



Creating Local Early Education Systems that Support Healthy Child Development and Thriving Communities

A child's early years are a time of incredible growth and development, and what happens during these years can have a major impact on his or her opportunities for success later in life. Children who participate in high-quality early learning and development opportunities are more likely to graduate from high school and develop stronger social and emotional skills. A growing [body of research](#) shows that investments in high-quality early learning and the healthy development of young children can yield significant returns.

For example, a recent [study](#) shows that every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood programs can provide an economic return of as much as \$16. This investment increases the odds of future success in school and on the job, and generates returns on investment through reduced crime, lower special education and welfare costs, and higher earnings and tax revenues for participants.

Many city leaders understand that providing high-quality education and development opportunities for young children is an essential component of their long-term economic development strategy. As a result, a growing number are making critical investments in early childhood that will benefit their residents and communities now and in the future.

However, the local health, child care and education systems that serve children in their earliest years often operate independently from one another. In many communities, agencies and programs serving the same families do not coordinate their efforts, and miss the chance to promote alignment and smooth transitions along the education continuum (initially from birth through age three and to pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) programs, and then subsequently from Pre-K to kindergarten and the early elementary grades). This fragmented structure can undercut the effectiveness of investments in early childhood programs, failing to fully support children in their most important stages of development.

City leaders have a unique, ground-level perspective on the impact that efforts to improve school readiness, reduce opportunity and

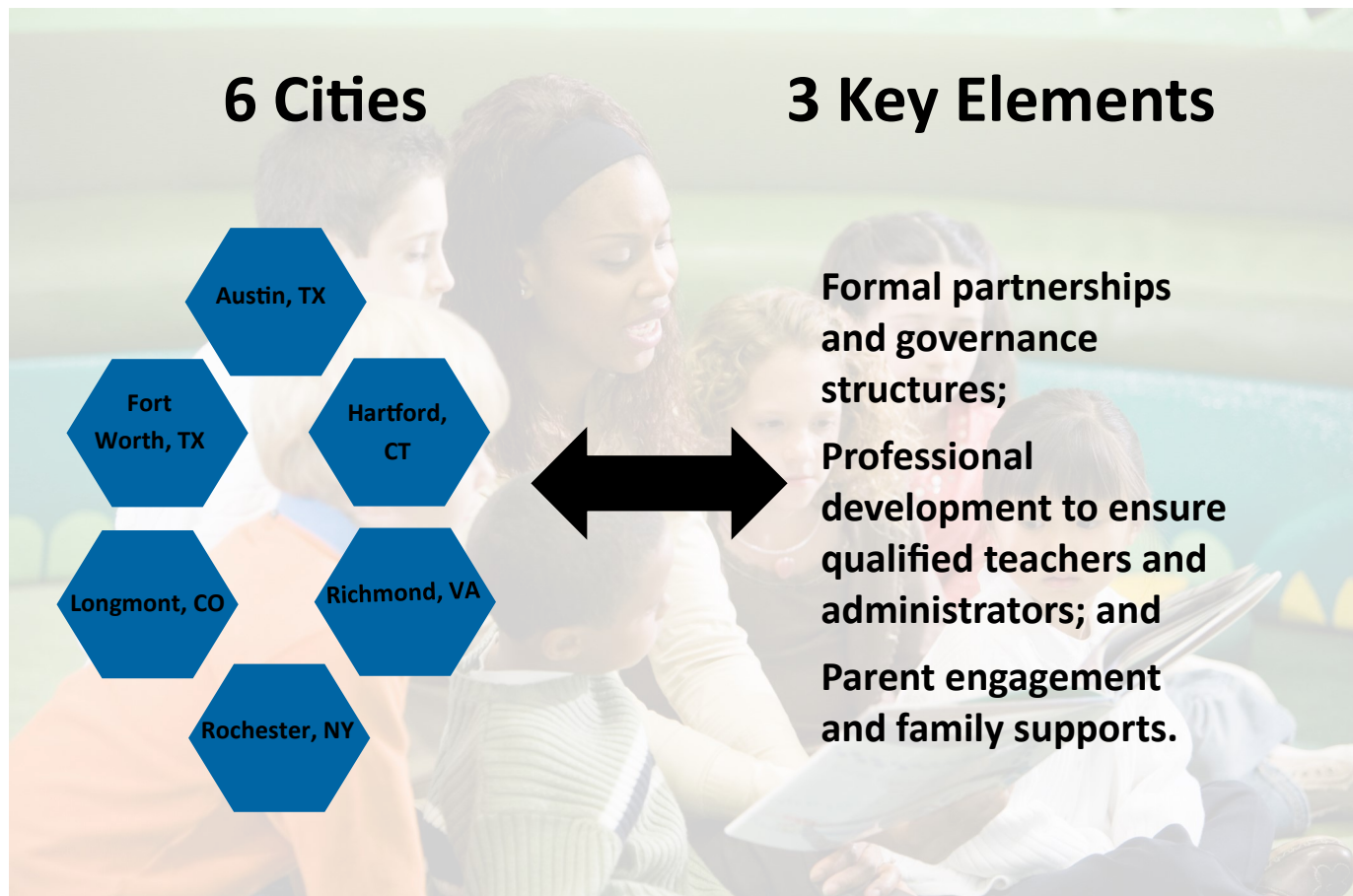
achievement gaps can have on the lives of young children, families and residents. Many are realizing that, in order to get the greatest return on investments in early care and education and to ensure that all children grow up healthy and ready for school, cities must develop a system that promotes educational alignment for young children.

