

Strategies for Success in Community Partnerships

Case Studies of Community Collaboratives
for Early Learning and Media



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About this report and the Ready To Learn Initiative

This case study report is for people interested in funding, managing, forming, or improving community partnerships. It provides an in-depth account of strategies associated with success in Community Collaboratives for Early Learning and Media, or CC-ELM. A national network of thirty CC-ELM—local partnerships among public media stations and organizations such as schools, libraries, afterschool program providers, parent and family advocacy groups, and housing authorities—were developed and implemented between 2015 and 2020 as part of the CPB-PBS Ready To Learn Initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

CPB-PBS Ready To Learn Research partners EDC and SRI International completed six case studies as part of their evaluation of CC-ELM implementation and impacts. The report opens with a cross-case analysis that places case study findings in the context of overall evaluation findings; the six case study reports follow, each focused on a single community.

The Ready To Learn Initiative is a cooperative agreement funded and managed by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. It supports the development of innovative educational television and digital media targeted to preschool and early elementary school children and their families. Its goal is to promote early learning and school readiness, with a particular interest in reaching children from low-income families. In addition to creating television and other media content, the program supports activities intended to promote national distribution of the programming, effective educational uses of the programming, community-based outreach, and research on educational effectiveness.

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About EDC

Education Development Center (EDC) is a global nonprofit organization that advances lasting solutions to improve education, promote health, and expand economic opportunity. Since 1958, we have been a leader in designing, implementing, and evaluating powerful and innovative programs in more than 80 countries around the world.

About SRI

SRI Education, a division of SRI International headquartered in Menlo Park, California, is tackling the most complex issues in education and learning to help students succeed. We work with federal and state agencies, school districts, major foundations, nonprofit organizations, and international and commercial clients to address risk factors that impede learning, assess learning gains, and use technology for educational innovation.

Acknowledgments

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Especially given this work's foundation in our national evaluation of the CC-ELM network, we thank the station staff who tirelessly administered surveys and responded whenever we had questions about the data. We thank the station staff at all 30 CC-ELM who responded to our Year 5 reflection survey and discussed the results with us in January 2020, at our last pre-pandemic, in-person meeting. The evaluation team's station liaisons played an invaluable role by putting data in context throughout each year, and in analysis and reporting. They are: lead Alexandra Adair, Marion Goldstein, Heather Lavigne, Tiffany Maxon, Lucy Nelson, and Alexia Raynal (all EDC); and Sarah Nixon Gerard, Sara Gracely, Sarah Dec, Christopher Ortiz, and Jenna Rush (SRI). Naomi Hupert and Megan Silander (EDC) and Carlin Llorente (formerly SRI) designed the national CC-ELM evaluation

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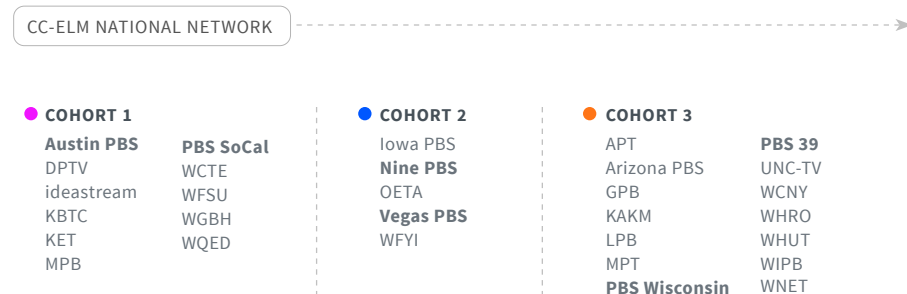
We warmly thank our colleagues who supported us through every stage of the case studies. We very much appreciated guidance and input on drafts from Ready To Learn research leads Shelley Pasnik and Naomi Hupert (EDC) and Phil Vahey (SRI). Jeremy Fritts (SRI) built the database that kept us straight and our data secure. Editor Bronwyn Taggart (EDC) was gracious as ever about our changing page counts and timeline. Designer John Parris (EDC) worked with us to develop a design suited to the work, and collaborated with Rebecca Driscoll and Hemali Patel (EDC) to design the Executive Summary.

