

## **The Development of an Evidenced Based Family Engagement Model: Fellsmere Kindergarten Readiness Collaborative of Indian River County**

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### **Organization Mission:**

Through collaboration our mission is to convene and support our partners in developing a high quality early childhood system that is family-centered. As part of the Moonshot Moment, our vision is that all children in Indian River County are prepared for kindergarten across the five critical domains: social/emotional, physical health and well-being, cognitive, communication, and adaptive learning.

### **Organization History:**

Recognizing a need for innovative solutions to improve lives and break the cycles of poverty in Indian River County (IRC), local community leaders rallied together to bring about lasting change, particularly in the area of education. In 2008, The Learning Alliance (TLA) joined forces with the School District of Indian River County to form the Moonshot Moment Goal. With TLA as the backbone organization, a collective quest began to answer the question "what does it take to get 90% of third graders reading on grade level in such a way that we create literate, compassionate creative citizens who improve our world?" In 2011, TLA joined the Campaign for Grade Level Reading and formed a collaborative which has focused on this question. This collaborative, called MCAN (Moonshot Community Action Network), has brought together community leaders in the areas of kindergarten readiness, summer learning/after school, and in-school/attendance issues.

Kindergarten readiness was clearly identified as a vital step to growing successful learners. The need for a backbone organization focusing on kindergarten readiness was identified through strategic planning, visioning sessions, focus groups, best practice research, and parent input.

Beginning in 2014, The Kindergarten Readiness Collaborative (KRC) was formed with funding provided by TLA and the Indian River County Funders' Forum. The KRC collaborative and initial board were comprised entirely of the MCAN leadership. The collaborative engaged in a year long process to analyze current community conditions, observe best practices in other communities, define and coordinate strategies, and build connections within the early

childhood sector. KRC represents more than 40 social service organizations, foundations, funders, and child care providers in IRC.

In June 2015, KRC's Executive Committee published *Kindergarten Ready: Indian River County's Strategic Plan* with an Executive Summary. The strategic plan identifies local needs, incorporates community input, and translates best practice research into strategies for local action. Members of the Indian River County Funder's Forum financially supported its creation. Highlights of the 2015 Strategic Plan include six strategies intended to inform and encourage community stakeholders to align limited resources around opportunities that will have the greatest impact on improving kindergarten readiness in Indian River County.

To carry out the work identified in the Strategic Plan, the collaborative hired staff in September 2015. Then, in December 2015, the Kindergarten Readiness Collaborative applied for and was awarded 501(c)3 charitable status from the IRS. KRC's Board of Directors and staff work closely with TLA and MCAN to ensure a seamless communication and delivery system, as we all contribute to the larger community goal of preparing children for success in school and life. As the momentum and community involvement continually increased, KRC's Board of Directors recognized the need to have an Executive Director that would act as a lead convener mobilizing and unifying Indian River County around a common goal to ensure all children arrive at kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed. After a national search with over 75 applicants, in September 2017, Dr. Nivea L. Torres became the first ever Executive Director for the Kindergarten Readiness Collaborative.

### **Organization Description:**

A community collaborative is a group of cross-sector partners committed to leveraging their individual resources to serve a common goal larger than any one organization can accomplish on their own. Kindergarten "readiness" involves a wide range of individuals, non-profits, state agencies, private providers, and businesses to ensure that a community and its families are working together to meet the needs of our children. The Kindergarten Readiness Collaborative is the backbone organization that organizes and convenes those cross-sector partners to develop innovative solutions to reach our vision that all children are prepared for kindergarten.

Our Board of Directors has defined 3 strategic roles that KRC fulfills in our community: clearinghouse, connector, and advocate. We accomplish these

roles primarily through Community Engagement efforts - this includes partner agencies and families.

KRC hosts collaborative community events with up to 50 partner agencies participating. For families, these events increase access and awareness by bringing multiple services to one convenient location outside of normal business hours. For partners, these events provide opportunities to network, share information, and enhance relationships. General parent outreach and education, that includes information about child development, has been identified as a vital, missing, component for the long-term success of children and families. The need for developmental milestones to be integrated into multiple touch-points for families and the need for direct parent outreach are highlighted throughout the KRC Strategic Plan. To increase access to literacy materials and help impoverished children overcome the 30-million-word gap, KRC incorporates the distribution of books into targeted outreach efforts, community-wide events, preschool parent nights, and partner agency distribution channels.

Our Outreach and Parent Engagement Specialists contribute towards multiple KRC strategic goals by connecting with families. KRC has chosen Fellsmere and Gifford as the first two focus areas because best-practice research shows that implementing outreach in communities with existing momentum and social infrastructure is most effective.

