



THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION has developed a comprehensive portfolio of programs to give community leaders — from public, private, faith, business and community organizations — the skills and tools they need to move from “talk” to “action” to improve outcomes for children and families. The Results-Based Leadership programs enable participants to work on real issues in real time, building successful collaborative relationships, and hone their ability to use data to develop action plans and measure progress. The ultimate impact of this work is to sustain efforts to improve outcomes not just for current budget cycles, but for years to come. This case study provides an example of how one such program — the Leadership in Action Program (LAP) — helped leaders in a community work more collaboratively and produce measurable results to improve the lives of children in their community.

IMPROVING SCHOOL READINESS IN DEKALB COUNTY, GEORGIA

Starting school ready to learn can be particularly challenging for children of refugees who have fled war and persecution, arriving in the United States often unable to speak English and unfamiliar with American ways.

But an innovative pre-kindergarten program for refugee children is working to change this in the Atlanta-area county of DeKalb, which has many refugees as well as low-income families and academically struggling students.

“This program changes lives. By the end of the first year, all these kids were fluent in English, reading-ready, school-ready, and poised to succeed,” says Allen Shaklan, Executive Director of Refugee Family Services, a nonprofit agency in Stone Mountain, Ga.

The refugee pre-K — a new direction for the agency — is among several early learning initiatives resulting from the collaboration of DeKalb County leaders working to improve school readiness and, ultimately, children’s success in school and beyond.

Twenty-seven leaders — including an initially skeptical Allen Shaklan — were brought together in spring 2007 to participate in the Leadership in Action Program (LAP), which provided hands-on support to help the group develop data-driven strategies to increase the number of children who start school ready to learn.

“Spending time with all these experts provided me with the support I needed to set up the pre-K,” says Shaklan, a lawyer by training. “I know a lot more now about the importance of early learning. That has resulted in a real commitment by our agency to early learning programs, and has helped us shape those. It’s critical that we reach these children early.”

Since 2001, LAP has been launched in a dozen communities, bringing together leaders from diverse backgrounds and fields — agency managers, educators, nonprofit staff, public officials, parents, and child advocates — to focus on pursuing a specific result to strengthen the prospects of vulnerable children and families.

Unlike other leadership development programs that provide out-of-town training to improve leadership skills or to brush up on an issue, LAP works in a community to strengthen local leaders’ skills and to stimulate the knowledge-sharing needed to pursue a common goal.

“Your real work is in the room because the people there are trying to affect the same thing you are — in the same place,” says Jennifer Gross, Senior Associate in the Talent Management and Leadership Development unit at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which partners with local organizations to develop and



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fund a LAP. "It brings together the skills you need and the result you want to achieve for children in your community."

DeKalb chose to focus on school readiness because "that was an area where we could really make a difference for children and families," says Sharen Hausmann, Vice President of Early Learning for United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta.

The county has many factors that put children at risk for school failure, from high rates of poverty, sin-

gle-parent homes, and non-English speakers to low high school graduation rates, school performance, and elementary school students' scores on Georgia's academic achievement tests.

"If we can impact children in the earlier years and work with the parents, those skills gained and those relationships can influence a child's chance of graduating on time," says Carol Crumby, Area Director of United Way's DeKalb County division and a LAP participant. "Those are pluses for that child going to school, through school, and coming out ready not just for college and a career but ready for life."

To increase early learning opportunities, the DeKalb LAP created an environment that spurred changes in participants' knowledge, behavior, and working relationships, encouraging them to think, communicate, and act in new ways. When the formal LAP process ended in 2008, the group opted to keep meeting.

"It connects you to a plan – we're actually going to do something with our networking," says Betty Matthews, a school improvement coordinator for the DeKalb County School System. "You walk out with very real projects to work on. That's really what leadership is about. Not only do I get to improve my skills but I get to see how they work in action."

FOCUSING ON RESULTS

Over the course of 14 months, DeKalb County leaders from a variety of backgrounds dedicated time for nine two-day LAP sessions. How did those sessions lead them to act to improve school readiness?

Part of the credit goes to LAP, whose theoretical underpinnings and prescribed format are designed to help mid- to high-level leaders focus on a goal, forge relationships, think creatively, collaborate, and take action.

