

Strategies for Success in Community Partnerships

Case Studies of Community Collaboratives
for Early Learning and Media



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About this report and the Ready To Learn Initiative

This case study report is for people interested in funding, managing, forming, or improving community partnerships. It provides an in-depth account of strategies associated with success in Community Collaboratives for Early Learning and Media, or CC-ELM. A national network of thirty CC-ELM—local partnerships among public media stations and organizations such as schools, libraries, afterschool program providers, parent and family advocacy groups, and housing authorities—were developed and implemented between 2015 and 2020 as part of the CPB-PBS Ready To Learn Initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

CPB-PBS Ready To Learn Research partners EDC and SRI International completed six case studies as part of their evaluation of CC-ELM implementation and impacts. The report opens with a cross-case analysis that places case study findings in the context of overall evaluation findings; the six case study reports follow, each focused on a single community.

The Ready To Learn Initiative is a cooperative agreement funded and managed by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. It supports the development of innovative educational television and digital media targeted to preschool and early elementary school children and their families. Its goal is to promote early learning and school readiness, with a particular interest in reaching children from low-income families. In addition to creating television and other media content, the program supports activities intended to promote national distribution of the programming, effective educational uses of the programming, community-based outreach, and research on educational effectiveness.

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About EDC

Education Development Center (EDC) is a global nonprofit organization that advances lasting solutions to improve education, promote health, and expand economic opportunity. Since 1958, we have been a leader in designing, implementing, and evaluating powerful and innovative programs in more than 80 countries around the world.

About SRI

SRI Education, a division of SRI International headquartered in Menlo Park, California, is tackling the most complex issues in education and learning to help students succeed. We work with federal and state agencies, school districts, major foundations, nonprofit organizations, and international and commercial clients to address risk factors that impede learning, assess learning gains, and use technology for educational innovation.

Acknowledgments

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Especially given this work's foundation in our national evaluation of the CC-ELM network, we thank the station staff who tirelessly administered surveys and responded whenever we had questions about the data. We thank the station staff at all 30 CC-ELM who responded to our Year 5 reflection survey and discussed the results with us in January 2020, at our last pre-pandemic, in-person meeting. The evaluation team's station liaisons played an invaluable role by putting data in context throughout each year, and in analysis and reporting. They are: lead Alexandra Adair, Marion Goldstein, Heather Lavigne, Tiffany Maxon, Lucy Nelson, and Alexia Raynal (all EDC); and Sarah Nixon Gerard, Sara Gracely, Sarah Dec, Christopher Ortiz, and Jenna Rush (SRI). Naomi Hupert and Megan Silander (EDC) and Carlin Llorente (formerly SRI) designed the national CC-ELM evaluation

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About This Study

This study provides insights into strategies associated with success in community partnerships focused on early learning and family engagement that targeted children in families in under-resourced communities.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) selected 30 public media stations to establish these community partnerships as part of the 2015–2020 Ready To Learn Initiative led jointly by CPB and PBS.

Partnering organizations included the stations, schools and Head Start programs, libraries, literacy nonprofits, and afterschool learning programs, as well as organizations such as community centers, interfaith organizations, clinics, housing authorities, and food pantries. Together, they assessed local needs and opportunities and identified target communities in which to focus their work.



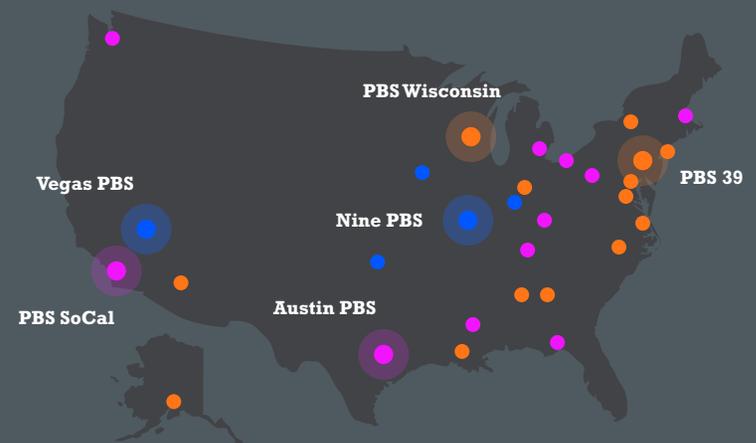
Note: **Case Study CC-ELM** (bolded) in the National CC-ELM Network

→ The partnerships, called **Community Collaboratives for Early Learning and Media** or **CC-ELM**, sought to

- ⊕ engage and build relationships with children in families in low-income communities through high-quality, media-rich learning programs and other services;
- ⊕ build local parent and educator capacity to support early learning;
- ⊕ mitigate other obstacles, such as food insecurity, that can impede children’s ability to learn.

CPB and PBS established a **national network** of CC-ELM by awarding three cohorts of partnerships in 2015, 2016, and 2018.

Figure 1



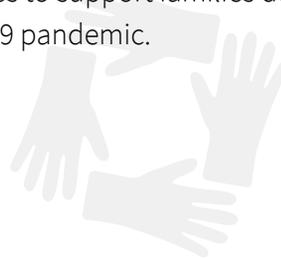
Partnership Activities

While CC-ELM activities varied from community to community by design, depending on the types of programs and services each participating organization offered and the local needs and resources, every CC-ELM offered PBS KIDS Ready To Learn family and child engagement programs. The programs combined digital media and hands-on activities to model “playful learning” approaches.

PBS and selected stations designed the programs and trained both CC-ELM station staff and partners to facilitate them. The programs promoted building relationships with families over time by taking place over multiple sessions and often by welcoming the same families back to different programs.

