

Project Summary

To put into action the belief that municipalities can and should play a role in supporting the development of the City's children, Denver created The 5 By 5 Project. The 5 By 5 Project provides Denver Head Start families with children under the age of 5 year-round access and educational opportunities at 12 of Denver's top cultural venues at no cost.

The 5 By 5 Project's goal is to support school readiness and strengthen families by providing children with extended learning to expand their experiences and success in and out of the classroom. A central purpose of the Project is to support parents in their role as "first teachers" by providing them with enjoyable and fulfilling experiences to increase family engagement. The 5 By 5 Project provides Head Start teachers with age-appropriate lessons and classroom materials, free access to the cultural venues and professional development opportunities, to connect students' cultural experiences with classroom learning.

More than 6,000 low-income families have participated in this program in its first three years, making more than 60,000 visits to the cultural venues. As a result, Denver's low-income children are having valuable learning experiences – gaining knowledge, skills, perspective, vocabulary and enjoyment of learning. Participating families report an increased sense of belonging to, and ownership of, the community. Denver's cultural institutions are taking steps to improve their programs to better serve a more diverse community.

The 5 By 5 Project was designed by the Mayor's Office for Education and Children and is made possible through in-kind and financial support from the City's cultural partners and sponsors. The estimated value of The 5 By 5 Project to families is over \$4 million each year, primarily derived from the free admission for families to the cultural organizations. The partnership has grown to include 12 family-friendly organizations: Children's Museum of Denver, Colorado Ballet, Denver Art Museum, Denver Botanic Gardens, Denver Center Theater Academy, Denver Museum of Nature & Science, Denver Parks & Recreation Aquatic Centers, Denver Public Libraries, Denver Zoo, Downtown Aquarium, Four Mile Historic Park, and The Wildlife Experience.

Project Description

About Denver

Denver is an energetic city located at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. The population of the municipality of Denver is 554,636, at the center of a metropolitan area with close to 3 million people. Latinos make up the largest and fastest-growing population in the city and are among those with the greatest needs. More than 57% of families with children under the age of 5 with incomes below poverty are Latino. Mayor Hickenlooper has placed a high priority on children and education and has worked to maximize access and increase the quality of programs for children and youth from early childhood

education to higher education. Under the Mayor's leadership, Denver has established funding to ensure that all 4-year olds have access to high-quality preschool programs. Denver has advanced quality after-school programs and provides funding for programs in almost every Denver Public School (DPS). The Mayor led efforts to establish an endowment to provide scholarships for every DPS graduate. Among the Mayor's highest education priorities is to continue strengthening the partnership between the City and the school district. The City and DPS have formalized their commitment to work together in a business plan that provides the framework for moving forward and outlines strategic action steps for achieving four goals: increased parent and family engagement; strengthened neighborhoods; increased student engagement; and increased skill development.

Why Invest in School Readiness?

Research clearly indicates that early childhood education programs have substantial and measurable economic benefits for individuals, families, schools and communities. Yet, research also shows that far too many children enter school unprepared to learn, which automatically puts them behind, and often times keeps them behind other students for years to come.

Investing in school readiness at an early age, when the majority of brain development occurs, is critical to closing the gap for those most at-risk of school failure. Research shows that readiness for school is not just about learning letters and numbers, but is also about engaging in activities that stimulate creativity and learning. Children who are given opportunities to learn through cultural experiences and active play broaden their skills and knowledge, which improves school readiness and develops the foundation for school success.

Families play a key role in helping young children become ready for school success. Research indicates that parents who become engaged in their children's learning early on are more likely to stay involved in their children's schooling over time. A critical component of improving school readiness in a community is to support parents in becoming more effective as "first teachers" of their children. Many parents of young children work long hours to provide for their family's basic survival, limiting available time and energy and hindering skill development for helping their children learn the necessary language, conceptual, social and emotional skills that make up school readiness. Parents need opportunities to help their young children develop a love for learning—engaging their senses and their minds while having fun and talking about their experiences.

Municipalities are in a unique position to mobilize the community to provide resources to improve school readiness by providing enhanced access to the arts and cultural experiences for families with young children in the community. Through The 5 By 5 Project, Denver has opened the doors of the City, providing access to cultural venues for low-income families with young children, improving school readiness and strengthening families.

Objectives of the Project

The primary objectives of The 5 By 5 Project are to support school readiness for Denver's low-income children under the age of 5 and to strengthen families by providing them with extended learning opportunities and access to the City's cultural venues. The goal of the Project is for children to visit at least five cultural venues before they are 5.

Keeping the focus on school readiness led to the development of educational materials. At the request of ECE teachers, an activity guide was created to support teachers in connecting their students' cultural experiences to classroom learning. The Activity Guide was created based on best practices of Early Childhood Education Standards and features age-appropriate lessons connected to each partnering cultural facility in an easy to use format. The Activity Guide comes complete with all materials needed for each lesson. Teachers receive one-on-one training in the use of the Activity Guide and have access to specialized professional development opportunities at the select cultural venues. In addition, educational materials are provided to parents to use at home, providing hands-on activities to support parents while visiting the venues and providing a home connection. To further support Head Start teachers to connect their students' cultural experiences to classroom learning, a Staff Pass Card was created to allow Head Start staff access to visit cultural venues to determine first-hand how they could incorporate cultural experiences into classroom learning and at the same time help promote The Project to families.

