

Oak Park Villager of the Year: Collaboration for Early Childhood

Nurturing success from the start and taking a pro-active approach to education

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Board members of the Collaboration for Early Childhood Development, with kids from the OP-RF Day Nursery, from left, back row: Emily Pastor, Carolyn Newberry Schwartz, David Weindling and Catherine Hart. Front row: Joan White, Carollina Song and Ann Courter.

DAVID PIERINI/Staff Photographer

By [Anna Lothson](#)

Staff Reporter

A child can't read the board or hear the teacher. There are family stressors at home. The student is being taught at the wrong level or has fallen behind. Parents don't know where to turn. Their child, at his or her most impressionable age, remains at risk.

These scenarios have become increasingly apparent in the education system, particularly in the early childhood years, the most vulnerable period of a child's development. For 10 years, the Collaboration for Early Childhood has worked to bridge these gaps, and in 2012, that commitment reached a new level.

In recognition of their efforts to focus the attention of our two communities, Wednesday Journal has named them Villagers of the Year.

In 2009, the Oak Park and River Forest High School board and the Village of Oak Park launched a community-wide strategic planning process in conjunction with the Collaboration for Early Childhood Care and Education. The goal was to create a comprehensive system that integrates high-quality programs and services for children age 0-5 that helps advance their development. Three years later, funding for the initiative has been, or is expected to be, approved by multiple governing boards in Oak Park and River Forest, allowing the collaboration to move forward.

"It needs to be underscored that we do have a significant need in the achievement gap," said Eric Gershenson, a volunteer board member and one of the founders of the Collaboration for Early Childhood, citing data that indicates close to 20 percent of kids from birth to 5 years old are at risk of academic failure. This is a growth of about 11 percent in the last decade, he said.

"It's a values issue for Oak Park, and it's a fiscal issue," he said. "Fortunately in this instance, the approach we believe in is responsive to both of those things. If you do both of those things you're going to get a significant response on both your investments."

The groups have agreed that no one governmental body is entirely responsible for the success of children's educational and emotional development. The effort in 2012 to fund the initiative garnered support from six independently operating governing bodies.

Carolyn Newberry Schwartz, executive director of the nonprofit Collaboration, said the group has secured a public-private partnership, which was very intentional. The structure of the organization, she said, allows everybody to feel they can participate in an equal manner.

"It's in the interest of everybody to make sure we needed to — and we did — leverage private funding to support early childhood in Oak Park," Newberry Schwartz said.

The merging of private and public funding has contributed to the overall success of the project because it's "enabled people to participate meaningfully and at multiple levels," she said. Private assistance is immensely helpful because Oak Park can't tap into the small pool of public dollars available statewide for such initiatives.

"You provide better services if people have working relationships with each other. There are major gaps in the early childhood field," Newberry Schwartz said. "It's relatively recent that we've learned how important early childhood is."

Although Oak Park has needs, compared to other districts in the state our early childhood programs don't have to deal with the magnitude of concerns others face, but Gershenson said the group has followed research created by national education leaders.

"While we'd like to think that we are absolutely at the cutting edge of social policy, and in many ways we are, this didn't just spring on us. We've really been paying attention to the national policy," he said. "There has been observation about the nature of this whole situation and the fragmentation of services."

Gershenson said that fragmentation occurs because gaps often aren't seen until students hit high school, even though children may have been falling behind for years. Essentially, early child development has a domino effect that has the potential to either boost or delay a child if they aren't reached at a young age. This includes the very pivotal 0-5 age group that the Collaboration for Early Childhood group is targeting.

"We know now that we need to start before birth — but especially at birth," Newberry Schwartz said. "If we don't do that, we are going to continue to struggle with the same issues we've had. We've got to become smart about how we're investing our public dollars."

It's time for a change, she said, and community support is the resource that will make the program sustainable.

"We've been told by the state that there is nothing in the near term that we can plan for. If we're going to make a meaningful change and really do this plan that the community developed, we need to do a little more."

The strategic plan for the early childhood initiative establishes a blueprint for a more systematic approach, Gershenson said, and this includes four primary strategies: early detection screenings, parent information and support, professional child care development and public preschool coordination. A series of groups — the task group/executive board, the Collaboration's board, and the jurisdictional oversight board — will implement, direct and monitor the progress and outcome of the programs.

"It's an issue for all families in Oak Park," Newberry Schwartz said. "There is lack of understanding where to go for support. There is a need for information that wasn't being met."

The goal is to get more children properly prepared for kindergarten, help parents and children received the support needed, and eventually ensure that Oak Park has a "high-quality, coordinated early childhood system."

The overall goal, which includes time for data collection, and time to determine if the program is hitting benchmarks, is a three-year window. If progress isn't at the level expected, the groups will reevaluate and make tweaks. Many of the early childhood programs are already being monitored.

"If we're going to make this kind of commitment to education, we have to at the very least acknowledge that we've got to lay that foundation," Gershenson said. "No architect starts a world-class building on the seventh floor. You've got to have that foundation, and if you do, your kids are going to be that much more successful."