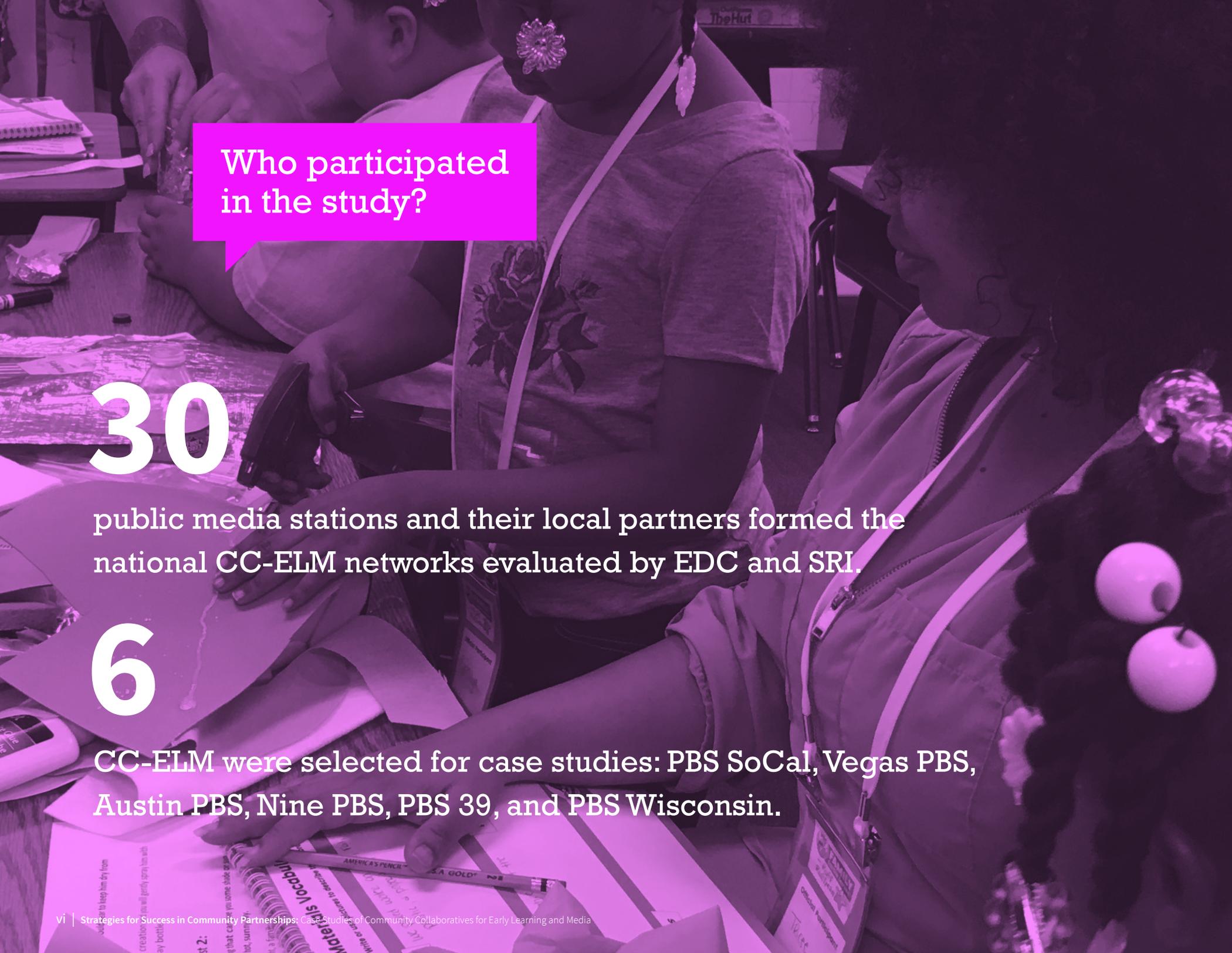
Over half of the CC-ELM also offered Educator & Community Learning workshops, professional development programs in which educators practice guided play strategies and learn about PBS KIDS digital resources.

CC-ELM offered a rich array of other programs and services as well, including other family learning programs, children’s reading clubs, large-scale community events, job training workshops for parents, support for children to connect with parents who are incarcerated, and “digital backpacks” and other online resources to support families during the COVID-19 pandemic.



In Family & Community Learning workshops (FCLs), parents (or other adult family members) engage in activities alongside their children. Each FCL series usually meets for four 2-hour sessions that begin with a community meal.

Camps have similar learning goals to those of FCLs, but are for children in out-of-school-time settings, such as afterschool or school-break programs.



Who participated
in the study?

30

public media stations and their local partners formed the national CC-ELM networks evaluated by EDC and SRI.

6

CC-ELM were selected for case studies: PBS SoCal, Vegas PBS, Austin PBS, Nine PBS, PBS 39, and PBS Wisconsin.

Research Design

Ready To Learn research partners EDC and SRI worked with CPB and PBS to select six CC-ELM for **case studies**, with the goal of building on findings from their CC-ELM **evaluation**.

For the **evaluation**, EDC and SRI analyzed each year's surveys (2017–2020) that they developed for CC-ELM to administer

- after engagement programs (for parents and facilitators) to investigate program implementation and impacts;
- annually (for station and partner staff) to investigate organizational and community impacts.

Station staff from all 30 CC-ELM also responded to a summative reflection survey in December 2019.

In selecting the six CC-ELM for **case studies**, we sought to highlight exemplary strategies that contributed to the partnerships' success

while also drawing from a range of CC-ELM that was representative of the national network (Figure 1). We then reviewed documents and interviewed 75 people—63 station and partner organization staff, parents, and educators, and 12 CPB and PBS leaders—to examine factors that influenced CC-ELM successes and challenges.



We interviewed

75 

12 CPB and PBS Ready To Learn Leaders



19 Station Staffers

24 Partners

14 Parents

6 Educators

About the Case Reports



Austin PBS



PBS SoCal



Nine PBS

CC-ELM established in 2015

The first 11 CC-ELM generated the lessons learned that later cohorts would build on. Their five-year awards promoted rich partnering relationships and expansion of family, community, and educator impacts. Austin PBS and PBS SoCal were both leaders in the CC-ELM network. Austin PBS shared its work in national meetings, piloted a new Family & Community Learning program, and received a CPB-PBS Scale & Sustainability award. PBS SoCal developed both a Family & Community Learning program and a camp. Stations around the country adopted learning resources that PBS SoCal developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Austin PBS CC-ELM: Expanding opportunities with local district support for scaling the work

This Collaborative, based in Austin, Texas, was formed among a children’s museum, local schools, a family advocacy group, a youth development organization, and an early-learning nonprofit. The team offered both bilingual and Spanish-only programs to welcome local families. As word spread of high family engagement in programs offered by this team, new opportunities arose to partner with the school district. They first developed a parents-only series that took place at school during the school day, with support from district parent engagement funds. Based on success with that

program, the district then sought their help to develop from the PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programs standards-aligned lessons for teachers to use during school. To scale use of the lessons, Austin PBS offered virtual trainings on the lessons, enrolling 60 early elementary educators in the region free of charge. The station has also begun to offer the 5-meeting parent series virtually.

The PBS SoCal CC-ELM: Empowering parents with workforce training and rich school programming

Where other stations collaborated with a handful of organizations to establish their CC-ELM, PBS SoCal listed over 20 partners in its initial project plan. Over time, however, a shared anti-poverty priority emerged among a smaller group. One partner described how, by helping parents to build workforce skills, the team hoped to foster greater agency and independence. PBS SoCal built on its STEM Parent Academy to train parents and hire them as facilitators of PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programs, with the goal that the experience would prepare them for other early education positions. In addition, PBS SoCal deepened its relationship with Compton schools, where parents reported having attended five or even ten school programs with a PBS KIDS element. Thanks to this partnership, PBS SoCal and the school district jointly secured a multi-million dollar award to improve early mathematics learning.

