABILITY

Since ending in December 2016, the PLVIZ team explored how the IZ work can continue in the Pilsen and Little Village communities. Each community continued its own enrollment outreach efforts. In Little Village, a community agency with an educational collaborative leads the work and plans for education from cradle to career, incorporating the Innovation Zone practices into an existing work plan. Pilsen is working on securing an agency or partner to continue the IZ work in their community.

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/.