

Early Childhood Community Engagement

How can New Hampshire be the best place for all children and their families to play, learn, and grow?

A NH Listens Summary Report

February 2017



ABOUT NH LISTENS



New Hampshire Listens is a civic engagement initiative of the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire.

Our mission:

To bring people together for engaged conversations and informed community solutions

Our work:

- Create engaged community conversations on local and statewide issues
- Serve as a resource and support network for new local Listens groups
- Cultivate a network of facilitators for public engagement and action

Our principles:

- Bring people together from all walks of life
- Provide time for in-depth, informed conversations
- Respect differences as well as seek common ground
- Achieve outcomes that lead to informed community solutions

New Hampshire Listens

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Early Childhood Public Engagement Matters

In the first few years of a child’s life, hundreds of neural connections form in the brain. When children engage with and receive thoughtful responses¹ from adults, they form strong relationships that bolster healthy growth. Creating conditions (in the home, at school/child care, and in the community) that promote robust brain development and reduce toxic stress² early on is likely to be more effective and less costly than healing the effects of adverse experiences later in life.³ Families of all backgrounds and incomes can benefit from carefully woven supports across public and private services that foster strong starts for children, spanning prenatal wellness to early learning and family engagement.

Project Overview

Background

New Hampshire has begun to develop comprehensive early childhood systems and system changes that attend to family supports, young children’s development, and practitioners’ needs (for example, see Spark NH’s⁴ [Comprehensive Plan for Early Childhood](#) and [Framework for Action](#)). These concerted efforts help ensure every child has the opportunity to reach his/her full potential and that every community is capable of responding to the needs of its youngest members and families. It is a collective impact initiative in which “organizations and community members work together at a systemic level to achieve a complex community-wide goal.”⁵

Purpose

In early 2016, NH Listens partnered with the [Endowment for Health](#) and [NH Charitable Foundation](#) to develop local early childhood field strategies,⁶ namely, promoting the identification and adoption of shared goals and policy priorities for New Hampshire’s young children and their families. Eight communities (Claremont, Greater Nashua, Greater Tilton, Mount Washington Valley (MWV), the Monadnock Region, Laconia, Rochester, and Somersworth) were selected to create (or build upon existing) local/regional coalitions of stakeholders committed to designing innovative, effective, and sustained community supports (in the form of short- and long-term programmatic initiatives, new investments, or policy changes).

¹ Responses may vary depending on cultural beliefs and backgrounds. See Quinn, N. & Mageo, J. (2013). Attachment Reconsidered: Cultural Perspectives on a Western Theory. NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

² From “Toxic Stress” by the Center on the Developing Child Harvard University, 2016. Visit <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/> to read the entire entry.

³ From “The Science of Early Childhood Development” by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, for more information visit <http://www.developingchild.net>.

⁴ Spark NH has recently convened a community of practice among these local and regional initiatives.

⁵ From Community Engagement Matters (Now More than Ever) by Barnes, M. & Schmitz, P., 2016. For the whole article visit https://ssir.org/articles/entry/community_engagement_matters_now_more_than_ever.

⁶ Visit the “Ensuring the Healthy Development of Young Children” webpage on the Endowment for Health website at <http://www.endowmentforhealth.org/our-priorities/ensuring-the-healthy-development-of-young-children>.

Technical Assistance and Coaching

NH Listens provided technical assistance supporting the design and facilitation of engagement initiative and the analysis of resulting data. The data qualitatively documented public perspectives and preferences providing the basis for short- and long-term goals and action planning. Communities were coached to build innovative ideas for children and families by: (1) establishing and/or expanding effective, sustained, and diverse early childhood leadership coalitions or short-term action groups serving as trusted, bipartisan advocates; (2) increasing participation from traditionally underrepresented community members whose perspectives can deepen civic processes; and (3) developing specific strategies and concrete steps for enhancing public and private support for policies and programs. NH Listens also encouraged local steering committee members to bend the barriers of organizational roles to build a larger coalition or join existing efforts. In sum, group leaders continually thought about: Who else needs to be heard? What has to happen next? Are our plans feasible? And who can lead and support implementation?