Credit also goes to DeKalb County, which was primed for further action after piloting a five-year early learning initiative funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and implemented by Smart Start, the United Way's early learning division. When that initiative – known as SPARK Georgia (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) – ended in 2007, LAP grabbed the torch and kept running.

"We wanted to take it to another level so it would be sustained," says Hausmann. "We moved into LAP to get those leaders in the middle involved and committed."

DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

Georgia's most diverse county, DeKalb's population (about 739,956) is 54 percent black, 40 percent white, and 10 percent Hispanic. More than 30,000 refugees have resettled in the county over the past 20 years, with 3,000 arriving each year. In 17 percent of homes, English is not the first language spoken.

About 14 percent of DeKalb's population lives below the poverty line. For children ages 18 and younger, the poverty rate was 21 percent in 2007. The unemployment rate was 10.7 percent in September 2009.

The DeKalb schools' 101,079 student population is 75 percent black, 10 percent white, and eight percent Hispanic. Almost 64 percent of students are economically disadvantaged.

Test scores for DeKalb first-graders in math, reading, and English/language arts lagged behind Georgia first-graders' scores during the 2007-2008 school year. The scores for DeKalb students who are black or Hispanic lagged behind those of students who are white, multi-racial, or Asian. The scores are from the Criterion Referenced Competency Test, which measures how well students have acquired skills and knowledge as defined by state performance standards.

LAP is the most rigorous form of Results-Based Leadership, a range of leadership development tools and programs developed by the Casey Foundation that are based on the conviction that strong leadership – by groups of leaders working together on a shared result – is key to achieving measureable and lasting improvements in child and family well-being. Program investments and system reforms alone won't do the job.

"This reflects our belief that mid- to high-level leaders from across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors want to and can be mobilized to act together to improve a result for children, families, and communities," says Barbara Squires, Director of Leadership Development at Casey. "And they are more likely to achieve the result collectively when they feel a sense of urgency, commit to being held publicly accountable, and have the skills that enable them to take aligned actions."

Ranging in intensity, time commitment, and cost, Results-Based Leadership looks different in different places, depending on a community's needs and resources. Not every community will choose to do a full LAP, but all programs share the same underlying objective: to move from talk to action on a result that a community chooses.

The result represents the best-case scenario that the community aspires to achieve for a specific population and commits to working towards. Hence the DeKalb LAP's result: All children in DeKalb County will start school ready to learn. Other communities have selected results important to them such as "All

families are economically successful" and "All offenders successfully re-enter their communities."

To help LAP participants track the impact of their work and make adjustments, a clear data measure to quantify the result is chosen and monitored. The indicator also creates a sense of urgency and accountability. In DeKalb, first-graders' performance on a state academic achievement test consistently lagged behind that of Georgia first-graders. Hence the DeKalb LAP's indicator: First-graders' test scores. LAP leaders expected that the first children affected by their work would complete that grade in 2010.

Before a LAP begins, there are several months of critical advance preparation by Casey and a top-level state, local or community figure or group known as an Accountability Partner. In DeKalb County, two early learning commissions – one led by United Way, the other by the County – serve as the Accountability Partner.

The Partner not only chooses the result and indicator but enlists the leaders to do the work. This "Call to Action" also conveys urgency and helps LAP participants focus on achieving the result. The participants report back to the Accountability Partner and can seek input or help. In DeKalb, leaders were invited from the school system, early care and education, business, United Way, state and government agencies, health care, refugee services, the arts, and parent groups.

Following this detailed preparation process, DeKalb LAP participants were given the place, time,

and supports they needed to align, focus, and collaborate; to develop no-cost and low-cost strategies; and to act and measure their progress towards their stated result.

The DeKalb “LAPers” met in a room carefully arranged and equipped to help them stay on task and work together. They sat in semi-circular pods so no one was behind anyone else, and the walls were decorated with banners stating the result, posters with pertinent data, and photos of school children.

The sessions were overseen by an implementation team of two facilitators and a project management team. The facilitators followed a format designed to help the LAPers develop the vital skills and competencies they needed to collaborate, including:

- Developing and tracking their work by using Results-Based Accountability, which includes defining the result, engaging partners to achieve the result, and using data to assess progress.
- Addressing and integrating issues regarding race, class, and culture into their work, in order to reduce disparities.
- Leading from the middle, by identifying and promoting practices to take back to their home organization.
- Making group decisions and building group consensus to take aligned actions.