About This Study

This study provides insights into strategies associated with success in community partnerships focused on early learning and family engagement that targeted children in families in under-resourced communities.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) selected 30 public media stations to establish these community partnerships as part of the 2015–2020 Ready To Learn Initiative led jointly by CPB and PBS.

Partnering organizations included the stations, schools and Head Start programs, libraries, literacy nonprofits, and afterschool learning programs, as well as organizations such as community centers, interfaith organizations, clinics, housing authorities, and food pantries. Together, they assessed local needs and opportunities and identified target communities in which to focus their work.



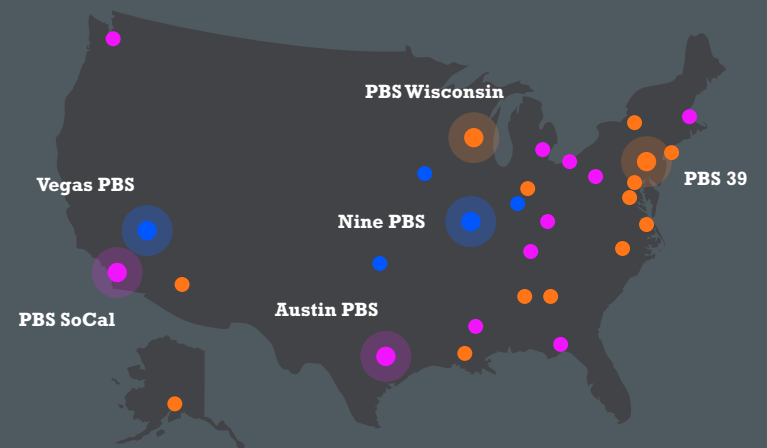
Note: **Case Study CC-ELM** (bolded) in the National CC-ELM Network

→ The partnerships, called **Community Collaboratives for Early Learning and Media or CC-ELM**, sought to

- ⊕ engage and build relationships with children in families in low-income communities through high-quality, media-rich learning programs and other services;
- ⊕ build local parent and educator capacity to support early learning;
- ⊕ mitigate other obstacles, such as food insecurity, that can impede children’s ability to learn.

CPB and PBS established a **national network** of CC-ELM by awarding three cohorts of partnerships in 2015, 2016, and 2018.

Figure 1



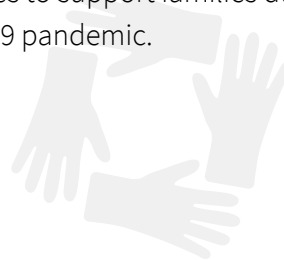
Partnership Activities

While CC-ELM activities varied from community to community by design, depending on the types of programs and services each participating organization offered and the local needs and resources, every CC-ELM offered PBS KIDS Ready To Learn family and child engagement programs. The programs combined digital media and hands-on activities to model “playful learning” approaches.

PBS and selected stations designed the programs and trained both CC-ELM station staff and partners to facilitate them. The programs promoted building relationships with families over time by taking place over multiple sessions and often by welcoming the same families back to different programs.

Over half of the CC-ELM also offered Educator & Community Learning workshops, professional development programs in which educators practice guided play strategies and learn about PBS KIDS digital resources.

CC-ELM offered a rich array of other programs and services as well, including other family learning programs, children’s reading clubs, large-scale community events, job training workshops for parents, support for children to connect with parents who are incarcerated, and “digital backpacks” and other online resources to support families during the COVID-19 pandemic.



In Family & Community Learning workshops (FCLs), parents (or other adult family members) engage in activities alongside their children. Each FCL series usually meets for four 2-hour sessions that begin with a community meal.

Camps have similar learning goals to those of FCLs, but are for children in out-of-school-time settings, such as afterschool or school-break programs.



Who participated
in the study?

30

public media stations and their local partners formed the national CC-ELM networks evaluated by EDC and SRI.

6

CC-ELM were selected for case studies: PBS SoCal, Vegas PBS, Austin PBS, Nine PBS, PBS 39, and PBS Wisconsin.

Research Design

Ready To Learn research partners EDC and SRI worked with CPB and PBS to select six CC-ELM for **case studies**, with the goal of building on findings from their CC-ELM **evaluation**.