Engagement Summary

Local Leadership

To begin, each community formed a steering committee consisting of 3 to 15 members. Groups included:

- School districts (including administrators, teachers, English for Speakers of Other Languages)
- Early childhood educators and administrators
- Child care center directors
- Family resource center directors
- Public health center family coordinators
- Head Start/Early Head Start administrators
- Early intervention directors
- Faith leaders
- Community organizing non-profits (such as United Way, Impact Monadnock)
- Higher and adult educators
- Municipal leaders and elected officials
- Chamber of commerce and local business leaders

People Engaged and Activities Held

Balancing family, work, and play themselves, these dedicated individuals began building coalition membership and capacity for approximately eight months. They shared information about significant early childhood topics (for example, brain development during the first 5 years, and early prevention of substance abuse and misuse) and welcomed the voices of multiple sectors across 54 activities, engaging over 1,000 people (summarized in Table 1) representing:

- Health professionals
- Educators and administrators
- Business owners and chambers of commerce
- Municipal leaders and elected officials
- Child care providers
- Family supports and services, including early intervention
- Mental and behavioral health
- Families
- Women in transition
- Seniors
- Non-profits
- Community organizers
- Faith communities
- Future early childhood educators
- Other concerned residents

School partnerships played a critical organizing role in many of the communities. In general, those communities* with school partners hosted higher numbers of events and involved a higher number of people (see Table 1). Reasons for this may include broader outreach to families and the school as a key pillar to community outreach and engagement.

Each activity engaged community members by posing open-ended questions which were either answered individually or in a facilitated conversation. For example, questions included:

- How can (insert community) be the best place for all young children to live, grow, and play?
- What do you appreciate about (insert community) when it comes to families getting what they need for young children to thrive?
- What resources and information are hardest to find and understand?
- What are the most important actions the community can take on behalf of families and children?
- How will our communities be different in 2–3 years as a result of the actions we take?

Table 2 shows a summary of engagement across all eight communities. The action forums had a higher number of participants since these activities were often framed as the culminating engagement event after educational or information outreach activities such as screenings of “Raising NH” or focus groups. Action forums were geared toward identifying goals and priorities for implementation planning.

Implementation Planning

Steering committees identified goals and determined short- and long-term actions using the information from the public engagement activities summarized above. Steering committees had to consider how they would gather concrete commitments to build their coalition; partner with decision makers (local, regional, and state) to assure sustainability and funding; and nurture emerging leaders dedicated to early childhood issues and innovative solutions (see Appendix A for each community’s engagement summary, goals, and initial plans). General themes emerging across communities included:

- **Increasing mental/behavioral health supports for families and children** (including expanding community-based programs for prevention, toxic stress, and poverty)
- **Expanding access and affordability to quality (out-of-home) care** for infant, preschool, and before/ afterschool care

Table 1. Activities and People Engaged by Community

Community	# of Events	# of People Engaged
Laconia	3	74
Rochester	4	78
Greater Tilton	5	32
Monadnock Region*	6	128
Somersworth*	7	174
Mt. Washington Valley*	8	139
Claremont*	8	264
Greater Nashua*	13	120
Total	54	1009

Table 2. Summary of Early Childhood Engagement Activities and People Engaged by Type

Type of Event	# of Events	# of People
Action Forums	12	343
Community Festivals and Event Outreach	9	247
Raising NH Screenings and Conversation	9	153
Focus Groups	16	111
Online Survey	3	66
Goal Setting	3	45
Community Asset Mapping	2	44
Total	54	1009

- **Creating hubs for parent education, resources, and support** (including [Vroom!](#) launches; family resource guides; virtual, mobile, or in-place family resource centers; and comprehensive home visiting programs)
- **Developing family-friendly communities** where families can relate to one another through free and out-of-school activities (such as in libraries, parks, and community centers)
- **Understanding families' financial needs and struggles** (including affording and accessing child care, transportation, housing, and local family-friendly workplace policies)
- **Continuing to build sustainable local early childhood coalitions** and including/strengthening networks that already exist (needing funding for dedicated leadership and coordination, including underrepresented voices as emerging leaders)

For individual community goals, key actions, and contact information see Appendix A. *Contact those who started these initiatives to learn more about their work and how to get involved.*

Conclusions and Future Work

Communities need to grow and sustain early childhood engagement that supports social change and benefits families. Across the state, families and their children face barriers when trying to access services and resources that not only meet their basic needs but also early learning opportunities leading to positive futures. Over and over, the public attending early childhood community engagement events expressed concerns about:

- **Meeting Basic Needs** (including reliable transportation and affordable housing)
- **Family Wellness** (including family-friendly workplaces and finding mental/behavioral health supports)
- **Family Support and Education** (including home visiting, needs for resource libraries or centers—online, mobile, or in-place and community gathering spaces)
- **Early Learning and Care** (including affordable care options and quality care facilities, access to education, and professional development for providers)