A well-aligned system includes streamlined communication and coordinated services that address the full range of academic, behavioral, health and family issues. It also eases developmental as well as [educational transitions](#), and provides a range of educational opportunities in the classroom and the community.

The National League of Cities (NLC), through its Institute for Youth, Education and Families (YEF Institute), is helping city leaders align the various systems that serve their youngest residents. The goals of this work are to promote the healthy development of young children and ensure that every child enters kindergarten ready to learn and succeed in school. As part of this effort, the YEF Institute has identified [10 common elements of effective early childhood systems alignment](#).

Cities do not have to tackle all 10 elements at once to be successful in their efforts. Focusing on two or three elements initially can build support, resources and the basic structure for how educational alignment for young children may work in a particular city. Mayors and other city leaders often find that such early efforts lead quickly to related work on other key elements as a result of their interconnected nature.

Educational Alignment for Young Children (EAYC)



In 2013, NLC launched *Municipal Leadership to Promote Educational Alignment for Young Children*, a YEF Institute technical assistance project, to help six cities begin the process of creating an aligned early care and education system for young children.

These elements offer promising entry points for city leaders, and efforts toward achieving them have the potential to lay critical groundwork for further alignment. Formalizing partnerships and governance structures are important in the development of common definitions and goals among stakeholders, allowing them to work more effectively together. Professional development to prepare qualified administrators and teachers in Pre-K and early elementary (K-3) classrooms is essential in developing a high-quality system and fosters relationships among early care and education professionals that can pave the way for future alignment of curricula and assessments.

Finally, educational alignment for young children cannot be fully effective without strong parent and family engagement. Parents and caregivers play a pivotal role in helping their children develop and learn in their earliest years. Ideally, parents and families of young children are involved from the beginning as city leaders plan new initiatives, sharing their experiences and offering ideas to inform programs and policies.

Cities in Action

Over the course of two years, each of the six cities participating in the initiative created a stakeholder group or enlisted an existing work group to promote early educational alignment in their cities. Through this process, the YEF Institute and city teams learned valuable lessons about the potential roles that city leaders can play. These lessons are captured in the following descriptions of specific actions taken by the six cities from October 2013 through September 2015.

Partnerships and Governance Structures:

- **Form creative partnerships.**

The Fort Worth EAYC Working Group invited the “typical” stakeholders: the local Head Start grantee, school districts, Pre-K programs and other community service providers. At the same time, however, they also broadened their reach to include less likely allies – most notably, the local community foundation, the [Community Foundation of North Texas](#).

Through this partnership, the Community Foundation of North Texas realized the benefits of educational alignment and revised an existing request for proposals to ensure that its selection criteria supported Fort Worth’s alignment strategy. It offered in-kind services to the working group, including donated staff and intern time. The community foundation also hosted a well-attended, high-profile reception to raise awareness of the educational alignment work within the philanthropic and business community in Fort Worth.



- **Institutionalize EAYC efforts within a city office.**

In Richmond, early childhood issues are now a prominent component of Mayor Dwight Jones’ anti-poverty agenda, which has yielded several key initiatives, including an early childhood task force within the [Mayor’s Anti-Poverty Commission](#), the [Early Childhood Development Initiative](#) within Richmond’s Department of Social Services and the City’s [Grade Level Reading](#) initiative.

The mayor also created the [Office of Community Wealth Building](#) in June 2014. The office works with city agencies and departments to examine structural causes of poverty in Richmond and determine how each city agency can play a role in reducing poverty. The office hosts a Children’s Cabinet that is exploring gaps in early childhood services across the city. The Children’s Cabinet is also working to institutionalize stronger coordination across multiple early childhood care and education services, and to develop new models for connecting families in need to support services. As a result, educational alignment for young children has become a key focus of Richmond’s Office of Community Wealth Building.

- **Make sure outcome measures are relevant to specific EAYC goals.**

Austin’s School Readiness Action Plan Leadership Team – with representatives from the city and county health departments, City of Austin’s Early Childhood Council, United Way, Austin Independent School District, Austin Community College and other early childhood community organizations – developed an action plan to improve school readiness. They also created outcome measures to help them determine if they were on track toward meeting their goals. However, over the course of the implementation process, the leadership team realized that they had developed too many measures, many of which revealed very little about their progress.