CC-ELM established in 2016

By 2020, this cohort of five CC-ELM was in most regards indistinguishable from those in the founding cohort. Several rose to national leadership roles in the CC-ELM network. Las Vegas PBS developed one of the Family & Community Learning programs and, like Nine PBS, benefited from a supplemental CPB-PBS Scale & Sustainability award.

The Nine PBS CC-ELM: Improving equity within organizations and communities

This partnership focused its efforts in two urban communities, St. Louis City and East St. Louis, and in the Normandy area of St. Louis County. The early stages of the work were humbling, even for the veteran community organizer and engagement leader Nine PBS hired to lead the CC-ELM, who described abandoning myriad assumptions in that phase. This team went on to form rich, mutually beneficial relationships with a children’s literature nonprofit that promotes Black authors and books with Black characters, the St. Louis County Library system, a state history museum, and family and housing advocacy groups. Seeking to improve equity within the CC-ELM team itself, the Nine PBS leader revised hiring practices and established a fellowship program to support staff development. The team made space to reflect on new opportunities by holding regular “Kids and Coffee” meetings.



Vegas PBS



PBS 39



PBS Wisconsin

One partner described viewing organizations as synergistic that he had previously seen as competing for the same resources, after learning more about them through the partnership.

The Vegas PBS CC-ELM: Supporting families across settings, 24-7

This CC-ELM comprised the station, the local school district’s community engagement program, the local library system, family advocacy organizations, an out-of-school learning provider, and a university extension program. The station was already a trusted education partner in the community, but sought with these partners to address more comprehensive needs of families. They aimed to offer programs across settings to provide continuity for families in areas with high school transiency rates. The team also homed in on its potential role in this uniquely 24-7 city, where children may need care—and may have learning opportunities—at any hour. The CC-ELM capitalized on the fact that the informal “friend, family, and neighbor” providers that fill this around-the-clock need register with a local advocacy organization to engage them in a series of workshops focused on playful learning approaches in early STEM. A partner reported observing a sense of community emerging in the group. Like Austin PBS and PBS SoCal, this CC-ELM offered bilingual programs to welcome families who are more comfortable speaking Spanish.

CC-ELM established in 2018, after a planning year

This group of 14 CC-ELM were selected from among 34 stations that had received one-year planning grants from CPB-PBS. This last cohort benefited from the experiences of the previous two—sharing in national meetings, an online community, and informally—but had less time to build relationships or realize deeper organizational change.

The PBS 39 CC-ELM: Building trust and making STEM institutions more accessible with help from ambassadors

The PBS 39 CC-ELM, which focused its work in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, was unusual in that all three of the station’s core partners were informal learning institutions—a museum, a science center, and a nature conservancy. The team initially underestimated how critical local community schools liaisons would be in opening connections to local families and helping to recruit for the programs. By relying on these and other ambassadors to help recruit, and by offering programs first in familiar places, the team built the trust that helped families venture into institutions they had never visited before, including the station itself. Partners who had long struggled with participation from some sectors

of the community—one described a longstanding but underattended free admissions day—described welcoming these families for the first time.

The PBS Wisconsin CC-ELM: Building family engagement in two rural counties through key school connections

A library and schools in two small towns in rural southwestern Wisconsin were delighted to partner with PBS Wisconsin, describing their counties as often overlooked by philanthropic efforts that tend to target more densely populated places. The PBS Wisconsin team, based about one hundred miles away in Madison, built relationships from scratch to develop partnerships and engage families. A local church staff member shared her community knowledge and ties with the station team, who soon learned that local schools played a prominent role in families’ lives. By focusing on the schools, the team came to see principals, secretaries, teachers, and even superintendents taking a hands-on role in recruiting and facilitating to champion the PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programs. School leaders reported unprecedented levels of family engagement, while a library leader also reported greater family engagement after getting to know the families at the nearby school.

Key Findings

Impacts on Partnering Organizations

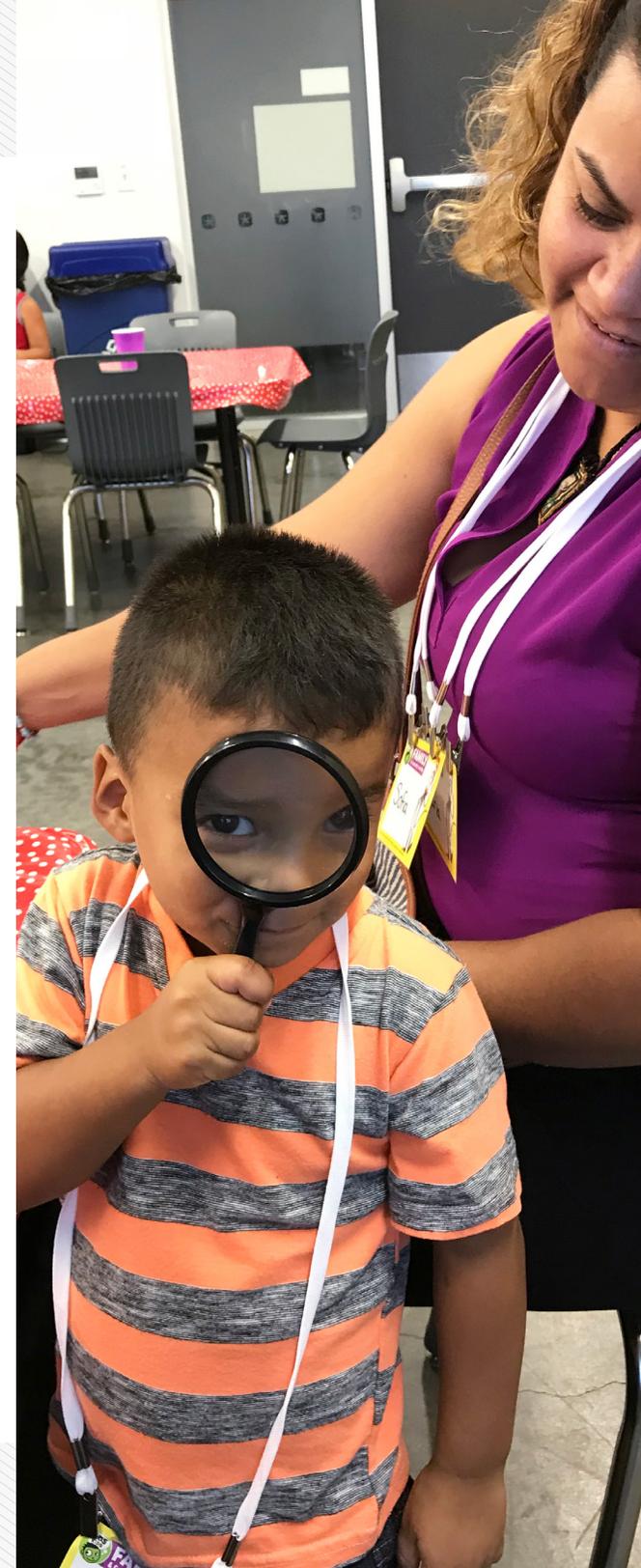
 **Strong partnerships cultivated mutual relationships among all partnering organizations and a deep, multifaceted sense of shared mission and goals.** They also continually assessed needs and opportunities over the course of the work, and adapted flexibly to changing circumstances.