For the **evaluation**, EDC and SRI analyzed each year's surveys (2017–2020) that they developed for CC-ELM to administer

- after engagement programs (for parents and facilitators) to investigate program implementation and impacts;
- annually (for station and partner staff) to investigate organizational and community impacts.

Station staff from all 30 CC-ELM also responded to a summative reflection survey in December 2019.

In selecting the six CC-ELM for **case studies**, we sought to highlight exemplary strategies that contributed to the partnerships' success

while also drawing from a range of CC-ELM that was representative of the national network (Figure 1). We then reviewed documents and interviewed 75 people—63 station and partner organization staff, parents, and educators, and 12 CPB and PBS leaders—to examine factors that influenced CC-ELM successes and challenges.



We interviewed

75 

12 CPB and PBS Ready To Learn Leaders



19 Station Staffers

24 Partners

14 Parents

6 Educators

About the Case Reports



Austin PBS



PBS SoCal



Nine PBS

CC-ELM established in 2015

The first 11 CC-ELM generated the lessons learned that later cohorts would build on. Their five-year awards promoted rich partnering relationships and expansion of family, community, and educator impacts. Austin PBS and PBS SoCal were both leaders in the CC-ELM network. Austin PBS shared its work in national meetings, piloted a new Family & Community Learning program, and received a CPB-PBS Scale & Sustainability award. PBS SoCal developed both a Family & Community Learning program and a camp. Stations around the country adopted learning resources that PBS SoCal developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Austin PBS CC-ELM: Expanding opportunities with local district support for scaling the work

This Collaborative, based in Austin, Texas, was formed among a children’s museum, local schools, a family advocacy group, a youth development organization, and an early-learning nonprofit. The team offered both bilingual and Spanish-only programs to welcome local families. As word spread of high family engagement in programs offered by this team, new opportunities arose to partner with the school district. They first developed a parents-only series that took place at school during the school day, with support from district parent engagement funds. Based on success with that

program, the district then sought their help to develop from the PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programs standards-aligned lessons for teachers to use during school. To scale use of the lessons, Austin PBS offered virtual trainings on the lessons, enrolling 60 early elementary educators in the region free of charge. The station has also begun to offer the 5-meeting parent series virtually.

The PBS SoCal CC-ELM: Empowering parents with workforce training and rich school programming

Where other stations collaborated with a handful of organizations to establish their CC-ELM, PBS SoCal listed over 20 partners in its initial project plan. Over time, however, a shared anti-poverty priority emerged among a smaller group. One partner described how, by helping parents to build workforce skills, the team hoped to foster greater agency and independence. PBS SoCal built on its STEM Parent Academy to train parents and hire them as facilitators of PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programs, with the goal that the experience would prepare them for other early education positions. In addition, PBS SoCal deepened its relationship with Compton schools, where parents reported having attended five or even ten school programs with a PBS KIDS element. Thanks to this partnership, PBS SoCal and the school district jointly secured a multi-million dollar award to improve early mathematics learning.

CC-ELM established in 2016

By 2020, this cohort of five CC-ELM was in most regards indistinguishable from those in the founding cohort. Several rose to national leadership roles in the CC-ELM network. Las Vegas PBS developed one of the Family & Community Learning programs and, like Nine PBS, benefited from a supplemental CPB-PBS Scale & Sustainability award.

The Nine PBS CC-ELM: Improving equity within organizations and communities

This partnership focused its efforts in two urban communities, St. Louis City and East St. Louis, and in the Normandy area of St. Louis County. The early stages of the work were humbling, even for the veteran community organizer and engagement leader Nine PBS hired to lead the CC-ELM, who described abandoning myriad assumptions in that phase. This team went on to form rich, mutually beneficial relationships with a children’s literature nonprofit that promotes Black authors and books with Black characters, the St. Louis County Library system, a state history museum, and family and housing advocacy groups. Seeking to improve equity within the CC-ELM team itself, the Nine PBS leader revised hiring practices and established a fellowship program to support staff development. The team made space to reflect on new opportunities by holding regular “Kids and Coffee” meetings.



