Preschool Community Partnership Case Study #3: Leveraging Funding and Program Coordination

This case study was developed by the Early Care and Education Consortium (ECEC) and is based on discussions with the U.S. Department of Education Office of Early Learning. It is part of a series of case studies designed to highlight successful public-private preschool partnerships in states and localities around the country. Each case study is available at www.ececonsortium.org.

Executive Summary
Children benefit when programs work together to expand access and increase quality. A successful collaboration between schools and early learning community-based programs builds on the strengths of each system. This case study highlights a highly successful partnership among three partners: the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, Pottstown Early Action for Kindergarten Readiness (PEAK), and Montgomery Early Learning Centers (MELC) Pottstown Center. Each organization has a distinct and critical role in assuring 60 children receive a high-quality early learning experience in the Pottstown community in eastern Pennsylvania. These organizations work in partnership to:

- Build the capacity for the local school district to serve children through leveraging existing resources among high-quality community child care providers.
- Braid and blend multiple funding streams to enhance the quality of the programs.
- Demonstrate quality through accreditation by a nationally/internationally recognized entity and high ratings on Pennsylvania’s Keystone Stars (Quality Rating and Improvement System),
- Use a model of shared leadership to jointly coordinate school district and MELC program leaders.
- Make shared professional development available to all early learning staff.

The Partners

- **Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts** is the state’s public-private initiative to provide access to high quality, licensed preschool programs for children 3, 4 and 5 years old in low income communities.
- **Pottstown Early Action for Kindergarten Readiness (PEAK)** is a public-private partnership which secures funds from multiple sources (Pre-K Counts, United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey, Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and other donations and grants) and then uses these funds to support high quality local early learning programs.
- **Montgomery Early Learning Centers (MELC)** is the entity which provides the direct services for children ages six weeks to 12 years from diverse social economic backgrounds. In this partnership, MELC is the direct service provider of 3 Pre-K Counts classrooms at their Pottstown Center.
State and Local Early Childhood System Landscape

State Context
Approximately one-third (35%) of Pennsylvania’s children under age five participate in publicly-funded quality early education programs including Early Intervention, Head Start, Keystone STARS, Pre-K Counts and home visiting programs. Pennsylvania’s Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) oversees the state’s network of early care and learning programs, grouped under the PA Keys to Quality Initiative. These programs include subsidized child care and Head Start, as well as the state-funded pre-k program, Pre-K Counts. Currently, approximately 18% of all of the state’s three- and four-year-olds attend Pre-K Counts, which in 2014-15 represented 13,800 children.\(^i\)

Pennsylvania was awarded a Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Fund grant in 2013, which the state has used to improve program quality and close the achievement gap for at-risk students so they can enter kindergarten ready to succeed. The state has combined a statewide approach to improving the system and supports for providers, teachers, and families with a local community-based approach to provide intensive supports and local grants to 50 of Pennsylvania’s highest risk communities.\(^ii\)

Local Context
PEAK is the local entity that coordinates early learning programs in the Pottstown community, blending and braiding various funding sources mentioned earlier and PEAK driving the initiative locally. The goals of PEAK are:

- Every three- and four-year-old child has access to high-quality child care, early childhood education, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.
- Every parent of young children has access to the high-quality skill building and resources needed to prepare them to be their child’s first “teacher” and to prepare their children for success in school.
- Every child has access to health and wellness services to ensure that they are prepared to maximize their potential in school.

This unique collaboration in Pottstown forms a unified, common vision for early childhood education in the community with the expectation this effort increase quality in early learning programs, increased resources for families, and improved readiness for school. PEAK does not deliver services but works with entities that do to form one common vision for early childhood education in the community resulting in higher quality early learning programs, increased resources for families and improved readiness for school.

Program Background
Founded in 1964, MELC is a regional leader in providing families throughout Pennsylvania with affordable, high-quality educational environments for children aged six weeks to 12 years from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. MELC’s mission is to develop, provide and advocate for high-quality learning and school age programs for all children. MELC is accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)- The program is particularly noted for providing effective staff
education, strong leadership and management, and family and community partnerships. MELC has its own professional development and technical assistance unit that provides training and support to their own staff as well as to staff around the state. Through its professional development arm MELC reaches over 1,000 Greater Philadelphia early childhood and school-age providers annually.