To promote family engagement, The 5 By 5 Project is available to the Head Start student, all siblings, and two adults. Families have unlimited access to the majority of the venues and can visit the venues year-round. In addition to free year-round admission, students can participate in educational programs at the cultural venues, including swimming lessons, week-long camps, and on-site ballet lessons.

To promote the program to families and ease anxieties about visiting unfamiliar places, Denver created a calendar and videotape that features each of the cultural organizations and shows families what they can expect to see and do.

Partners/Funding

The 5 By 5 Project was designed by the Mayor's Office for Education and Children in partnership with 10 of Denver's top cultural venues. The partnership has grown to include 12 family-friendly organizations that have opened their doors to low-income families, providing free year-round access and educational opportunities. The partners include: The Children's Museum of Denver, Colorado Ballet, Denver Art Museum, Denver Botanic Gardens, Denver Center Theater Academy, Denver Museum of Nature & Science, Denver Parks & Recreation Aquatic Centers, Denver Public Libraries, Denver Zoo, Downtown Aquarium, Four Mile Historic Park, and The Wildlife Experience.

The 5 By 5 Project is free to families and is made possible through in-kind and financial support from the City's cultural partners and sponsors. The estimated value of The 5 By

5 Project to families is over \$4 million each year, primarily derived from the free admission for families to the cultural organizations.

The cultural organizations in Denver have been willing to make this significant in-kind contribution because: a) it helps them fulfill their mission to serve the community and facilitates their outreach into parts of the community that have not been involved in their institutions, and b) it is expected to expand community support and membership, ultimately having a positive effect on the organization's sustainability and bottom line.

In-kind contributions are also provided for staffing at cultural organizations and for program coordination by City staff. Head Start staff provides the critical link to families, distributing information and promoting The 5 By 5 Project throughout the year.

The yearly operating cost is about \$35,000 and is funded through a Community Development Block Grant. The operating costs include dual-language marketing materials, a calendar featuring participating venues and a pass card used for admission; kick-off and celebratory events; program evaluation; educational materials to provide families with activities to expand students learning in the home environment and materials to be used by classroom teachers to link their students cultural experiences with classroom curriculum. Program coordination is provided through the City.

How Has Success Been Measured

The 5 By 5 Project was implemented in May of 2005. Since implementation, over 60,000 visits have been made to the cultural venues. An outcomes evaluation has been conducted each program year to determine the benefits of participating in The 5 By 5 Project for children, families, and the community. Both evaluations have demonstrated extremely high satisfaction amongst all participants. The most recent evaluation data indicates that program participation:

- a) Strengthens families – Eighty-two percent of Head Start staff and 71% of families identified improved family relationships as a major benefit of participation. Families stated that The 5 By 5 Project gave them increased opportunities for positive interactions as a family in diverse environments.
- b) Expands students' learning – Head Start staff rated expanded student learning as a major benefit of The 5 By 5 Project. Students' vocabulary and verbal skills increased and allowed better communication that enhanced classroom participation. Sixty-one percent of parents reported that students learned more by visiting cultural venues which developed students' confidence in new situations.
- c) Expands awareness of and use of community resources - The 5 By 5 Project helped families get out of their neighborhood and/or expanded what they consider to be their community. The Project also fostered positive feelings about the City, discovering that these venues are intended for all families to use.
- d) Promotes relationship building among families – Focus group comments from staff and families indicate that families built friendships by encouraging others to use the pass card and by going in groups to increase the comfort level of visiting new places.

- e) Enhances parent-staff relationships - Staff and parents agree that The 5 By 5 Project enhanced parent-staff relationships by creating shared experiences, increasing communication, and building a stronger sense of community.
- f) Provides an effective strategy for cultural organizations to reach out to low-income, ethnically diverse families - Staff and parents commented that most of these families would not have visited cultural facilities without The 5 By 5 Project. Cultural partners also indicated that the Project enabled their institution to more effectively reach out to low-income, ethnically diverse families. In addition, cultural organizations became more aware of each other and began partnering with each other and learning how to effectively outreach to low-income families with young children.

Future Plans

The most common responses to questions about how to improve Denver's 5 By 5 Project are:

- Continue it
- Expand it
 - make it available to more children and families
 - make free admission available beyond preschool years.

Project partners are discussing strategies for expanding the project to serve additional low-income families, specifically families living in public housing. Efforts are being made to research opportunities for helping families to take the next step to become members of their favorite cultural organizations once their child leaves the Head Start program.

Strategic planning efforts have focused on strengthening support to ECE teachers, since they provide the critical link to families, and directly linking the Project to classroom curriculum. Current evaluation efforts are focused on determining the effectiveness of The 5 By 5 Activity Guide in linking students' cultural experiences to classroom learning.

Denver has received numerous requests for information from other cities that want to start their own 5 By 5 Project and has developed a replication manual to share with other municipalities. The easy to follow guide provides an outline from pre-planning, outreach to partners, to establishing the population to serve. The replication manual is available for dissemination.