“It’s important that participants don’t come in and recreate the wheel,” says Victoria Goddard-Truitt, a facilitator. “We want the leaders to come in sharing, being able to leverage things that are working, and sometimes thinking out of the box.”

During facilitated discussions, LAPers determined three core strategies to pursue and then broke into work groups focusing on a specific strategy. Each group designed aligned actions to achieve its strategy, and committed to taking an action at the end of each session.

“It becomes a safe space where they feel like they can talk about whatever their challenges are and they’re able to connect with other leaders and share their frustrations, work through them and move to action,” says Nicole Wise Williams, the project manager.

“People in the room are trying to help you get beyond wherever you may be stuck. Being in this space where there’s momentum for change, everyone is seeking to leave that two-day session with something having been accomplished.”

BUILDING ON SUCCESS TO FURTHER SPARK SCHOOL READINESS

The first week of pre-kindergarten used to be traumatic for children at Hightower Elementary, a DeKalb County school serving many low-income Hispanic families whose youngsters tend to stay at home during their early years. Now there is less trauma and more time for learning, thanks to KinderCamp, a summer program designed to smooth the transition to school for young children.

“There was a lot of crying, tears, and anxiety,” says Elaine Swartley, a Hightower pre-K teacher. “The program helped ease that. The children also go home with books, crayons, markers, scissors, and activities. Most of our children don’t have these things. With some, you can tell parents have been working with them.”

Low-cost, high-impact KinderCamp and school transition teams were developed and implemented during SPARK Georgia. They were expanded during LAP to reach more children.

“When instruction can begin day one, you have increased the number of instructional hours that a child will receive that year. That was all a matter of alleviating the stress of the first days of school,” says Betty Matthews, of the school system.

During SPARK, school transition teams and KinderCamp were piloted at four DeKalb schools. As SPARK was winding down and LAP was gearing up, the school system decided to expand the effort to include 16 schools, using Title 1 funds, the federal program supporting high-poverty schools.

The work has since spread to two more DeKalb schools and is funded entirely by Title 1. And KinderCamp, which began by serving four- and five-year-olds entering kindergarten, now also serves three- and four-year-olds entering pre-kindergarten.

By design, LAP builds upon the good work already occurring in a community – which is what happened in DeKalb County. “The decision to invest in and expand the school transition work was made because of the SPARK success and the visibility and credibility that LAP gave to the work,” says Roberta Malavenda, a LAP participant who coordinated SPARK Georgia.

Strong working relationships that developed during LAP also helped. About midway through the LAP, Malavenda and others recommended inviting Matthews – who had been appointed to a newly created position to implement DeKalb’s school transition work.



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Matthews became a key player, collaborating with other LAPers to expand school transition programs. Other LAPers, in turn, provided information, resources, and support to the schools, including help with promoting KinderCamps.

“LAP brought to the forefront other agencies that were willing to work with the schools, such as the public library, health department, United Way,” says Matthews. This helped “the school system see that through a collaborative effort, we could get more services for students coming into school.”

The public library, in turn, used its new connections to further promote the importance of reading to young children. “We had had a very strong partnership with school media specialists,” says Sharon Deeds, the library’s youth coordinator. “Because of LAP, we now have a very strong partnership with pre-school coordinators. It broadens our mission.”

The library also has new connections with family child care providers, who now help families get library

cards and find out about library pre-school activities. “I gave flyers to my LAP colleagues who, in turn, spread the word,” says Deeds.

School transition activities also help connect the early learning community with the schools. And programs like KinderCamp enable parents “to get to the schools, meet the teachers, even the principal,” says Malavenda. “It not only alleviates stress for the children but the parents, building relationships so the teacher and parent can partner.”

Each summer, KinderCamp is attended by 350 to 400 children for three to five half-days. “That gives them a chance to get used to us, the school environment, to being away from mom,” says Swartley. “We can start moving on instructional-type things sooner.”

CHANGING BUSINESS-AS-USUAL TO ENCOURAGE EARLY LEARNING

At a county social services office, low-income families typically find help with programs such as Medicaid and food stamps – not with free children’s books or a pre-kindergarten opening. This changed in DeKalb County after Weny Worrall participated in LAP.

