

EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

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Two-Generation Pilot Program Underway in Evanston

By Larry Gavin

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At a policy research briefing held last week at Evanston Township High School, a panel of educators and researchers, led by Lindsay Chase-Landsdale and Teresa Eckrich Sommer, outlined the Two-Generation Initiative for low-income parents and their young children that is being piloted in Evanston. More than 125 people attended the event.

The Evanston Community Foundation (ECF), the Institute for Policy Research (IPR) at Northwestern University and Ascend at the Aspen Institute are partnering on the program.

"Two-generation programs intentionally and strategically link education, job training, and career-building programs for low-income parents simultaneously with high-quality early childhood education programs for their young children," say the partners in a memo handed out at the briefing.

Dr. Chase-Landsdale, a professor, associate provost for faculty and IPR fellow, and Dr. Sommer, an IPR senior research scientist, are conducting research on a two-generation program called "Career Advance" in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and are using the research to design and implement the pilot in Evanston. They will also conduct a research study of the Evanston pilot.

Ascend is promoting two-generation solutions throughout the country, and the Evanston pilot is part of this national network, said Dr. Chase-Landsdale.

Two-Generation Programs

"The research hypothesis is that two-generation programs that target parents and children simultaneously ... will have a greater short- and long-term impact on children's success and life opportunities over time, than simply having children in early childhood classes," said Dr. Chase-Landsdale.

While saying that there is "very little empirical evidence that these work," she said there are "compelling theories" supporting the approach. "The argument is you're going to get a double whammy because children will be better prepared for kindergarten, and parents will be starting to progress more and see they have more opportunities over time."

As time goes on, kids will do better in elementary school; and in middle school and high school, they will develop a sense of identity to go forward to college, said Dr. Chase-Landsdale. Parents who participate in the

program will have achieved a higher education level, secured better wage growth, and have less stress and better economic stability.

Dr. Sommer said, "Children gain cognitively and socially from early learning. But we also know those gains tend to fade in time and that we need to better support these investments in children. One of the ways we can do this is to tighten the connections to early elementary schools. Another is what we're talking about here, investing in the human and social capital of parents themselves."

"It's a new idea to think of adding this to early childhood education centers," said Dr. Sommer. "One of the ways we can do that is we can create structures within the centers to support parents by providing coaching services, helping parents to work in small groups together, building on the social networks that we know are already in existence. We began this work with the study of three programs. We saw the strengths of early childhood education and the networks that are provided to parents and we wanted to build on that."

Sara Schastok, president and CEO of ECF, told the *RoundTable*, "The added focus on parents as learners opens up a path to economic security for the whole family. In a U.S. economy in which families are increasingly 'stuck' where they are, advancing parents' careers through education is significant. When both parents and children are successfully engaged in school, parents are likely to be more comfortable in their children's schools and better advocates for their children in a school setting. That's also good for families.

"And, you can't ignore the research showing that parents' level of education – especially the mother's – affects the child's achievement," Ms. Schastok continued. "The children of parents with a bachelor's degree are reading better and scoring higher in math than children whose parents have less education. Every year of learning matters – so when parents finish high school, or gain some college or vocational training, even short of a degree – all these steps produce gains for their children."

The Evanston Model

Dr. Sommer said the two-generation program builds on ECF's work in the early childhood development area, and builds on the strength of early learning and workforce training programs.

"We started small with this pilot initiative," said Dr. Sommer. The pilot includes 13 parents "who are highly motivated for their children." Their children, up to age six, "are already in quality early learning centers," specifically District 65's early childhood center, the Infant Welfare Society of Evanston and the Child Care Center of Evanston.

The pilot began on Feb. 18 with a three-month curriculum. The parents attend weekly meetings of small peer groups led by a career coach at the Evanston Public Library. In addition, each parent receives one-on-one coaching on a monthly basis from Artishia Hunter, director of Evanston's two-generation program, to guide them in career-decision making, to identify values and strengths, and to work through challenges.

During these sessions, "We're helping parents set professional goals and to identify careers," said Dr. Sommer. "One way we've done this is the group has gone to IRMCO, a manufacturing facility here in Evanston led by a woman president, and learn hands on what would it be like to work in a manufacturing field."

The parents are also thinking about identifying priorities for their families, what kind of work they would like to do (e.g., night shifts, day shifts, or part-time) and think about how they would balance their work with the care of their children, said Dr. Sommer.

The parents are also working with Patricia Hunter at the YWCA "to think about finances and how they match what their economic situation is with their particular goals.

"We're also helping them determine where are they right now educationally, and what is the next step they can take to progress to reach their goals," said Dr. Sommer.

After the three-month program ends, the parents will continue to receive coaching for an additional six months. The plan is also to help parents enter an educational program or a job-training program. "We're going to invest in education and training programs that support the needs of parents, but also the needs of the employers in our community," said Dr. Sommer.

"We have a working list of employers we've reached out to and we are continuing to develop relationships," said Artishia Hunter.

The initiative will have two more cohorts of 15 parents, one next fall and the second in the winter, said Dr. Chase-Lansdale, and they will seek feedback from the parents to guide development of the program. ECF and NU plan to fundraise and create a long-term sustainability plan, she said.

"The long-term vision," Dr. Sommer said, "is we want to be able to provide parents with the kind of supports, intensive training and education that will get them careers in the local marketplace and enable them to progress along as their children grow at each stage of their career."

"These families are so resilient and they come with so many strengths," said Arteshia Hunter. "While the initiative will be providing supports, she said, it is important to recognize that the parents are "highly motivated by their children and want the best for their children and want their children's lives to be better than theirs. They want to create great opportunities, and many of them are seeing the pathway to that is through education."

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