Looking to lower these barriers and persevere through the challenges of coalition building, all eight communities involved in early childhood engagement activities this past year will hopefully continue to build their leadership teams and broaden their early childhood capacity with a variety of voices represented. Their work aligns with multiple initiatives in place across the state (for example, Child Care Aware, Seacoast Early Learning Alliance, Early Learning NH, Spark NH, Civix Action Group – Family-Friendly Economy, United Way – Ready for K!, Project Aware, among others). Although these regional and statewide projects are in place and offer tremendous resources for early childhood systems coordination, it is important for local coalitions to draw from their own local leadership while also finding new early childhood advocates living and accessing supports in their communities. This early childhood engagement work at the state and local levels continues to grow, providing New Hampshire's children and families with publicly vetted supports and services that meet their needs.

We are grateful for the generous support from the Endowment for Health and the NH Charitable Foundation. Ongoing thanks for the collaboration and guidance received from Spark NH, the Governor's advisory council on early childhood. These organizations continuously work toward improved outcomes for children and families.

Community Snapshots

Claremont Early Childhood Coalition

Contact Information: Lauren Simpson, Claremont Learning Partnership, lsimpson@sau6.org; Cory LeClair, SAU 6, cleclair@sau6.org

Goals and Key Actions			
Infant, Preschool, and Before/After School Care	Mental/Behavioral Health Support	Parent Education and Knowledge	Transportation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase available child care spots, staffing, and hours • Make child care more affordable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop more community “play and socialize” events • Hire more behavioral support specialists in schools and the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a family resource guide • Provide classes on early childhood growth and development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase local transportation options so families can get to programs, events, and child care
First Implementation Steps			
<p>The steering committee identified their first priority as setting some specific goals and activities important to the entire community.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After meeting with the community and business leaders as well as the general public, we set some specific goals that have been shown as important to the entire community. A final gathering of the greater coalition to discuss the goals was established. • We met with the broader coalition and shared with them what goals have been shown as important to the community. We then asked the coalition to choose a goal they would like to work on—this resulted in four separate action teams. Timelines, specific activities to be accomplished, and who will be doing those things were established. Claremont’s efforts align with other initiatives and funding (for example, through a Nellie Mae Education Foundation grant and Systems of Care grant). 			

Greater Nashua Early Childhood Coalition

Contact Information: Liz Fitzgerald, Greater Nashua United Way, Ifitzgerald@unitedwaynashua.org

Goals and Key Actions			
Build and sustain a Greater Nashua Family Collaborative focused on identifying universal touch points, universal (destigmatized) parent supports, and ECE provider support in a multi-sector network.			
Improve transitions and increase cross-system collaborations (Family Centered Goals)	Support early childhood educators (Provider Centered Goals)	Build family support systems	Communicate with families about early child development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand access to transition supports Refine goals and implementation plan to increase collaboration FOR families Create shared messaging and EC goals across agencies Inventory and fortify family friendly spaces in Greater Nashua 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build universal community understanding and value for early childhood success across stakeholder groups including increased respect for early childhood professionals Engage employers and advocate for increased wages and family friendly ECE and workplaces Increase professional development opportunities (training, continuing education, peer mentors, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop coordinated family supports and eliminate perceived stigma around accessing family supports Increase awareness of EC services and parenting resources; tap under-utilized services such as home visiting and parent support groups Support family stability (jobs and livable wages, housing, and energy assistance) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connect families with ECE and public schools and link young families to parenting resources, supports, and services including “universal touch points” Foster inclusive parenting community across diverse demographic groups (socio-economic, race and ethnicity, high risk and low risk, etc.) Market key messages and touch points (including Vroom!) across Greater Nashua
First Implementation Steps			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formalize the structure of our planning group, and identify the individuals and organizations that will anchor each of the goals and be responsible for delivering the objectives. This includes connecting with other EC groups and initiatives. Identify individuals and organizations that will anchor each goal (or group of goals) and provide primary project management. Engage key stakeholders and providers missing from the current table, and build stronger engagement from local employer base and local businesses. Create a series of “universal touch points” for families in our community that begin prenatally and continue throughout the first five years in a child’s life. Through these touch points, we will elevate awareness for the critical first five years of growth and brain development and promote active parenting. 			

