

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR AN

Early Learning Community



What is an Early Learning Community?

Leaders in communities across the country are recognizing the importance of ensuring that young children and their families thrive – they understand that child well-being and thriving communities go hand-in-hand. Elected officials, business and civic leaders and people from all walks of life are working to create true Early Learning Communities – that is, places that promote learning and development prenatally through the early years of elementary school, making sure that the “building blocks” for early and lifelong success are in place.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) and the National League of Cities (NLC) have developed an *Early Learning Community Action Guide* designed to help communities focus their efforts around four key building blocks.

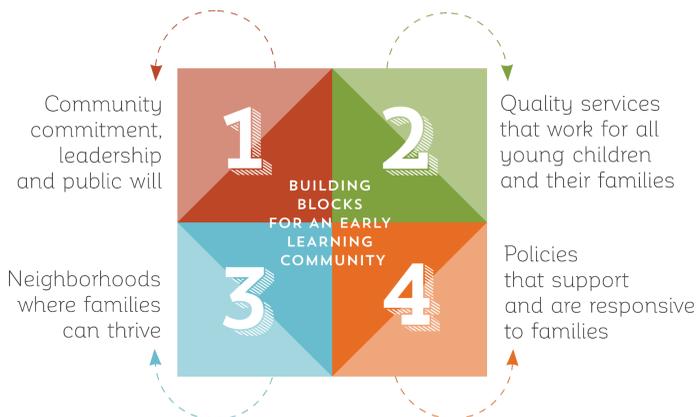
Ensuring that All Children Thrive: The “North Star” for Early Learning Communities

The goal of an Early Learning Community is to ensure that all young children get a great start, setting the foundations for life-long success and well-being. An Early Learning Community employs targeted strategies to ensure that all children, families and communities have equitable opportunities to reach the kind of results that every parent wants for his or her child. We define these results in three broad categories:

- Young children and pregnant women are healthy.
- Children are ready to succeed in school.
- Children live in safe, stable and nurturing families and communities.

Becoming an Early Learning Community

Becoming an Early Learning Community is an ongoing process, where there are always opportunities to make progress. The building blocks that make up your community need to be aligned, bolstered and assembled in a way that builds on the strengths of the community, recognizes the challenges families face and addresses disparities across racial, ethnic, sociodemographic and/or geographic lines in the community.



1 Community leadership, commitment and public will to make early childhood a priority

- **Target 1.1:** Local leaders work together across systems with a focus on early childhood.
- **Target 1.2:** The community invests in young children and families.
- **Target 1.3:** Community members support and understand the importance of early childhood health, learning and well-being.
- **Target 1.4:** A rich network of informal supports is available for all families.
- **Target 1.5:** Community resources for children and families are well-known, accessible and easy to use.

2 Quality services that work for all young children and their families

- **Target 2.1:** Families have access to high-quality, basic services that proactively promote and support health, learning and family strengths.
- **Target 2.2:** All children receive routine screening, identification, referral and linkage for additional risks and needs.
- **Target 2.3:** Children and families at risk and those with identified needs have timely access to more intensive services.
- **Target 2.4:** Families and parents are actively engaged as partners.
- **Target 2.5:** Supports are in place for service providers.
- **Target 2.6:** Leaders use data to drive change.

3 Neighborhoods where families can thrive

- **Target 3.1:** The built environment promotes safety and allows families to access basic services in their neighborhoods and beyond.
- **Target 3.2:** Economic and employment opportunities are available to all.
- **Target 3.3:** Residents feel a sense of belonging and hope within their neighborhoods and connection to the broader community.

4 Policies that support and are responsive to families

- **Target 4.1:** Policies that govern child and family services are equitable and responsive.
- **Target 4.2:** Workplace and other policies support families in raising children.
- **Target 4.3:** Land use and community development policies are designed with consideration for how they affect young children and families.

Build Your Early Learning Community

Every Early Learning Community is unique. There is no one design that will fit every community. Each community will choose the actions that fit their community best. However, there are steps your community should take as you begin your journey that will give you a strong foundation and help sustain your efforts into the future. These are the steps to lay that foundation.

- 1 Identify one or more Champions – that might be you!**
- 2 Pull together stakeholders with an interest in early childhood.**
Ensure that representation is equitable and inclusive of parents and other caregivers and folks with many different backgrounds and experiences (including neighborhoods, socioeconomic statuses, sexual orientations, abilities, races and ethnicities).
- 3 Designate a person to coordinate efforts, make connections across partners and keep the work moving.**
This person will bring the community and stakeholders together, facilitate conversations and decision-making, keep the group focused on the vision and build relationships with and among stakeholders in the community. He or she will also coordinate efforts to support and fund different actions and initiatives.
Identify potential funding sources for your improvement efforts and for longer-term investment in early childhood.
- 4 Use the Progress Rating Tool to determine your community's current level in each of the foundations of the building blocks.**
Be sure that your assessment of your current status reflects the experience of different population groups within the community – by looking at disaggregated data and by asking members of various population groups to share their experiences and perspectives on the community.
Focus on equity and closing gaps – Look at how children from various subgroups in the community are doing to identify where additional investments or coordination are needed.
- 5 Develop an Action Plan targeting a few building blocks or foundations where you would like to advance to a higher level.**
The more specific you can be about planned action steps, timeline, budget and who is responsible, the better!
As you make your Action Plan, be clear about your desired results, how you will know whether you are making progress and how you'll gauge whether your efforts are making a difference.
- 6 Engage parents, service providers and community residents in developing plans to move your community to a higher level.**
Partner with parents to find the best solutions – Parents in the community, and especially parents in underserved communities, will be your best partners in finding and implementing solutions that work for them. Engage parents, caregivers and other community residents at every point along the way.
- 7 Regularly review your community's status on the Progress Rating Tool as your community takes actions and makes progress. Determine where your community wants to go next and assess what actions will take you to the next level.**

The Early Learning Community Action Guide is a joint project between the National League of Cities (NLC) and the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), with generous support from the Bezos Family Foundation. CSSP and NLC are working with networks of cities and counties to achieve the vision of the United States becoming an Early Learning Nation made up of communities that prioritize kids and families and promote learning and development for early and lifelong success.

www.cssp.org
www.nlc.org

Throughout your journey to becoming an Early Learning Community, no matter where you are or what action steps you choose to take, you will need to consider how to:

- advance equity
- promote partnerships with families
- determine whether you are achieving results