Our mission is to be a catalyst in the community, and a listener and thought partner. This program is exactly that. We are listening and providing that change, evolving with the community around us. —*PBS 39 station staff member*

 **Successful partnerships resulted in increased organizational and staff capacity.** Staff of partnering organizations reported gaining greater understanding of how to promote equity in early learning and how to lead culturally responsive family and community engagement work. Leaders noted the CC-ELM provided opportunities for staff development and improved internal collaboration. We saw the strongest evidence of these changes in partnerships that were at least three years old.

 **Community brokers and ambassadors were vital in developing trusted relationships with families.** Partners and stations both played this role for the CC-ELM, as did individuals not affiliated with partnering organizations but well-known and highly regarded in the target communities. Brokers served as connectors, while ambassadors were community advocates for the work. Station or partner staff from the target communities could play both roles. The CC-ELM that initially underestimated the need for brokers and ambassadors quickly learned that high family participation followed relationship-building.





Community brokers and ambassadors were vital in developing trusted relationships with families.



Museums in general have kind of a stigma around them, that they're only for a certain type of people. ... So, we really wanted to start to break down those barriers and identify ways to continue to build our relationship with the communities.

—Children's museum partner in the Austin PBS CC-ELM

It's going in as somebody who wants to support and somebody who is recognizing the community that you're going into is the expert and you're not. And I think that's a critical lens to have.

—PBS Wisconsin station staff member

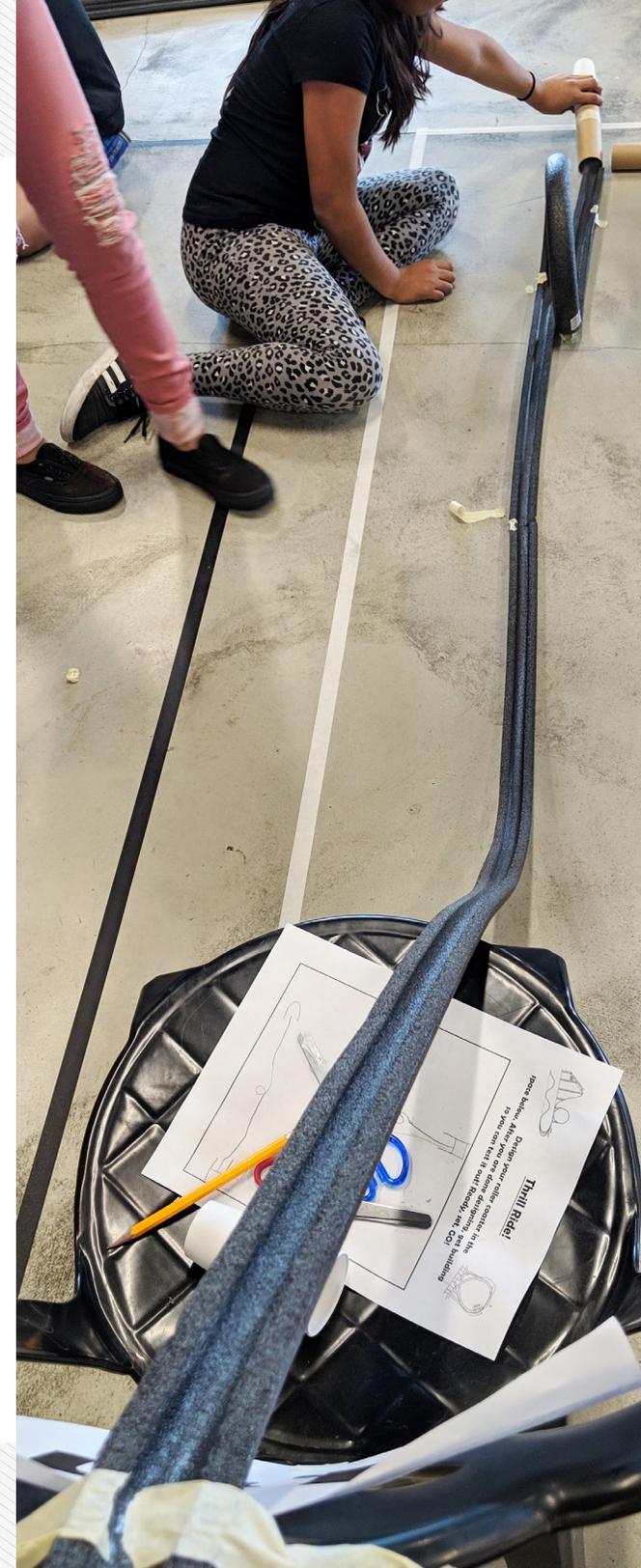
 **CC-ELM saw high participation from families when programs were designed to welcome them.** Accessible, inclusive programs had a foundation of trusted relationships, welcomed whole families in a familiar setting, featured a community meal, were scheduled around parents' work and other family obligations, were bilingual if needed, and offered support for children with disabilities. Schools and other partners who observed high, ongoing engagement from families who had historically not been as engaged reevaluated their expectations of these parents.

 **Partnering organizations rose into more prominent leadership roles and gained influence** as some CC-ELM expanded beyond their family and community engagement efforts to take a broader place in the local or regional early learning and family advocacy landscape. Partners benefited from funders' and families' high regard for PBS. Stations and partners alike reported the CC-ELM had led to new funding opportunities and new partnering relationships.



It's not just the numbers of sessions we offer, it's more building up the educational ecosystem, building stronger partners, having people able to use the resources better.

—Nine PBS CC-ELM leader





CC-ELM saw high participation from families when programs were designed to welcome them.