Greater Tilton Area (GTA) Early Childhood Coalition

Contact Information: Michelle Betts, GTA Family Resource Center at Northfield–Tilton Congregational Church, ntccpastormb@gmail.com

Goals and Key Actions			
Coordinated Early Childhood System	Positive Early Learning Experiences	Health Children and Families	Strong Families
Establish a network of educators and ECE providers to connect across agencies in order to create a well-coordinated system for Early Childhood Education in the GTA	Increase opportunities for free activities, for learning in and out of school, and for conveying the importance of the early years	Develop and expand community-based programs focused prevention, toxic stress, treatment, and poverty	Strengthen parent and family support programs
First Implementation Steps			
Build the GTA's early childhood coalition capacity by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding funds for the GTA Early Childhood Network, which would include an initial year of organizing and facilitation • Completing an assets and gaps analysis with co-partners/potential leaders from school districts and child cares • Strengthening the GTA-FRC through funding for a coach and facilitator for strategic and business planning as well as funding for personnel stipends 			

Impact Monadnock and Regional SAUs – Early Childhood Initiative

Contact Information: Marj Droppa, Impact Monadnock and Monadnock United Way, marj@muw.org; Reuben Duncan, SAU 47 at r.duncan@sau47.org

Goals and Key Actions	
Coalition building, collaborating, networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better integrate schools and community—connect with private, nonprofit providers • Create an early childhood professional community to share stories and best practices • Reduce silos, get all players together to marshal resources and information • Train public school teachers and early childhood educators on available resources
Child-family interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on early literacy and language • Support social emotional relationships and attachment • Create time for outdoor play, exercise, good nutrition
Out-of-home child care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable, high quality programs for all • Care that fills the gaps in the calendar • Link day care and senior centers
Family support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent education—newborn resources, high school parenting courses • Mental and emotional support • Early diagnosis of children with special needs and early intervention • Ensure financial stability and good jobs (living wage)
Communication and information sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document what is working and disseminate it—providers and families • Clearinghouse for families to connect families with resources
Systems Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More flexible, inclusive practices made by informed policy makers—evaluate what’s working and replicate it • Encourage family-friendly businesses—child care and its benefits for employers and employees • Increase community awareness and advocacy—brain development, the early years, and universal preschool
Role of public schools and their partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable, universal preschool with spots for all children • Bring existing programs into the schools, integrating with the community • Use school facilities for community centers, parent education, primary care • Connect nonprofit early childhood providers with community college and high school lab programs
First Implementation Steps	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School districts plan to partner with one another and Impact Monadnock to educate the public about early childhood (for example, Vroom! and Mind in the Making). • They will also develop a learning community focused on early childhood for school districts and community stakeholders (such as faith ministries and businesses). • SAU 47 Superintendent Reuben Duncan will chair the effort to create an annual Learning Community event with the first one being during March through May, 2017. 	

Mt. Washington Valley (MWV) and Carroll County Early Childhood Coalition

Contact Information: Pam Stimpson, SAU 9 Director of Special Services, p_stimpson@sau9.org; Emily Benson, Carroll County Coalition for Public Health of Granite United Way, Emily.Benson@graniteuw.org

Goals and Key Actions		
Increase awareness of the importance of early childhood development to ensure that all children in MWV will thrive	Increase the ability for families to access quality early childhood programming	Develop a Family Resource Program to ensure that families have well-coordinated resources for acquiring skills and supports to enhance their children’s development and learning from birth through age 5
<p>Family resource program will ensure all families have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to the services needed to improve life outcomes and educational programs respecting and empowering families • Knowledge of the programs and services for children birth through age 5, so families have access to the programs through adequate transportation services or scholarship funding • A trusted source for early childhood services across a continuum of care to ensure smooth transitions between all stages of a child’s development 	<p>People will be better informed through “Spark NH Bedrock” presentations about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of brain development in the early years and the best ways to support children in order to lay a solid foundation for the future • The ways children can have quality early childhood experiences in all settings, including home, child care, and throughout their communities • The importance of investing in the early years and the need for programs to be better coordinated to reduce duplication and costs 	
First Implementation Steps		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to research and begin to address the barriers families experience in accessing quality early childhood programming through collaboration with local organizations. • Present “Bedrock” presentation and updates on local early childhood programming efforts to MWV community groups in 2017 asking for participation and support for early childhood efforts. • Pursue development of a Family Resource Program in collaboration with existing organizations. • Find staff and training to coordinate and present “Bedrock” presentations and funding for a staff person to develop and oversee Family Resource Program design and implementation. 		