“You’re sitting in those LAP meetings thinking ‘How does this apply to me? How does my work connect with this? How can we be instrumental in helping children be ready for school?’” recalls Worrall, who was an administrator for Georgia’s Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) during the DeKalb LAP.

“It was pretty obvious that we see 3,000 or more people a day and that should be an opportunity to connect with low-income families that definitely are in the possible target group in terms of early learning.”

After hearing from other LAPers about the availability of free children’s books and brochures with tips on how to stimulate early learning, Worrall took action. She encouraged caseworkers to go beyond their normal job and promote literacy, early learning, and school readiness among their clients with young children. Over two dozen busy caseworkers volunteered not only to offer books and brochures to families but to talk to them about the importance of reading to young children.

“We could put the books in the waiting room but they would just disappear,” says Worrall. “We really wanted to be sending a certain message: ‘Read to your children. We’re concerned about child development and those early years.’”

Other LAP discussions inspired Worrall to find out how many DFCS clients receiving child care subsidies enrolled their children in Georgia's free pre-kindergarten. She also worked with her office's computer techs to determine which clients' children would soon be eligible for pre-K.

To encourage pre-K participation, DFCS computers were made available so families could search online for pre-K openings. The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning reworked its website so this information is easier to find.

Worrall retired in 2009 but remains active in LAP, now known as DeKalb Partners for Early Learning, a smaller group that meets for one day about every six weeks. "I'm passionate about the whole early learning effort," she says. "We need to do a lot more."

FINDING NEW WAYS TO MOVE THE NEEDLE FOR CHILDREN

As a busy nonprofit agency administrator, Allen Shaklan questioned if he could spare the time to participate in LAP and if it would prove worthwhile. "I just wondered whether I would be serving myself or bringing anything to the table," he adds.

His answer: Yes. "It cut both ways," he says. "I built relationships with people who have helped our agency. And my participation has helped other agencies to shape their programs with the refugee and immigrant communities in mind."

Shaklan found invaluable assistance from people including Sharen Hausmann of United Way to overcome bureaucratic barriers that had frustrated his efforts, begun during SPARK, to create one of the nation's first refugee pre-K programs. "Sharen's help was a big deal, because I was ready to give up," says Shaklan.

"Allen had some really good ideas and it was very important for refugee kids," says Hausmann, a member of the United Way's Early Learning Commission, an Accountability Partner. "We just bent the rules a little bit."

The pre-K now serves about 20 children a year, some born in refugee camps in countries including Burma, Burundi, and Liberia. "It really helped him," says Iman Muse, a native of Somalia, of her son's experience in the program in 2008, during its first year.

Shaklan says LAP also led him to "think more globally. How do we move the needle for all children in DeKalb County? It has pushed all of us in LAP to look beyond our own narrow interests."

LAP also has influenced public officials involved with the DeKalb County Early Learning and School Readiness Commission, the other Accountability Partner. "It really demonstrated that there were a number of groups in our county working on this issue and that a lot could be gained by working together," says Dale Phillips, Director of the DeKalb County Human Development Department, who was also a LAP participant.

Phillips' department has worked with other LAP participants to apply for early learning grants and has dedicated new resources to early learning. "It was the first time we did it with a specific intent that there's a zero to five age group that we want to focus on," says Phillips.

The DeKalb LAP also has informed work by Rep. Stephanie Stuckey Benfield, one of the county's state legislators, to expand Georgia's pre-K program to include three-year-olds. As a member of the DeKalb Early Learning Commission, Benfield has exchanged valuable information with LAP participants.

"It was definitely a reciprocal relationship, where I would tell them 'This is what I'm working on legislatively' and they would give me feedback about ways I could improve," says Benfield. "They also back up their efforts with research and data. That is so incredibly helpful. In politics and government, they're all about accountability, where the dollars are spent, especially these days. LAP does a really good job with that."

Through the DeKalb Partners for Early Learning, the LAP lives on. "The energy was so strong that the majority of LAPers wanted to continue," says Roberta Malavenda. "That's a testament to the LAP experience. People saw so many immediate results."

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of UPS, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at www.aecf.org.

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