Vegas PBS



PBS 39



PBS Wisconsin

One partner described viewing organizations as synergistic that he had previously seen as competing for the same resources, after learning more about them through the partnership.

The Vegas PBS CC-ELM: Supporting families across settings, 24-7

This CC-ELM comprised the station, the local school district’s community engagement program, the local library system, family advocacy organizations, an out-of-school learning provider, and a university extension program. The station was already a trusted education partner in the community, but sought with these partners to address more comprehensive needs of families. They aimed to offer programs across settings to provide continuity for families in areas with high school transiency rates. The team also homed in on its potential role in this uniquely 24-7 city, where children may need care—and may have learning opportunities—at any hour. The CC-ELM capitalized on the fact that the informal “friend, family, and neighbor” providers that fill this around-the-clock need register with a local advocacy organization to engage them in a series of workshops focused on playful learning approaches in early STEM. A partner reported observing a sense of community emerging in the group. Like Austin PBS and PBS SoCal, this CC-ELM offered bilingual programs to welcome families who are more comfortable speaking Spanish.

CC-ELM established in 2018, after a planning year

This group of 14 CC-ELM were selected from among 34 stations that had received one-year planning grants from CPB-PBS. This last cohort benefited from the experiences of the previous two—sharing in national meetings, an online community, and informally—but had less time to build relationships or realize deeper organizational change.

The PBS 39 CC-ELM: Building trust and making STEM institutions more accessible with help from ambassadors

The PBS 39 CC-ELM, which focused its work in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, was unusual in that all three of the station’s core partners were informal learning institutions—a museum, a science center, and a nature conservancy. The team initially underestimated how critical local community schools liaisons would be in opening connections to local families and helping to recruit for the programs. By relying on these and other ambassadors to help recruit, and by offering programs first in familiar places, the team built the trust that helped families venture into institutions they had never visited before, including the station itself. Partners who had long struggled with participation from some sectors


of the community—one described a longstanding but underattended free admissions day—described welcoming these families for the first time.

The PBS Wisconsin CC-ELM: Building family engagement in two rural counties through key school connections

A library and schools in two small towns in rural southwestern Wisconsin were delighted to partner with PBS Wisconsin, describing their counties as often overlooked by philanthropic efforts that tend to target more densely populated places. The PBS Wisconsin team, based about one hundred miles away in Madison, built relationships from scratch to develop partnerships and engage families. A local church staff member shared her community knowledge and ties with the station team, who soon learned that local schools played a prominent role in families’ lives. By focusing on the schools, the team came to see principals, secretaries, teachers, and even superintendents taking a hands-on role in recruiting and facilitating to champion the PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programs. School leaders reported unprecedented levels of family engagement, while a library leader also reported greater family engagement after getting to know the families at the nearby school.


