Lessons Learned from the District of Columbia’s First Step Program

In 2016, the District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) launched First Step, a program that prepares high school students to earn a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential while completing their high school diploma. Students in the program receive paid summer employment that provides them with practical experience working with young children in child development centers. First Step also offers supports to help students earn a CDA credential and access higher education degrees, such as paid application and examination fees for the CDA examination, college and career counseling, and scholarship opportunities. This document highlights key lessons learned from the creation and implementation of the First Step program, which city leaders can use to implement similar initiatives in their communities. Please see OSSE one-pager, First Step: A Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential and Career and Technical Education (CTE) Program, for a fuller description of the First Step program.

1. Build Strong Partnerships between Early Childhood Stakeholders and Career and Technical Education (CTE) Stakeholders

In the District of Columbia (D.C.), the First Step program was made possible by strong existing partnerships between OSSE Division of Early Learning (DEL) and the Division of Postsecondary and Career Education (PCE). These two teams came together to review strategies on how the existing CTE program could be enhanced, which led to the creation of the First Step program. This program has deepened the partnerships between early childhood and career and technical education in D.C. and is a win-win for both divisions. DEL and PCE worked closely with the OSSE Superintendent to implement this program.

2. Demonstrate the Need to Increase the Supply of Early Childhood Workforce

Many communities face an insufficient number of qualified early childhood professionals in the workforce to meet the care and educational needs of young children. In D.C., there were ongoing conversations about the need to increase the supply of the early childhood workforce. Leaders in OSSE seized the opportunity of these ongoing conversations to promote the First Step program. A CTE strategic plan that was designed to identify areas of demand in D.C. helped identify education as a key area of demand. This also helped lead to the development of the First Step program. In addition, D.C.’s licensing system made evident the need for more members of the early childhood workforce in the District. It is vital to have early childhood workforce data to justify the need to increase the supply of early childhood professionals. Cities can look to a state professional development registry or other data systems to make the case for more early education professionals.
3. Frame This Program Within a “Growing Our Own” Narrative
When leaders in D.C. were developing this program, they talked about it as a “grow our own” strategy to support the workforce development and career pathways for residents of D.C. This allowed them to advocate for this program not only in terms of early childhood education, but also as a strategy to increase career pathways for District residents. Leaders in D.C. found this framing to be a winning strategy. Training District residents to become early childhood educators also contributes toward efforts to diversify the early childhood workforce and helps create a local workforce that is representative of the children it serves.

4. Utilize Existing Sources of Funding
The First Step program in D.C. was made possible by bringing together several existing funding streams. Federal funding from the Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act was already in place to support students pursuing career and technical education. The D.C. Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) Early Childhood Project, the DC Tuition Assistance Grant (DCTAG) program, and the Mayor’s Scholars Undergraduate Program all provide tuition assistance to students pursuing degrees at colleges and universities. D.C. used funds from their state Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) to support a CDA instructor for this program. Cities can work with their state or county to explore opportunities to use CCDF dollars for this purpose. Bringing together various agencies to blend and layer existing funding sources was key to creating this program.

5. Link Higher Education and Early Learning
The First Step program is also an opportunity to deepen partnerships between the early learning community and institutions of higher education. Cities can bring in higher education by demonstrating that this program will increase the pool of students entering early childhood programs at local colleges and universities. Higher education programs are also in need of placement sites for their programs. Cities can leverage this program to deepen mutually beneficial connections between early learning centers and the higher education community.