

EDI in Action:

Building an Early Learning Movement in Santa Ana



Time and time again research confirms that kindergarten readiness is a strong predictor of future success. Children who are developmentally ready when they enter the classroom are more likely to graduate from high school, compete for higher paying jobs and enjoy success and happiness throughout their lives.

Knowing how important kindergarten readiness is, First 5 Orange County invested in a unique and innovative way to assess the readiness of Orange County's young children, called the Early Development Index (EDI). After examining EDI data specific to young learners in Santa Ana, local community leaders sounded the alarm bells.



The EDI data revealed that in 2016, more than half – 58 percent – of Santa Ana children were not ready for kindergarten upon entry. That's more than 1,900 students who started school at a learning disadvantage and thus will likely face more challenges on their path to success.

The sobering data served as the catalyst for the creation of a community-led partnership committed to bringing together parents, caregivers, nonprofit organizations, Santa Ana schools and city agencies, funders, and other leaders to improve kindergarten readiness in Santa Ana. Launched through an initial system-building grant from First 5 Orange County, the "Santa Ana Early Learning Initiative" or SAEI, established as its core task to drive system-wide, sustainable changes for early childhood and significantly improve outcomes for young children.

SAEI has evolved from three founding nonprofit agencies into a network of more than 30 agencies, 12 elementary schools and more than 125 parents.

Based on research and community work, SAEI has chosen two core strategies to guide their efforts: aligning and coordinating existing resources using a Two-Generation Model, and utilizing a neighborhood-based approach to engage parents, caregivers, and other local stakeholders.

Two-Generation Model Addresses Family Economic Stressors

SAELI leaders recognized early on the strong relationship between family economic stress and lower kindergarten readiness scores. When families chronically have to worry about which bills to pay and where the next healthy meal will come from, it compromises their ability to give their time and attention to their children's early development and skill building.



Drawing from a national model that works with low-income families, SAELI implemented the Two-Generation Model. Practitioners of this model believe that providing resources to parents is equally as important as providing services to children, not only in the form of parenting education, but in concrete supports to address the family's economic needs such as financial literacy counseling, access to workforce development services, and linkage to health and human supports, among other resources. By aligning and coordinating resources to support parents, cities like Santa Ana can better support

their young children to achieve and sustain positive early childhood outcomes in school and in life.

Neighborhood-Based Approach to Inspire Champions

SAELI also takes a neighborhood-based approach, leveraging trusted partners and bringing services to support children and their families to the places they are already visiting – schools and community centers.

By concentrating multiple services onsite at these venues, SAELI eliminates many barriers to accessing services, such as additional transportation requirements, costs, fear, unfamiliarity and time constraints.

By reaching parents and caregivers in their neighborhoods, where they work, live and play, SAELI is also creating a very active network of early learning champions who are advocating for a better quality of life not just for their children, but for the community as a whole.

Significant changes to the systems that serve young children are being implemented as a result of this new early learning collective voice. Neighborhood leaders are canvassing their communities to reach out to families with young children. Wellness Centers are opening up in every local school in Santa Ana to coordinate services for families. Schools are offering more preschool slots, full day kindergarten and extended learning options. All of this is certain to have a profound impact on the overall wellbeing of families and the developmental progress of Santa Ana's young children.

The Future is Bright

First 5 Orange County's new Strategic Plan is focused on engaging neighborhoods and building committed leaders who will partner to invest in the systems that serve young children and their families. Over the past three years, SAELI has done just that, building a broad network of local leaders who are committed to making early childhood a priority and creating a framework to guide collective action.

The early learning movement will not stop there. First 5 Orange County, SAELI and its core partners are committed to further enhancing the levels of, and access to, programs, services and community settings in which children and parents can learn and play together to foster healthy development.