Key Findings

Impacts on Partnering Organizations

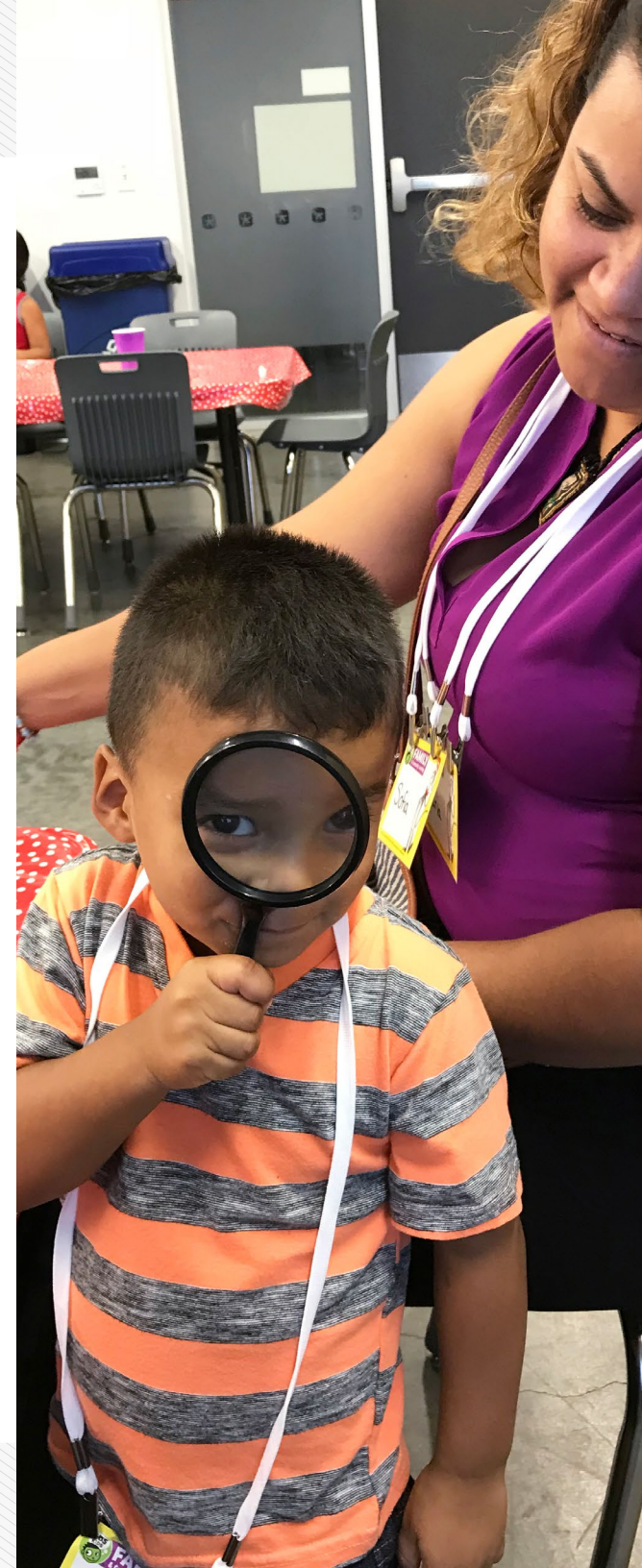
 **Strong partnerships cultivated mutual relationships among all partnering organizations and a deep, multifaceted sense of shared mission and goals.** They also continually assessed needs and opportunities over the course of the work, and adapted flexibly to changing circumstances.



Our mission is to be a catalyst in the community, and a listener and thought partner. This program is exactly that. We are listening and providing that change, evolving with the community around us. —*PBS 39 station staff member*

 **Successful partnerships resulted in increased organizational and staff capacity.** Staff of partnering organizations reported gaining greater understanding of how to promote equity in early learning and how to lead culturally responsive family and community engagement work. Leaders noted the CC-ELM provided opportunities for staff development and improved internal collaboration. We saw the strongest evidence of these changes in partnerships that were at least three years old.

 **Community brokers and ambassadors were vital in developing trusted relationships with families.** Partners and stations both played this role for the CC-ELM, as did individuals not affiliated with partnering organizations but well-known and highly regarded in the target communities. Brokers served as connectors, while ambassadors were community advocates for the work. Station or partner staff from the target communities could play both roles. The CC-ELM that initially underestimated the need for brokers and ambassadors quickly learned that high family participation followed relationship-building.





Community brokers and ambassadors were vital in developing trusted relationships with families.





Museums in general have kind of a stigma around them, that they're only for a certain type of people. ... So, we really wanted to start to break down those barriers and identify ways to continue to build our relationship with the communities.

—Children's museum partner in the Austin PBS CC-ELM

It's going in as somebody who wants to support and somebody who is recognizing the community that you're going into is the expert and you're not. And I think that's a critical lens to have.