### **Research Context:**

Currently, only 44 percent of IRC kindergarteners are on grade level by the end of kindergarten. This increases slightly to 56 percent by the end of third grade. There are many risk factors that contribute to children arriving at school not prepared, many of which stem from poverty conditions. The limitations poverty imposes on families are real and significant. According to the United Way ALICE Report 47% of families in IRC are unable to meet basic food, housing and health needs. These **A**sset Limited, **I**ncome **C**onstrained, **E**mployed families make more than the federal poverty level, but not enough to cover the basic cost of living. Childcare is a significant portion of a household's budget and, with limited resources, there are few options for affordable care that is also high in quality. This scenario is even more dire when you examine the demographics in the city of Fellsmere. According to the 2016 Census Bureau Report;

- Fellsmere has a population of 5,390. Over 88.8% of the population is Hispanic in comparison to the FL state average of 23.7% and the US average of 17.1%.
- Additionally, 86% of families report that a language other than English is spoken in the home and 46% of the population was born in another country.
- Fellsmere has the largest proportion of people in Indian River County in the “less than 20-year-old” category at 35.2%.
- The birth rate in Fellsmere is 12.1% in comparison to the FL state average of 5% and the US average of 5%.
- About 21.7% of families and 24.3% of the population in Fellsmere are below the poverty line, including 25.2% of those under age 18 and 12.9% of those ages 65 or over.

Statistically, the outlook for residents in Fellsmere is more destitute than any other area in Indian River County and the State average, with higher rates of obesity, lower educational attainment, and less earnings. In addition to families struggling with extreme poverty, most of the families in Fellsmere are also constrained by language barriers, which only adds to the stress and complexity of raising their children and accessing the necessary supports.

To ensure the health and well-being of future generations, and the economic prosperity of Indian River County, we must invest in early learning opportunities and the family support structures that create quality early learning environments for our children, particularly those who are living below the poverty line. At KRC, we envision every parent, regardless of income or zip code, to have the knowledge and tools they need to raise healthy and productive people.

### **Emergent Questions/Hypothesis:**

What will it take for parents and Fellsmere community partners to engage in early childhood development to improve educational outcomes for children from birth to age five?

What framework will operationalize this emergent strategy?

How can we measure parent/family engagement and its impact?

### **Intended Outcomes:**

Fellsmere families are better equipped with the knowledge, skills and resources they need to help prepare their children for Kindergarten.

Children who struggle with learning and attention issues or who may require remediation or additional support are identified earlier and are connected to the support services they need to thrive in school and in life.

The Fellsmere community and local organizations garner additional support to sustain the family engagement model.

Fellsmere children (0-5) increase their pre-literacy and social-emotional skills for Kindergarten.

Increase in K Readiness scores for entering students at Fellsmere Elementary School.

### **Research Description:**

Kindergarten readiness starts long before a child enters a formal education setting. Neuroscience research has shown the first 1,000 days of a child's life – from pregnancy through a child's second birthday – are a critical time that set the stage for a person's intellectual development and lifelong health. Brain development, and therefore learning, begins with the health, nutrition and wellbeing of mothers during pregnancy. The brain development that occurs following birth, through a child's second birthday, is also noted as one of the most critical building blocks for educational success. Brain development at this stage is based on good nutrition, talking, playing, and building positive emotional bonds with others.

***As the clearinghouse for early childhood in Indian River County, KRC seeks to create collective impact with local partners through the development of a parent engagement model.*** This model would be aligned with KRC's Strategic Plan Strategy I: Power of the Parent. Our vision is for every parent, regardless of income or zip code, to have the knowledge and tools they need to raise healthy and productive people. We believe parents are a child's first teacher, and they can raise smart babies through simple, everyday interactions. The demographic data for Indian River County and specifically Fellsmere, point to widespread disparities across ethnic, racial and socioeconomic lines. Therefore, Fellsmere is an ideal setting for the development of a parent engagement model that creates a support structure for families and empowers parents to actively engage in their child's learning.

Presently, over 100 families in Fellsmere are served through the KRC Outreach Family Specialist Model. These families would be invited to engage in a longitudinal case study that includes researched based inputs with the goal of building capacity for family engagement and improving children's kindergarten readiness. Intervention and preventative efforts would include home visits; participation in playgroups; participation in Parent/Family Dinners; book distribution; and focus groups for interaction with Understood.org, VROOM, and Streetwyze app.

We propose the use of purposeful sampling to develop an in-depth understanding of information rich cases within Fellsmere families. The criteria for the purposeful sampling in the study includes a) Fellsmere resident, b) parent of a child age 0-5, c) participant in KRC Outreach Worker Model, d) a willingness and availability to participate in the study.

Input data would be derived from the following sources:

- Minnesota Executive Functioning Screening for all participants: We will leverage this data to better understand the needs of our PreK population and more thoroughly identify children at-risk of struggling earlier and provide children and families with connections to services.
- Survey data gathered from playgroups: We will identify parent knowledge, skills, and available resources for their child's development through pre-and post-survey data obtained through their participation in evidence-based playgroups. In this case study, a playgroup is defined as a structured, intentional opportunity for parents and/or caregivers and their children to engage, learn and play to support the optimal development of the child and the social emotional needs of the family and increase social connectedness.
- Interviews conducted at Parent Dinners: We will identify local needs based on parent feedback and participation at Parent Dinners in order to customize presentations, topics for sessions, and topics for individualized home visits. Parent Dinners will also serve as a way to network among the community and create a supportive environment for parents of children 0-5.
- Sessions for Understood.org, VROOM, and Streetwyze App related to learning and attention issues that are of interest to parents.