Impacts on Families, Communities, and Educators

Parents felt empowered by gaining knowledge, skills, and confidence in supporting their young children's learning.

They spoke of gaining new insights into their children's strengths and interests. Parents described how they used strategies and PBS KIDS resources they had learned about in CC-ELM programs in their families. They also reported increased understanding of how to use media and technology for learning, and valuing that their children gained proficiency with tablet and PBS KIDS apps.



Yes, I know I can teach my children. I have more ideas for how to help [him] learn—not just using a notebook ... he doesn't have to learn only through reading and writing, but also through exploration, seeing, and imagining. ... I have used some of the tools they gave us there. And sometimes even I try to do other things, or search for things they can do.

Sí, sé que le puedo enseñar a los niños. Tengo más ideas para que el niño aprenda—no nada más en un cuaderno. ... el niño no solo tiene que aprender leyendo y escribiendo, sino también explorando, viendo, e imaginando ... La verdad yo sí he utilizado algunas de las herramientas que nos dieron allí. Y hasta a veces yo misma intento hacer otras cosas o buscar cosas que puedan hacer.

—Parent who had participated in and facilitated Family & Community Learning workshops in Las Vegas



Families gained access to—and began using—a wider range of community learning resources.

Parents reported they began to use local libraries, to visit museums or other cultural organizations, and to attend school and station-led programs more often after building relationships with staff from these organizations and participating in programs designed to welcome them. Stations, libraries, museums, and a wildlife conservancy were among those reporting new relationships and participation from families for whom they had long struggled to make their resources accessible. Staff also reported connecting families with other local services, such as food pantries.

 Parents and partners reported that a **stronger sense of community** developed among participating families as they got to know each other through shared meals and collaborative activities, and that they built on those relationships to engage more with community learning resources.

Children gained knowledge as well as increased communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills.

Parents described how their children talked about program concepts and activities after participating. They reported being impressed with what they described as newfound confidence their children had after participating.

Educators learned new approaches for engaging children in early literacy and STEM learning, and for deepening children’s learning, by participating in professional development offered by the CC-ELM. In Educator & Community Learning workshops, educators learned about PBS KIDS Ready To Learn resources and how to use them in their teaching. Some reported seeing increases in children’s communication skills after using guided play pedagogy and PBS KIDS resources.

Scale and Sustainability

The CC-ELM work promoted longer-term partnerships among participating organizations. Stations and partners were motivated to sustain collaborations they viewed as increasing the impacts of their work for children and families. They also reported securing additional funding or plans to seek additional funding for new joint efforts.

Participating organizations opened new opportunities by becoming “go-to resources” in their areas. Stations and partners reported that, as a result of their CC-ELM work, organizations they had not previously worked with now consider them key players in addressing local and regional needs. They reported being contacted by state education leaders, school districts, early learning programs, libraries, and others.

Some CC-ELM expanded the reach of PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programs by training others. Stations reported training staff at other public media stations and leading trainings at early learning conferences. Others trained educators through Educator & Community Learning professional development. In some CC ELM, partners began offering the programs independently.





The CC-ELM work promoted longer-term partnerships among participating organizations.

Recommendations

From these findings, we developed the following recommendations for people involved in community partnership work, particularly in partnerships involving public media stations or focused on improving equity and outcomes in early learning.

☆ **Plan from the start to sustain efforts beyond a given award.** Selecting partners with strong mission alignment, developing deeply mutual partner relationships, and building organizational capacity and increasing the partnerships' reach and influence all supported sustainability.

☆ **Commit to gaining deep understandings of the needs and assets of a well-defined target community.** Partners generated this understanding by jointly conducting a needs assessment process to identify partners, inform plans, and hone their strategies. Sometimes the target community successfully identified by partners was different from the community initially

envisioned by the station. More successful CC-ELM viewed assessing needs and assets as a critical ongoing strategy in which partners maintain “a listening stance” as those factors evolve.

☆ **Gain internal buy-in.** It is wise to invest time and resources early on to communicate the importance of the partnership work within an organization and to secure the backing of other leaders and internal stakeholders. Throughout the work, maintain internal buy-in by engaging stakeholders in sample programming, communicating positive impacts within and across teams, and working to ensure “a seat at the table” for partnership leaders in organizational decision-making.



“When I came on board, it was easy to see that our focus and groups we wanted to work with were those who shared the same mission—people truly motivated and inspired with family and community work, working with families. . . . We needed organizations who could work with families at all times.

—Vegas PBS station staff member

☆ **Earn community buy-in.** It is well worth partners' efforts to look outward and raise awareness about their programs, services, and impacts among community stakeholders. Such communications increased family participation, attracted new partners, and opened new avenues for funding.

☆ **Get to know the families.** Nurturing relationships with families is key. It is not enough to offer free admission days or programs open to all. To truly achieve and sustain positive community impacts, invest time in getting to know families by listening to their needs, building trust, inviting them to participate more actively in the programming, and adjusting strategies based on what you learn, such as by offering programming in a relevant language or at convenient times for working families.

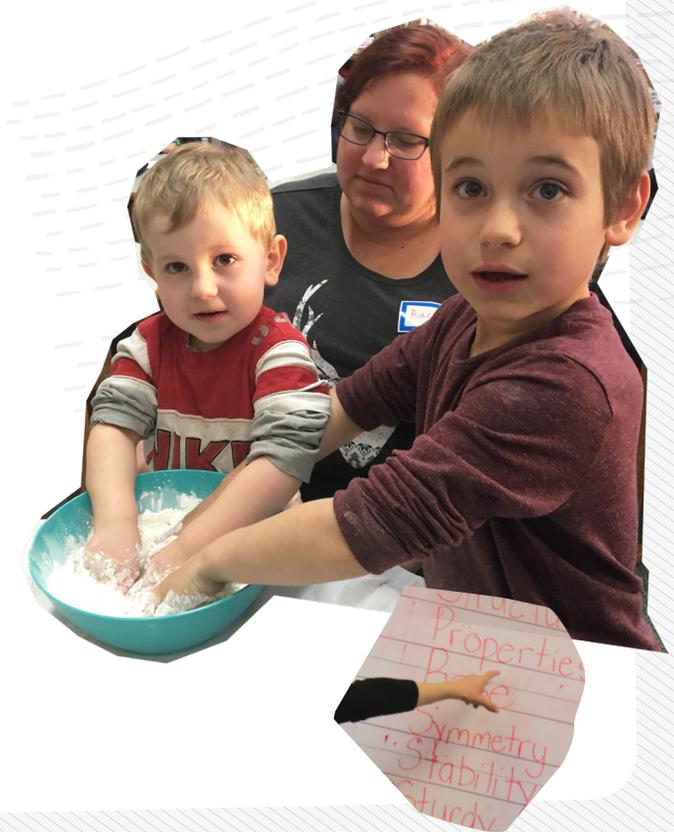
☆ **Staff your team with the right complement of expertise.** This includes hiring additional people with particular expertise to support the work, which may necessitate belt-tightening in other areas, but the benefits to programming over time

can result in financial and other resource gains that exceed those initial investments. Thoughtful staffing also involves having the right people in well-defined roles so that, collectively, the team has the breadth of expertise needed to implement successful programming. CC ELM required the expertise of educators, as well as those with skills in managing community partnerships, fundraising, and communications. Some CC-ELM also benefited from hiring individuals from the community who brought a deeper understanding of needs and assets to the work.

