

Early Childhood Results Count (ECRC) was an intensive, multi-sector planning effort to create strategies and an action plan to remedy a dramatic drop in School Readiness among Central Texas students. School readiness is a leading indicator for critical educational and economic outcomes such as reading proficiency and high school graduation, and in recent years the percentage of children entering school ready had dropped dramatically. Data show that kids who start behind tend to stay behind. A sense of urgency to quickly change the trajectory of this early warning sign of community health and well-being drove this effort.

E3 Alliance led the effort, in partnership with United Way, Children’s Optimal Health, the St. David’s Foundation, and many others. STRIVE Together, a national network of cradle to career collective impact organizations, facilitated the planning effort, using the **Results Count (formerly Results Based Leadership)**, framework pioneered by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The planning effort leveraged existing work, such as that done by the Austin/Travis County School Readiness Action Plan and the San Marcos Youth Commission. Details on the process can be found in Exhibit A; Lessons Learned from the process can be found in Exhibit B.

ECRC harnessed expertise from multiple sectors to develop an action plan with the ability to turn around the decline in School Readiness and achieve a rate of 70% of Central Texas children entering kindergarten ready to learn.

Achieving a kindergarten readiness rate of 70% by 2020 requires a concerted, multisector effort. At a minimum, our regional health, mental health, and education sectors need to be much more closely aligned. The ECRC participants recommend the following strategies be prioritized:

- 1. *Move interventions further upstream, to capitalize on evidence on the importance of early experiences***
 - a. Increase public awareness of brain development, including read/sing/talk/play campaign for caregivers
 - b. Expand home visiting services for families
 - c. Expand Pre-K 3 programs to serve more 3 year olds who are eligible
 - d. Align current school-based resources to serve more children in early grades
- 2. *Enhance Pre-K quality and access to ensure more children have the educational supports that are proven to increase School Readiness***
 - a. Increase number of Pre-K children in full day Pre-K with low student to teacher ratios
 - b. Increase Pre-K enrollment through “prescriptions” from health and service providers
 - c. Increase number of Pre-K Teachers receiving instructional coaching / mentoring
 - d. Define and operationalize best practice approaches for fostering social emotional learning in Pre-K programs
- 3. *Improve shared data infrastructure to facilitate collaboration across sectors***
 - a. Share developmental screener data with closed loop referrals across health and education sectors
 - b. Leverage and share a common School Readiness measure

Individual participants and partnering organizations have made action commitments to carry these strategies forward, through existing collaboratives such as the School Readiness Action Plan, backbone organizations such as E3 Alliance and Children’s Optimal Health, partnering organizations such as the Dell Medical School and school districts, and through the newly formed Early Matters Greater Austin, which will play a strong advocacy role and bring business leaders to the forefront in supporting early childhood.

Exhibit A: Description of the Process

Early Childhood Results Count (ECRC) planning started in early spring 2017 as a way to bring together sectors from across the region, especially our health, mental health, and education sectors, to address the drop in school readiness and help Central Texas meet the goal of 70% of children entering Kindergarten School Ready. The impetus for the effort was a very significant decrease in readiness: E3 Alliance has been assessing School Readiness since 2010 using a multi-competency, student-centered regional assessment. Despite large budget cuts and a rapid increase of children in poverty, overall readiness remained stable at just over 50% until 2015-16, when readiness dropped from 53% to 41%. Additional studies tied this drop to significant cuts in federal, state, and local services available to families with children 0-3 starting in 2010. We viewed School Readiness as a cumulative measure of the social, health, and learning conditions experienced by children up until their entrance into Kindergarten.

Scope and Participants:

Due to the intense time and resource requirements of the Results Count process, the planning team decided that it was unwieldy to include all districts and all counties in the Central Texas region. However, we wanted some range of size and geographic dispersion. Ultimately we decided to focus on San Marcos, Manor, and Austin school districts. While participants came mostly from Travis and Hays Counties, we believe the mix of school district size and urban/ rural make-up mean conclusions and strategies are appropriate for the entire region, and probably the state.

The planning team included:

Alison Bentley, United Way for Greater Austin
Sue Carpenter, United Way for Greater Austin
Susan Dawson, E3 Alliance
Cathy Doggett, KLE Foundation
Jessica Dominguez, United Way for Greater Austin
Grant Gottesman, White Caps Fund for Social Good
Michelle Hamilton, Texas State University
Suzanne Hershey, CommunitySync
Laura Koenig, E3 Alliance
Cathy McHorse, United Way for Greater Austin
Kim McPherson, St. David's Foundation
Susan Millea, Children's Optimal Health
Jacquie Porter, TEA
Brook Son, Travis County
Tracy Spinner, Austin ISD
Billy Stokes, Texas State University

There were 46 total participants in the process, representing 27 different organizations, including school districts, institutions of higher education, cities and counties, health providers, mental health, social services, and business. An additional 55 people from Central Texas and across the state participated as advisors to the process.

Results Count Process:

The ECRC participants were split into five workgroups:

1. Mental Health Professionals in Schools and Childcare programs
2. Health Providers Building Kindergarten Readiness
3. High Quality Pre-K
4. Parent and Family Engagement and Supports
5. Data Sharing and Data Infrastructure

Each of these workgroups met together for three two-day sessions facilitated by the STRIVE Together facilitation team, with multiple meetings in between within the individual workgroups. After each working meeting, a two hour review meeting was held with outside advisors to gain additional perspectives and insights. In total, well over 3,000 volunteer hours were dedicated to this effort.