Today, through 300 staff in Montgomery and Philadelphia counties MELC serves over 1,400 children in 19 early childhood and school-age sites. Six of these sites are early childhood centers serving the 0-5 population, including a site in West Philadelphia, which serves families who are predominantly supported by subsidy. MELC’s 13 school-age programs provide both before and after school services, as well as kindergarten enrichment consisting of three-and-a-half hours of instruction aligned with Pennsylvania’s kindergarten curriculum.

The MELC Pottstown site is located in western Montgomery County, PA an area that is home to a high percentage of low-income families. According to the 2014 American Community Survey, 12.2% of Pottstown’s families are currently living below poverty, which is 2.9% above Pennsylvania’s state average of 9.3%. Furthermore, according to Pennsylvania’s 2015 Unmet Needs Data Table, Pottstown ranked 11th overall in the state and has the greatest need in Montgomery County with an unmet need of 965 children ages 3 – 4 living below 300% of the Federal Poverty Level. The MELC Pottstown Center serves approximately 125 children and families, and is located in a church building that is conveniently located on a bus route families frequent.

Program Integration and Coordination
As mentioned earlier, PEAK braids and blends resources across several funding streams such as Pre-K Counts to help Pottstown early childhood providers like the MELC Pottstown program. The MELC Pottstown program also needs to braid and blend resources to ensure that all children from 6 weeks to 5 years old can be served. With the funds provided by PEAK and other sources, the MELC Pottstown program is able to serve approximately 125 children and families through the following classrooms:

- Two Early Head Start (EHS)-funded classrooms serving 16 children for a 10-hour day; Services include a partnership with a home-based maternity care service provider, as well as support to families to apply for child care subsidy to cover additional service hours;
- Two OCDEL-funded EHS expansion classrooms serving 16 children with the exact same services as previously mentioned;
- Three Pre-K Counts-funded classrooms serving 60 children; services incorporate subsidy wraparound dollars to cover a full 10-hour day beyond the OCDEL-funded six-hour pre-k day.
The MELC Pottstown site also offers wrap-around services for school-age children who are transported to the center from across the district after school each day and on holidays.

In 2015, W.K. Kellogg Foundation awarded PEAK a $1.25 million three-year grant to support the initiative’s efforts to improve educational opportunities and results for Pottstown’s pre-k-aged children. This funding supported strategies to improve kindergarten readiness outcomes by increasing alignment between the state and district pre-k curricula.
Instructional, Professional Development and Leadership Models

Overall, MELC employs 250 staff in centers across the state. Each site is led by a center director who with support from an assistant director, administrative support staff takes responsibility for strategic center decisions, ensures high-quality programming, and supports and supervises staff.

MELC Directors implement a model of distributed leadership that empowers all teaching staff to deliver high-quality care and instruction in each classroom. Distributed leadership builds the capacity of all center staff by ensuring they have the professional skills and supports to provide responsive, developmentally appropriate, and content-rich instruction within classrooms.

MELC’s staffing program model aligns with Pennsylvania’s Keystone STARS career lattice and staffing guidelines which provides the center with a strategic direction to ensure that the program is providing a high quality program to the community it serves. MELC’s reliance on multiple funding sources present several operational and administrative challenges to staffing model. The program must satisfy various program-specific staffing requirements, which also makes it difficult to recruit and retain highly qualified Pre-K Counts teachers whose qualification level makes them eligible to teach at the K-12 level where salaries are higher. Specifically, the Pottstown site grapples with meeting the following program staff qualification requirements:

- State child care licensure requirements call for a Child Development Associate credential (CDA); In addition, MELC encourages all infant/toddler staff to attain a CDA within their first year of employment. MELC supports staff to attain a CDA through tuition assistance, and encourages staff to move from the CDA to the BA level.
- The Early Head Start OCDEL grant requires staff to have both an infant/toddler CDA and BA degree.
- Pre-K Counts requires BA with teaching certificate.