☆ **Make space and time to nurture the partnership.** This involves a focus on joint planning, reflecting on each other's strengths and needs, and learning about one another's work beyond the scope of the current collaborative project. A networked view of the partnership, in which partners connect with one another as well as with one organizational nucleus, also helps make the whole far greater than the sum of its parts.

☆ **Plan for personnel changes.**

A partnership is on unstable ground if it relies on the staying power of a single leader. Mitigate impacts of staff turnover by fostering ties with people who have long histories in the target community and in related efforts. If they leave one organization, they are likely to open a new partnering opportunity when they go to another.



Learn More

- Read the cross-case analysis and six individual case reports here at: edc.org/CC-ELM
- Program guides for the PBS KIDS Ready To Learn Family & Community Learning workshops are available at: <https://pbslearningmedia.org/collection/pbs-kids-family-community-learning>
- Materials for PBS KIDS Ready To Learn camps and other out-of-school resources can be found at: <https://pbslearningmedia.org/collection/rtl-oosresources>
- EDC and SRI's engagement measures for CC-ELM implementation and impacts, along with the community needs assessment tool, are available in the Ready To Learn instrument repository (search for "CC-ELM"): <http://cct.edc.org/rtl/data-collection-tools>
- EDC and SRI's other research studies of PBS KIDS Ready To Learn resources: <https://www.edc.org/ready-learn>

Nine PBS CC-ELM Case Report



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SNAPSHOT

Station	Nine PBS of Public Media
Station service area	St. Louis and the surrounding region in Missouri and Illinois
Target community	Primary focus on East St. Louis (Illinois) and St. Louis City (Missouri). Program activities also in Normandy and St. Louis County (Missouri)
Partners	<p><u>East Side Aligned</u>, a collective impact initiative focused on children and youth in the greater East St. Louis area (Illinois)</p> <p><u>Beyond Housing</u>, an organization that supports over 20 municipalities in the Normandy Schools Collaborative</p> <p><u>St. Louis County Library</u></p> <p><u>St. Louis Black Authors of Children’s Literature</u></p> <p><u>Missouri History Museum</u></p> <p><u>St. Louis Public Schools</u></p>
Collaborative established	October 2016

Starting With a Target Community

Despite Nine PBS’s proximity to the Mississippi River that separates St. Louis City, Missouri, from East St. Louis, Illinois—“the bridge is *right there*,” a station staffer emphasized—the station had not developed strong ties in the two communities prior to its CC-ELM work. In contrast with the relative affluence of the surrounding

counties, St. Louis City and East St. Louis have been historically underserved. Resulting disparities have led to under-resourced schools and low literacy rates, as well as to youth trauma from gun violence.

As the local public media station launched its Community Collaborative for Early Learning and Media (CC-ELM), funded by the CPB-PBS Ready To Learn Initiative, the team realized the effort to address the gap in these families' early learning opportunities and the systemic challenges related to early learning would take more investment and resources than anticipated. The team knew they "had to lean into it" to become trusted community partners. As this CC-ELM would learn over the next few years, achieving this goal would also take strategic staffing and planning, the right mix of partners, and a listening stance with partners and the community.

Similar Missions, Different Strengths

Nine PBS and its partners described a common mission of improving early literacy and early STEM, and of increasing parents' involvement in their children's learning. Each partner contributed different strengths and resources toward this common mission. Those we interviewed shared a commitment to serving local families facing the greatest challenges, not only by offering a specific type of service but by asking more broadly what the needs are and jointly strategizing to meet them. "That's one thing Nine PBS does, is ask 'how can we break these cycles?'" as one station staffer put it.

Serving families better by combining expertise and resources

Partners appreciated that Nine PBS lent their work prestige by providing research-based, high-quality learning resources from the well-respected media service PBS KIDS. Nine PBS also contributed Ready To Learn programs for educators, children, and families; training on the effective use of PBS KIDS media; and connections to other partners. One partner reported touting its work with Nine PBS to a local foundation to secure additional funding. Partners viewed the RTL professional development, out-of-school camps and Family & Community Learning (FCL) programs as engaging and accessible.



Children show off the PBS KIDS Playtime Pads they earned by completing a Molly of Denali Family & Community Learning series held in the Believe site at Glasgow Elementary in the Riverview Gardens School District in North St. Louis County, Missouri. Photo: Nine PBS

Teachers helped spread the word about PBS KIDS professional learning: The Saint Louis Public Schools Early Learning Coordinator reported that after teachers participate, "They go back and tell their colleagues and

more people want to do it.” Two partners also appreciated the opportunity to attend national training meetings conducted by CPB and PBS for station staff and partners from all CC-ELM.

Partners in turn have served as trusted brokers in neighborhoods and provided space or a service that complements the partnership’s mission. As one partner explained:

“Especially since [the police killing of Michael Brown in] Ferguson, any big brand like Nine [PBS] is just not accepted in these communities.” —*Julius B. Anthony, President of St. Louis Black Authors of Children’s Literature*

St. Louis Black Authors with its deep community ties provided the “bona fides” the CC-ELM needed to start building relationships. Nine PBS contributed tablets and apps to the cozy reading nooks, full of children’s books by and featuring African Americans, that the St. Louis Black Authors’ Believe project installs around the area to support its mission of reading competency for all children by the end of third grade. And St. Louis Black Authors also worked with Nine PBS to help plan and lead sessions at the station’s EdCamps, “unconference” gatherings for educators.

Later, Nine PBS and the Believe project worked together with the Missouri History Museum to plan a reading nook in the museum. The museum contributed resources focused on indigenous peoples to add a local element to learning resources associated with *Molly of Denali*, a PBS KIDS show funded by Ready To Learn that features a Native Alaskan lead character.