Somersworth Ready Together! Early Childhood Coalition

Contact Information: Kerry Martinelli, SAU 56 early educator, KMartinelli@SAU56.ORG; Jolene Francoeur, SAU 56 English as a Second Language Coordinator, jfrancoeur@SAU56.ORG

Goals and Key Actions

Continue to involve a cross-sector of representation to build our early childhood coalition with the purpose to address the health, family engagement, and early learning for the children and families of Somersworth

Use our coalition (that involves multiple agencies and leaders) to build the necessary capacity to reach a greater number of children, families, and providers in the community (thinking about incentives and ways each can get involved)

Develop a 3–5 year plan for engagement (such as advocacy, funding, sustainability)

Family-friendly city—Creating “Community Thinkscapes” to provide opportunities for children to interact with adults as they build language and literacy skills, serving as a visual reminder that Somersworth values children and creates a solid foundation for learning.

Bridging activities between home, school, and community serve as a way to provide family education while developing a long-term partnership. Activities may be virtual, mobile, or center-based within a school.

Creating a family resource center or hub for information: Mobile resources, communication platform, or center to bring resources/information to families.

First Implementation Steps

- **Pre-Work:** In general, sub-committees for each activity listed will be formed over the next 1–2 years. A steering committee member participates in each to define clear implementation plans for each effort. In order to coordinate, initiate, and carry out these activities, ideally the SECC would like to find funding for a part-time to full-time coordinator.
- **Activity 1:** Community Storytimes to increase library use (1–6 months—January 2017): To promote early literacy (and library use) and provide parent education and supports. Moving forward, elementary and school librarians will make plans to provide storytimes at child cares and other locations with children birth to five.
- **Activity 2:** Block Parties (5–8 months—January 2017): Neighborhood events connecting early childhood educators and service providers with residents (for example, A VROOM! launch and “Books for All”). Subcommittees will organize events (potentially annual) to bring information about the schools and services available to families in Somersworth.
- **Activity 3:** Community Thinkscapes (https://kaboom.org/playability/play_everywhere/gallery/urban_thinkscape) – Family Friendly City (1–3 years beginning in January 2017): A subcommittee needs to form and engage community partners to help build ideas and installations for promoting literacy and language.
- **Other Activities being considered** for the next 1–5 years: School-based learning activities, Pre-K Home Visiting, Family Resource Center, and Mobile Van.

Team Up Rochester (TUR): Early Childhood Coalition

Contact Information: Lauren Wool, United Way of the Greater Seacoast, lwool@uwgs.org

Goals and Key Actions	
<p>Launch a community-wide “Vroom!” Promotion (Goal: School readiness variability)</p>	<p>Strengthen Rochester’s ability to provide quality early care and education (ECE) by creating a Rochester centric network/coalition of providers and educators (Goal: Building the sustainability for Early Learning strength in the community)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a plan for promoting Vroom! across Rochester (families, parents with new-borns, hospitals, child care, etc.) • Project Coordinator (YMCA) and backbone organization (United Way of the Greater Seacoast) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TUR needs support networking and strengthening relationships between EC Educators, elementary school teachers, and key family support providers to improve continuity. • Focus on areas such as trauma-informed care, nonjudgmental supports, challenging behaviors, and Strengthening Families Framework • Address struggles with child care and educator communication and data sharing across programs.
First Implementation Steps	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convening support for early childhood network to get buy-in on coalition building. • Launch a comprehensive community-wide Vroom! Promotion. • Secure funding for a convener/coach and stipend support for local coalition co-chairs. 	

Thrive Laconia Early Childhood Coalition

Contact Information: Marti Ilg, Lakes Region Child Care Services, marti@lrchildcare.org; Erin Pettengill, Lakes Region Community Services Family Resource Center, erin.pettengill@lrccs.org

Goals and Key Actions				
Creating opportunities for Families to Connect	Develop proper and enough [child care] staffing	Promote an understanding of poverty	Increase transportation options	Promote the qualities of family-friendly workplaces
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent and community education—for everyone • Help develop family networks of care in the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work on livable wages for early childhood practitioners • Collaborate with colleges so agencies can recruit trained providers—New student enrollment dropping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create opportunities for public education (via reading groups or poverty simulation) • Help employers understand poverty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore families’ lack of accessible and reliable transportation to jobs, child care, appointments—few routes available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize the economic development council • Help employers understand what is a livable wage and what they can do to support families
First Implementation Steps				
<p>To move forward, Thrive will need financial support and commitments from key community leaders and families.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thrive is organizing another community event in February to signify this group being a solid piece of the community and to develop commitments from core members. • They are looking to host a “Bridges Out of Poverty” training for the community to develop an awareness of how poverty can affect all aspects of life. • They will continue to create more connections within the community with families that may otherwise not have a natural support system. • They hope to hire a part-time staff that is solely dedicated to seeing this process through. 				

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