—PBS Wisconsin station staff member

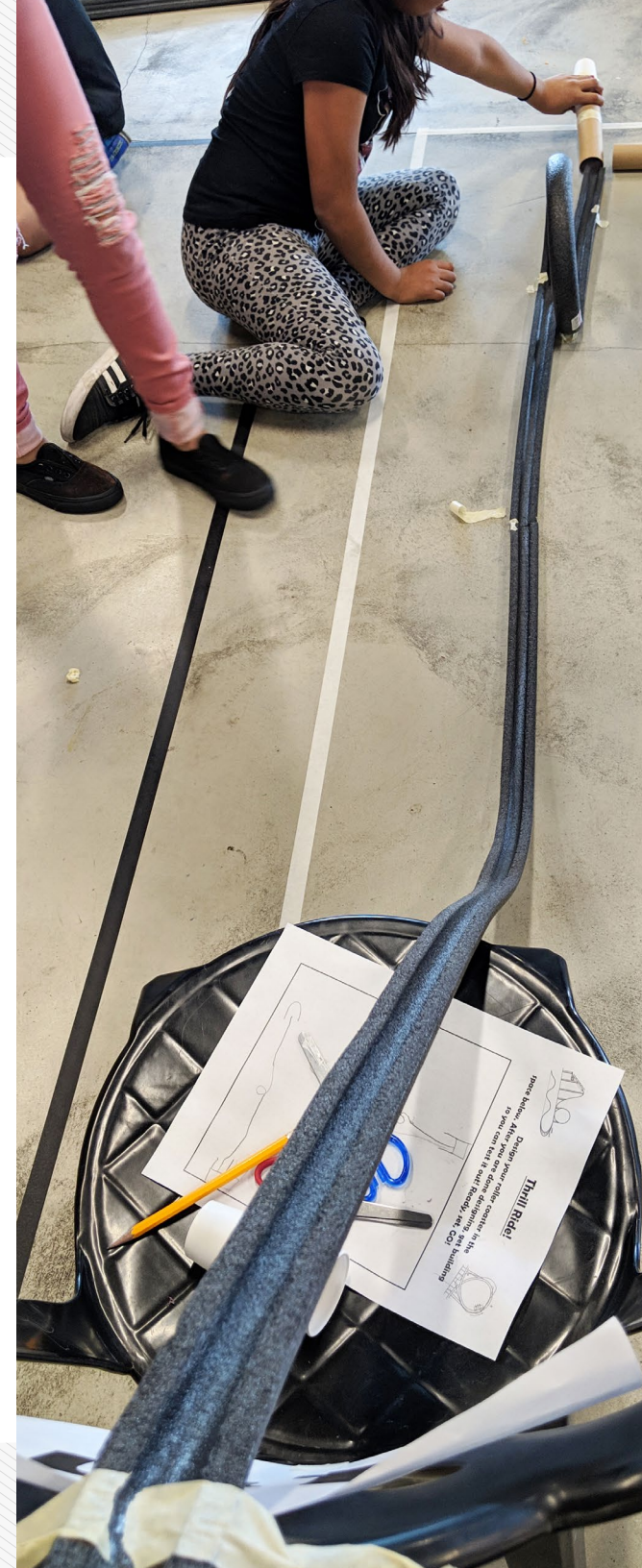
 **CC-ELM saw high participation from families when programs were designed to welcome them.** Accessible, inclusive programs had a foundation of trusted relationships, welcomed whole families in a familiar setting, featured a community meal, were scheduled around parents' work and other family obligations, were bilingual if needed, and offered support for children with disabilities. Schools and other partners who observed high, ongoing engagement from families who had historically not been as engaged reevaluated their expectations of these parents.

 **Partnering organizations rose into more prominent leadership roles and gained influence** as some CC-ELM expanded beyond their family and community engagement efforts to take a broader place in the local or regional early learning and family advocacy landscape. Partners benefited from funders' and families' high regard for PBS. Stations and partners alike reported the CC-ELM had led to new funding opportunities and new partnering relationships.



It's not just the numbers of sessions we offer, it's more building up the educational ecosystem, building stronger partners, having people able to use the resources better.

—Nine PBS CC-ELM leader





CC-ELM saw high participation from families when programs were designed to welcome them.



Impacts on Families, Communities, and Educators

Parents felt empowered by gaining knowledge, skills, and confidence in supporting their young children's learning.

They spoke of gaining new insights into their children's strengths and interests. Parents described how they used strategies and PBS KIDS resources they had learned about in CC-ELM programs in their families. They also reported increased understanding of how to use media and technology for learning, and valuing that their children gained proficiency with tablet and PBS KIDS apps.



Yes, I know I can teach my children. I have more ideas for how to help [him] learn—not just using a notebook ... he doesn't have to learn only through reading and writing, but also through exploration, seeing, and imagining. ... I have used some of the tools they gave us there. And sometimes even I try to do other things, or search for things they can do.