At the beginning of the ECRC process, the planning team documented their desired results as:

Leaders and practitioners in Central Texas will:

- Take action to make demonstrable improvements in School Readiness and long-term health outcomes
- Enhance how they leverage their roles and catalyze action and alignment across multiple partners to change systems and improve outcomes
- Build capacity to work together to align partners' contributions in service of desired results
- Make enhanced contributions in personal and organizational roles to address the root causes of inequities

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Exhibit B: Lessons Learned from the Process

In addition to developing and taking ownership of strategies to address the drop in School Readiness with a sense of urgency, the ECRC process was designed to provide tools for and build capacity in the individuals and organizations who participated in the effort. In addition, we wanted to document primary lessons learned from the process to help guide future efforts in Central Texas and other communities.

Having the Right People at the Table

Workgroups should be comprised of participants with high capacity to influence change. Because change is hard, some participants had a tendency to want to stay in planning mode and were hesitant to move to action. Participants were chosen for workgroups based on the criteria that they have both subject matter expertise and ability to influence change. Some workgroup participants were more content experts and less influencers. These participants seemed to have difficulty committing to a continuous improvement process. Measuring progress and making real-time program changes was at odds with some participants' training in randomized controlled trials and longer term longitudinal studies. They were more comfortable designing fully developed research projects than making change happen today. The resistance to immediate action made it difficult to fully implement the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycles in all of the ECRC workgroups. Our recommendation would be to have experts and researchers serve as advisors to this type of process and have participants who have direct influence over programs and systems that impact the result (school readiness) be a part of the workgroup teams.

The planning team is working closely with STRIVE Together to provide follow-up support to all the active teams working on strategies to more comprehensively go over the Plan-Do-Study-Act tools and better incorporate them into our community change work.

No Money this Year

School Districts are feeling the pain of a severely underfunded public education system. There are no reserves to do more with less. Rider 78 – the State's requirement that districts had to demonstrably spend 15% of its Pre-K average daily attendance revenue allocation (ADA) on quality hit districts especially hard because the guidance on it came late and did not get incorporated into school district budgets. Districts who did not previously participate in HB 4 High Quality Pre-K grants are hurting most. They did not get any of the \$118 million dollars provided in 2015-16 to increase quality, but now are being held to same standard as districts who did receive funding. Districts have little appetite for increasing funding for Pre-K with general dollars when the state is not coming near to covering the cost for the high quality requirements. Advocacy for more funding for High Quality Pre-K will be key in upcoming legislative sessions.

Districts Using Assessment Data

We must better understand what data is actionable for teachers to use in their classrooms. One of the Plan-Do-Study-Act projects undertaken as part of ECRC was to understand how teachers reacted to coaching on the new Pre-K Progress Monitoring data required by the TEA. Teachers were given an initial coaching session to better understand their classroom data and were asked to complete a survey on what strategies helped them best help their students. Coaching on classroom data had mixed results, primarily because more than half of the Pre-K teachers surveyed felt that their current assessments could be harmful to students, especially assessments using computer based testing. Teachers saw greater value in (1) having administrators who supported developmentally appropriate practices, (2) trainings on social emotional learning, (3) having dedicated time to review how each student was doing or dedicated coaching for teachers on particular students who were hard to understand. This PDSA helped us better understand the teacher perspective as well as the current landscape. Although TEA and

collective impact organizations may be using data, our teachers and districts are not using current assessments in a way that teachers feel helps their instructional practice. We also have to be better able to understand what data is actionable for teachers. With the requirements for quality pre-K in Rider 78, we want to maximize the strategies that will lead us to increasing School Readiness.

Using the Tools

One of the greatest benefits to the ECRC process was increased capacity of backbone organizations in our region that focus on children's health, mental health and early childhood services. ECRC workgroup members received specific training in multiple facilitation frameworks: the Critical Response Frame Work, Plan Do Study Act, and the Accountability Pathway. These tools will help the work of E3 Alliance and other backbone organizations up our game to continue the process of building a better system for children in our region. ECRC steering committee members will continue to receive additional trainings from STRIVE together to be able to refine our work, and more deeply embed the principles of the results count framework into our everyday practice.

More Meetings but Better Progress

One of the most desired outcomes of the ECRC process was to enhance cross-sector alignment of the education sector with health and mental health programs. We are continuing to work within the Central Texas community to enhance this practice. The Mental Health workgroup and the Pre-K Quality workgroup are combining to create a mental health and social emotional learning self-assessment for high-quality Pre-K programs. The Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute has agreed to be an advisor for this process and will share with us their work on mental health supports in schools that they are developing for schools impacted by Hurricane Harvey. Their work has concentrated on older grades and they are looking forward to the focus on Pre-K and K that our group will bring.

The Data Sharing workgroup is working closely with healthcare providers to enhance data systems, multi-entity sharing, and closed-loop referrals of developmental screening health data and School Readiness data so that our community can use this information to make better decisions and intervene earlier in the lives of children.

In addition, we are working with health care providers more closely to embed the idea of School Readiness being part of a whole child health program. Later this month, early childhood advocates will be part of our health care planning programs for the first time. City of Austin and Travis County personnel that participated in the ECRC have advocated for bringing the work of ECRC to the broader planning that is ongoing in community health in Central Texas. Work from the early childhood results count process and recommendations will be embedded into the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP). ECRC members will serve as advisors to this on-going process to continue to align Health and Mental Health services to ensure all children are school ready.

Where to Go From Here

All this to say that although the formal process has ended, in a way it feels like it has just begun. While individuals in many of these organizations have met for years, the work going forward is much more purposeful, urgent, and goal directed. Groups such as the School Readiness Action Plan, school districts, and health providers are incorporating strategies into their work going forward. At the same time, new players are at the table and ongoing commitments to shared objectives are supporting a common agenda with multiple backbone groups (including E3 Alliance, United Way for Greater Austin, and Children's Optimal Health). We are working hard to enhance the relationships made through this process and embed the holistic view into all of our planning processes.