MELC works to meet these staffing, recruitment, and retention challenges, through professional development and other supports. MELC’s chief program officer, program directors, and PD Dimensions director meet weekly to review technical assistance needs in any of the 19 sites and identify any additional supports, which may include on-site classroom mentoring and coaching.

In addition, MELC provides classrooms with iPads to support the implementation of The Creative Curriculum, and uses Teaching Strategies GOLD, as an assessment platform in infant and pre-k programs. Using technology linked to a curriculum and assessment system and aligned with the state’s Early Learning
Standards allows teachers to capture and record a child’s developmental achievements in real-time, reducing the time spent entering observations into the state’s system and allowing for additional instructional support activities such as lesson planning.

**IN THE DISTRICT’S OWN WORDS:**

Mary Rieck, PEAK Coordinator, Pottstown School District:

“For over 10 years, Pottstown School District has been happy to partner with MELC to provide high-quality early learning opportunities in Pottstown. Strong community partnerships are the key to achieving positive community change. MELC has also served as a PEAK Managing Partner organization since the inception of PEAK, the community wide school readiness initiative. This role has provided guidance in helping us achieve our mission: "All Pottstown children will enter kindergarten ready to learn and achieve." We look forward to a continued partnership with MELC to serve our community’s families and children.”

**IN THE DIRECTOR’S OWN WORDS:**

Jason Fine, Center Director, MELC Pottstown:

The partnership with PEAK is instrumental in providing the highest quality service to the families and staff at our center. Their community relationships provide our families with helpful and easily accessible resources, and our teachers receive support, guidance, and training. Additionally, the connection between the school district and MELC due to PEAK is so important in helping the pre-k class become ready for kindergarten.

**Community Outreach and Parent Engagement**

As a program serving a diverse range of families along the income continuum, including a high percentage of low-income families, MELC embraces a particularly strong family engagement model. *The Creative Curriculum* incorporates a family engagement component, which MELC has leveraged to promote staff awareness of this essential element of both leadership and instruction. Teachers are coached to actively model, practice, and communicate positive interactions that translate to positive parenting practices. All
parents participating in a MELC program receive communication sheets that summarize these strategies so that children are engaged in behavioral supports that are consistent between their early learning and home environments. Daily drop-off and pick-up provides an additional feedback opportunity where staff communicate classroom instructional content and behavioral strategies that may be reinforced at home.

MELC also promotes strong community engagement. For example, the YMCA (The Y) of the USA is also a managing partner in PEAK. This positive, collaborative relationship is particularly notable because The Y stands as a potential competitor in the community.

Program Success
Data from multiple sources confirms that the PEAK, MELC and PreK Counts partnership is improving child outcomes. Children who attended a Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program within the Pottstown School District and entered kindergarten in 2010 continue to perform as well as or better than their peers through third grade. Seventy-two percent of Pre-K Counts graduates entered fourth grade with proficient literacy skills in 2014, compared to 59% district average for the full fourth grade class.iii

Another measure used to assess progress has also found outstanding results. Since its inception in 2008, PEAK has used the Beginning of Year Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) to measure the initiative’s success. The DIBELS measures and assesses the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade. In 2008, 49% of children scored at or above “Core,” indicating high proficiency. In 2014, while the district average increased slightly to 52%, 75% of Pre-K Counts children scored at or above “Core.” The PEAK initiative also tracks early childhood teacher qualifications in the district, which have risen steadily since 2008; for example, in 2013, 94% of teachers held a CDA or higher, compared to in 63% of teachers with those qualifications in 2008.

The MELC, PEAK and Pre-K Counts partnership highlights the power of effective collaboration across state systems that can improve the alignment, accessibility and quality of early learning opportunities for children at levels of scalable impact.

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iv [http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v16n1/talan.html](http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v16n1/talan.html)
v [http://www.pakeys.org/uploadedContent/Docs/ELinPA/Results%20fact%20sheet%20final%204-30-15.pdf](http://www.pakeys.org/uploadedContent/Docs/ELinPA/Results%20fact%20sheet%20final%204-30-15.pdf)