Sí, sé que le puedo enseñar a los niños. Tengo más ideas para que el niño aprenda—no nada más en un cuaderno. ... el niño no solo tiene que aprender leyendo y escribiendo, sino también explorando, viendo, e imaginando ... La verdad yo sí he utilizado algunas de las herramientas que nos dieron allí. Y hasta a veces yo misma intento hacer otras cosas o buscar cosas que puedan hacer.

—Parent who had participated in and facilitated Family & Community Learning workshops in Las Vegas



Families gained access to—and began using—a wider range of community learning resources.

Parents reported they began to use local libraries, to visit museums or other cultural organizations, and to attend school and station-led programs more often after building relationships with staff from these organizations and participating in programs designed to welcome them. Stations, libraries, museums, and a wildlife conservancy were among those reporting new relationships and participation from families for whom they had long struggled to make their resources accessible. Staff also reported connecting families with other local services, such as food pantries.

 Parents and partners reported that a **stronger sense of community** developed among participating families as they got to know each other through shared meals and collaborative activities, and that they built on those relationships to engage more with community learning resources.

Children gained knowledge as well as increased communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills.

Parents described how their children talked about program concepts and activities after participating. They reported being impressed with what they described as newfound confidence their children had after participating.

Educators learned new approaches for engaging children in early literacy and STEM learning, and for deepening children’s learning, by participating in professional development offered by the CC-ELM. In Educator & Community Learning workshops, educators learned about PBS KIDS Ready To Learn resources and how to use them in their teaching. Some reported seeing increases in children’s communication skills after using guided play pedagogy and PBS KIDS resources.

Scale and Sustainability

The CC-ELM work promoted longer-term partnerships among participating organizations. Stations and partners were motivated to sustain collaborations they viewed as increasing the impacts of their work for children and families. They also reported securing additional funding or plans to seek additional funding for new joint efforts.

Participating organizations opened new opportunities by becoming “go-to resources” in their areas. Stations and partners reported that, as a result of their CC-ELM work, organizations they had not previously worked with now consider them key players in addressing local and regional needs. They reported being contacted by state education leaders, school districts, early learning programs, libraries, and others.

Some CC-ELM expanded the reach of PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programs by training others. Stations reported training staff at other public media stations and leading trainings at early learning conferences. Others trained educators through Educator & Community Learning professional development. In some CC ELM, partners began offering the programs independently.





The CC-ELM work promoted longer-term partnerships among participating organizations.

Recommendations

From these findings, we developed the following recommendations for people involved in community partnership work, particularly in partnerships involving public media stations or focused on improving equity and outcomes in early learning.

☆ **Plan from the start to sustain efforts beyond a given award.** Selecting partners with strong mission alignment, developing deeply mutual partner relationships, and building organizational capacity and increasing the partnerships' reach and influence all supported sustainability.

☆ **Commit to gaining deep understandings of the needs and assets of a well-defined target community.** Partners generated this understanding by jointly conducting a needs assessment process to identify partners, inform plans, and hone their strategies. Sometimes the target community successfully identified by partners was different from the community initially

envisioned by the station. More successful CC-ELM viewed assessing needs and assets as a critical ongoing strategy in which partners maintain “a listening stance” as those factors evolve.

☆ **Gain internal buy-in.** It is wise to invest time and resources early on to communicate the importance of the partnership work within an organization and to secure the backing of other leaders and internal stakeholders. Throughout the work, maintain internal buy-in by engaging stakeholders in sample programming, communicating positive impacts within and across teams, and working to ensure “a seat at the table” for partnership leaders in organizational decision-making.



“When I came on board, it was easy to see that our focus and groups we wanted to work with were those who shared the same mission—people truly motivated and inspired with family and community work, working with families. . . . We needed organizations who could work with families at all times.

—Vegas PBS station staff member

☆ **Earn community buy-in.** It is well worth partners' efforts to look outward and raise awareness about their programs, services, and impacts among community stakeholders. Such communications increased family participation, attracted new partners, and opened new avenues for funding.