Meanwhile, Operation Food Search contributed family meals at learning programs and, along with local schools and libraries, helped enroll its families in Nine PBS’s

Bright By Text program, which sends parents straightforward tips for helping their children learn. In a reciprocal manner, Nine PBS and other collaborators helped connect families with Operation Food Search and other partner services.

As the partners learned more about their respective strengths, they were able to further leverage the relationships to enhance their own work. The Missouri History Museum Manager of Early Childhood and Family Programs described the collaboration as “the tip of the iceberg,” with “a lot of room to grow” and “really natural connections.” She credited the CC-ELM with helping the museum engage new local audiences and described a well-attended Day of the Dead event at the Museum that featured a costumed character from the PBS KIDS show, *Let’s Go, Luna!*

Nine PBS staff and the four partners we interviewed all reported that the CC-ELM helped them serve families better. “I don’t know if everyone operates like this,” one Nine PBS staffer commented, “but we



Parents and children discover the coding fun of PBS KIDS ScratchJr in a Family & Community Learning session held in University City at the Urban Sprouts Child Development Center (St. Louis). Photo: Nine PBS

legit feel that relationships are key.” To meet the dual goals of supporting family learning and to “build relationships over time,” she added, one needs to first address whatever is holding families back, whether that means connecting families with “food, clothes, and diapers,” or playing music to help a child experiencing trauma feel comfortable enough to come out from her hiding spot under a table.

“As parents, we have so many other things going on. Workshops are not a priority for families to stop what they are doing, especially if they have other issues going on. If I can bridge that gap to whatever else is going on, then I will be here to help.” —*Fatama Moorer, Family Engagement Manager at Nine PBS*

Deepening Partnerships Over Time

Several station staff and partners reported that, prior to the CC-ELM partnership, they had met at regional early learning events but had not truly worked together. “We all kind of run in the same circles,” one partner stated, “it’s a small world in the city and county for early childhood.”

Partners credit the way they are able to collaborate now to the CC-ELM. Alex Stallings, the community engagement manager Nine PBS hired to run the CC-ELM, is quick to admit that “it took a while to get there.” She notes that while CPB and PBS trained CC-ELM leaders on equity-centered approaches to needs assessment and on new learning programs, there was no blueprint for how to run a collaborative.

Critically, she realized that the longer-term value of the CC-ELM is “not just the numbers of sessions we offer, it’s more building up the educational ecosystem, building stronger partners, having people able to use the resources better.” In keeping with this view, she cultivated two types of partners—those focused more on direct service and those focused on the early education ecosystem—and was able to build out her staff to manage both types.

New Nine PBS hires and new hiring practices strengthen partnership management

As the CC-ELM expanded, limited staff capacity began to stand in the way of new opportunities. Stallings lobbied station leadership to hire a full-time engagement coordinator to expand an internship program from two to six spots, and then to further formalize the internship program as a longer-term fellowship position. “They need public speaking skills, classroom management skills, cultural competency, knowledge of systems change, and in some cases language skills. It’s a lot.” To that end, fellows who could stay for a year or 18 months would work better than interns in six-month positions.

Stallings also rethought hiring practices to attract the staff who could best support the work. After being turned off by how some candidates talked about working with East St. Louis families “like it was the peace corps,” rather than as partnering with community members on “equal footing,” she was dismayed to see the same deficit model hinted at in the job description. She rewrote the posting from a more asset-based

perspective and found candidates whose views aligned better with the CC-ELM's. Moreover, by recruiting from the work's target communities, Nine PBS also hired staff from both East St. Louis and St. Louis City, who grew up there and "went to the Boys and Girls Club down the street."

Stallings is grateful for station leadership's support of the work and now feels she has enough of the right staff to manage the collaborative. Partners and station staff alike praised Stallings's leadership, too. As one staffer stated:

"The facilitators she hires have to have the same type of drive and passion. You're not going to make it past her if you're just here for the paid internship. She legit provides the right person over [a task], who's passionate and going to do anything in their power to make sure things go through."—Nine PBS staff member

Nine PBS staff members also described their own growth in learning to manage and lead family learning programs. One looked back on her first time facilitating. "I had worked with small groups of children [but] how to have good command over a room of kids, I had no idea." Over time, she told us, she developed those skills and adapted the PBS KIDS Ready To Learn resources based on her observations, such as watching a younger child struggle with scissors or seeing that certain activities needed more time. As she did this, she developed clear processes for preparing the large bins of materials facilitators take to the sessions, including pre-cutting materials when needed.

Making space for strategic planning

With the goals of strengthening relationships, sharing knowledge, and identifying new opportunities to partner, Nine PBS made time for broader conversations about supporting young children and families in the St. Louis region and shored up broad-based support for the work. The team put formal structures in place to foster the conversations and build awareness and buy-in. It convened a Community Advisory Board on Early Education comprising community leaders from across business, health, policy, and education sectors, including some CC-ELM partners. The team established "Kids and Coffee" meetings, where current partners and others interested in the work were invited to come and discuss new needs and opportunities to partner. "That's where a lot of the sharing goes on," one station staff member noted. The Kids and Coffee format expanded over time into "Regional Tables," topical discussions drawing together a wider range of partners. The CC-ELM also



Nine PBS's Parent Engagement Manager Fatama Moorer (center, with hat) and Director of Early Learning Alex Stallings (to her right) at a Greater East St. Louis Partnership meeting. Photo: Nine PBS

has leveraged relationships with two other networks, regional coalition East Side Aligned and Beyond Housing, an organization working in more than 20 area towns. CC-ELM leaders found additional opportunities to contribute, learn, and make new connections by serving as board members in regionally focused organizations.

Two partners also described the networking opportunities and ideas sparked when they accompanied Nine PBS to national training meetings involving all CC-ELM, held by CPB and PBS. A partner who attended a training on the *Molly of Denali* Family & Community Learning program and related resources stated:

“The training was really special—to get to meet the creators of the show and experience the RTL, and give feedback on how you think it went and what you would want to do differently. It gave me ideas about what we could do in our space.”—*Lindsay Newton, Manager of Early Childhood and Family Programs at the Missouri History Museum*

Cultivating direct-services partners

While some Nine PBS partners are mainly involved in broader strategic planning, others have roles focused on offering programs and services. These partnerships, just as vital to the work, also require dedicated staff and management of specialized routines. The CC-ELM has offered close to 30 PBS KIDS Ready To Learn camps and family learnings to date—more than most other CC-ELM—in addition to numerous other programs. Nine PBS has partnered with over a dozen other organizations (in addition to those we interviewed) to engage families throughout the region.