For the next iteration of the action plan, the leadership team’s data subcommittee is updating existing measures and creating more practical, meaningful measures. They have evaluated all proposed measures to ensure they are connected to strategies and goals outlined in their school readiness action plan.

Qualified Teachers and Administrators

- **Align instructional practices.**

The three entities serving young children in Hartford – the City of Hartford, Hartford Public Schools and the Capitol Region Education Council, which operates magnet schools – came together to align professional development across programs and across grades. The group was energized after reviewing research from [FirstSchool at UNC Chapel Hill](#) on professional development for early educators and instruction for boys of color. Mayor Pedro Segarra dedicated general fund dollars to the initiative, and the partners brought in researchers from UNC Chapel Hill to speak to the early childhood education community. The researchers are helping the community create a culture of caring, competence and excellence in early education programs and schools by re-examining instructional practices, interactions, protocol and policies based on current research and brain science.

Hartford's will begin aligning instructional practices between Pre-K and kindergarten, and then in subsequent grades. Once instructional practices are aligned, the partners can align professional development at all levels and across programs, which will allow them to take advantage of shared resources to create additional opportunities.

- **Use school district expertise to help child care providers.**

In 2014, representatives from Austin Independent School District's (AISD) early childhood staff presented at an annual child care directors' symposium for the first time. The symposium included sessions on every aspect of running a child care center, as well as opportunities for further professional development for owners and program directors. The AISD representatives provided professional development training on transitioning students from child care centers to public Pre-K programs. As a result of the symposium, child care directors have begun to connect with AISD officials for more information and have attended additional AISD professional development trainings.



- **Convene all entities involved in early childhood professional development.**

Professional development was identified in the City of Longmont's strategic planning process as a key issue area for 2015. In Longmont, members of [BrightEYES](#), an early learning coalition, examined professional development opportunities for early childhood educators, including Pre-K and early elementary (K-3) teachers, and quickly concluded that the system was fragmented.

As a result, the city of Longmont hosted a meeting with representatives from community-based Pre-K programs, the school district, the community college and the local early childhood council to identify gaps and find ways to blend and streamline professional development offerings. They began their collaboration by cataloguing all the professional development opportunities currently available in the area and then identifying obvious several gaps as well as opportunities for improvement. Findings emerging from this process have prompted the community college to put plans in place to streamline content for its professional development opportunities and degree programs.

Parent Engagement and Family Supports

- **Frame parent engagement as transformational.**

One way each of the six EAYC cities has energized their parent engagement efforts is by applying a transformational lens to their activities. By asking what parents need from educators and the community, transformational family engagement builds on what parents and families are doing right rather than trying to correct what they are perceived to be doing wrong.

In this approach, each activity is developed from an understanding that all families want the best for their children and want them to succeed. Transformational practices are co-constructed with program staff and families, and are part of an integrated engagement program rather than isolated, one-time actions.

Thinking about family engagement this way has motivated the EAYC teams in each of the six cities to reevaluate their current activities and plan new engagement activities that follow this design.

- **Create opportunities for parents to be involved in planning efforts.**

Several of the cities have involved parents and caregivers in their EAYC projects. In Rochester, parents serve on the Parent and Family Engagement subcommittee. Longmont hosted a “Rock Star Parent” group to talk about families’ needs. In Richmond, the Office of Community Wealth Building, in which the EAYC project is housed, will report to the Community Wealth Advisory Board, a group of local citizens — half of whom live below the poverty line — that will review and give feedback regarding proposals coming out of the office. Parents with young children will of course be a part of this group.

- **Pilot a promising strategy to drive citywide change.**

In Rochester, the EAYC coordinating council, which includes members from the public library, Rochester Department of Recreation and Youth Services, Rochester City School District and early childhood community organizations, is working with the school district to identify one or two school principals who are willing to pilot a transformational family engagement program. They are planning to begin this process with a series of focus groups of parents, staff and teachers to discuss what works and what could be improved. They will then work with the school(s) to implement those ideas and other best practices, while keeping in mind resource limitations. The process will be a culture shift for Rochester staff and parents, and coordinating council recognizes the need for training and support as well as easy-to-use assessment tools.

Cities can play a major role in providing high-quality early care and educational opportunities for young children by being a driving force and collaborative partner with families and community stakeholders in educational alignment. While aligning educational opportunities for young children is complex, the examples above demonstrate that cities can make important strides by taking simple yet targeted actions.

As the six EAYC cities enter the next phase of their projects, they are discovering more ways that local governments can lead these efforts. The National League of Cities will continue to highlight their actions so that other city leaders can learn from their experiences.



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The National League of Cities (NLC) is dedicated to helping city leaders build better communities. NLC is a resource and advocate for 19,000 cities, towns and villages, representing more than 218 million Americans.

About the Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities. NLC launched the YEF Institute in 2000 in recognition of the unique and influential roles that mayors, city councilmembers and other local leaders play in strengthening families and improving outcomes for children and youth.

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