☆ **Get to know the families.** Nurturing relationships with families is key. It is not enough to offer free admission days or programs open to all. To truly achieve and sustain positive community impacts, invest time in getting to know families by listening to their needs, building trust, inviting them to participate more actively in the programming, and adjusting strategies based on what you learn, such as by offering programming in a relevant language or at convenient times for working families.

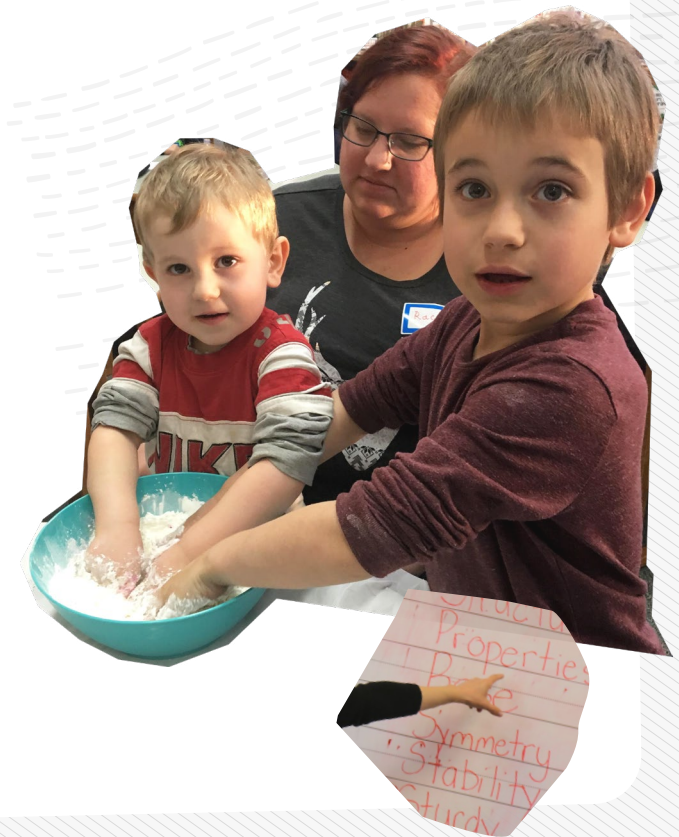
☆ **Staff your team with the right complement of expertise.** This includes hiring additional people with particular expertise to support the work, which may necessitate belt-tightening in other areas, but the benefits to programming over time

can result in financial and other resource gains that exceed those initial investments. Thoughtful staffing also involves having the right people in well-defined roles so that, collectively, the team has the breadth of expertise needed to implement successful programming. CC ELM required the expertise of educators, as well as those with skills in managing community partnerships, fundraising, and communications. Some CC-ELM also benefited from hiring individuals from the community who brought a deeper understanding of needs and assets to the work.

☆ **Make space and time to nurture the partnership.** This involves a focus on joint planning, reflecting on each other's strengths and needs, and learning about one another's work beyond the scope of the current collaborative project. A networked view of the partnership, in which partners connect with one another as well as with one organizational nucleus, also helps make the whole far greater than the sum of its parts.

☆ **Plan for personnel changes.**

A partnership is on unstable ground if it relies on the staying power of a single leader. Mitigate impacts of staff turnover by fostering ties with people who have long histories in the target community and in related efforts. If they leave one organization, they are likely to open a new partnering opportunity when they go to another.



Learn More

- Read the cross-case analysis and six individual case reports here at: edc.org/CC-ELM
- Program guides for the PBS KIDS Ready To Learn Family & Community Learning workshops are available at: <https://pbslearningmedia.org/collection/pbs-kids-family-community-learning>
- Materials for PBS KIDS Ready To Learn camps and other out-of-school resources can be found at: <https://pbslearningmedia.org/collection/rtl-oosresources>
- EDC and SRI's engagement measures for CC-ELM implementation and impacts, along with the community needs assessment tool, are available in the Ready To Learn instrument repository (search for "CC-ELM"): <http://cct.edc.org/rtl/data-collection-tools>
- EDC and SRI's other research studies of PBS KIDS Ready To Learn resources: <https://www.edc.org/ready-learn>