While the bulk of the CC-ELM work was focused in East St. Louis and St. Louis City, the team offered programs in surrounding areas as well. A 2019 memo lists seven locations for *Ready Jet Go!* camps to be held that June, including apartment complexes, libraries, churches, and community centers. The memo cites support from “lead partners” St. Louis County Library, Children’s Defense Fund, Microsoft, Castle Park Apartments, the International Institute, and the Jewish Community Relations Council, and names facilitators from multiple organizations who would lead the programs.

To support smooth onboarding of new partners and help determine which organizations can contribute what, the station team shares checklists of everything required from the space to the materials, communal meals and, in some cases, transportation. Staff also described their own growth in managing and leading programs.

Family Time and Community-Building in Family Learning Programs

Across the case studies, we saw that parents gained new perspectives on their children and their roles as parents from participating in the programs. A Nine PBS parent described how the program her children attended exceeded her expectations.

“Hearing my kids talk about the different projects, in detail about how they created the different things, was really cool.”—Parent who attended CC-ELM programs with her children

Seeing her children’s excitement made her want to support their interests more. “One time, they did a birdhouse. I’m not really that into nature. The kids were really into it and excited. It helped reinforce the idea that even if I’m not into these things myself, I should encourage it.” These views were echoed by parents we spoke with who had participated in family learning offered by other CC-ELM as well.

Partners appreciated that the Family & Community Learning programs included a communal meal and were designed to welcome whole families.

“That was great, the whole family was eating together, working together, being a family together. It was great to have them all, participating as they could, based on age. ... And they talked with one another. I don’t remember anyone on their phones or things like that. People connected with one another.”—Sandy Anderson, Early Literacy Coordinator, St. Louis County Library

Scaling Ready To Learn Programs and Use of Other PBS KIDS Resources

Partners that provide child and family learning programs are eager to offer the PBS KIDS RTL programs to the families they serve after observing them or learning about them at a national training or regional conference. They view the programs as similar to their other programming in terms of the “hands-on, child-centered approach” and the focus on early STEM, literacy, and parent involvement, while noting the difference that CC-ELM programs add with the use of technology and media for learning. Importantly, partners appreciate the programs’ quality and ready-to-use design. “They set a good example of what high-quality early childhood programming looks like,” one partner stated.

Nine PBS staffers observed that familiar PBS KIDS characters can help children find a way into the programs’ academic content. “I have taken a lot of science classes and it can be hard to get into, especially if you have other things going on. It’s not very welcoming in a lot of ways. The way we do it,

hands-on learning and activity-based learning, helps kids learn these tough subjects. It can help them find a foothold, explore an interest in a group setting, without having to figure it out all on their own.” A parent underscored how well children know the characters, asking, “Who doesn’t [know PBS KIDS]? We use the app and we watch PBS shows on our smart TV.”

Training partners to offer programs independently

The St. Louis County Public Library system is one partner that began offering its own FCLs. Recognizing that most county library branches serve more affluent communities than the CC-ELM’s focal East St. Louis and St. Louis City neighborhoods, library leaders committed to covering their own costs and sought a grant from their library foundation to help them do so.

Nine PBS staff and partners who led RTL programs both described in very similar ways how they adapted the programs to fit the needs of participating families. They made similar types of decisions for similar reasons and described their rationale in terms of program goals. That station staff and partners had similar views on these points reflects clear communication in the partnership, as well as partners’ readiness to offer the programs independently. A St. Louis County Library program leader noted that the program’s detailed facilitator guides help educators with less experience in leading family programs, but veteran facilitators can do as she did: “You can take what you need and make it your own.”

Partners’ sense of ownership in using the materials bodes well for scaling the program offerings throughout the region. At the same time, a Nine PBS staffer shared that not all partners become truly independent. Some continue to rely on Nine PBS to provide not only the PBS KIDS-branded materials but also everything else besides facilitators. “If there’s a handout, we have to print it and mail it or drive it over—everything.” Nine PBS occasionally faces a trade-off common among CC-ELM: Partners who may be able to offer programs independently may not serve the CC-ELM’s target communities, whereas organizations with rich, well-aligned community relationships may have limited staff resources or lack experience with family programming and need more support.



A family participated in a Ruff Ruffman Sensational Science program held in North St. Louis County at the St. Louis County Library. Photo: Nine PBS

Increasing educators' use of PBS KIDS resources

In addition to offering the Ready To Learn PBS KIDS programs and training others to offer them, Nine PBS shares a range of other PBS KIDS resources with its CC-ELM partners and others, including the EdCamp “unconference” events and the Bright By Text program. They regularly draw on other PBS properties, such as *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood* and *Sid the Science Kid*, to meet children and families’ needs. Nine PBS also has trained teachers in St. Louis City Public Schools on the PBS KIDS playful learning for educators approach and how to integrate materials from the PBS KIDS website into early childhood instruction. After participating, one Pre-K teacher said, “I started being able to align what we are already doing in the classroom with what is on the [PBS KIDS] website,” adding that the materials give her “more ideas on how to introduce topics.”



The Nine PBS Top 10 Early Learning Cohort
Photo: Nine PBS

Nine PBS also held a PBS Early Learning Champion nomination process that enabled them to identify a “Top 10” group of educators. Convening this group as a professional learning cohort, the station undertook a deep dive with them on using PBS KIDS resources in their classrooms.

Sustaining the Partnerships Over Time

Moving forward, Nine PBS plans to continue innovating with its partners to expand the collaborative’s reach and to better meet family and community needs. Partners all expressed interest in continuing to collaborate; one added her organization’s support for the work would make it easier to do so. As for the station’s efforts, one Nine PBS staffer developed a podcast based on PBS KIDS RTL resources to reach more families than the team can serve via in-person workshops and events. Nine PBS also has promoted with its partners its new *Teaching in Room 9* initiative, broadcast instruction for PreK-12 students to mitigate learning loss from school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. One partner is beginning to use the work to raise funds and seeks to expand programming by identifying potential facilitators among local college students and other community members. St. Louis City Public Schools noted that funding is a key factor in ongoing collaboration in an under-resourced district.

Stallings is hoping to retain and build staff capacity to support strategic planning and continue to manage direct-services partners, all while supporting those partners’ independence. She wants to “institutionalize it in a way that the fellowships are established and clear, and to lean into our role as train-the-trainer and

move away from the station's direct facilitation—to build other organizations' capacity to do these things themselves.” One member of her team concurred on the need for more staff training.

The CC-ELM has changed how Nine PBS thinks of community access to its resources—from an attitude of “our resources are available to everyone” to more “intentionality around taking the resources into community spaces” and “reducing barriers,” as one staffer described. More broadly, the CC-ELM has reshaped and enriched the station’s early learning work. Strategies that started in the CC-ELM now define the station’s overall early learning approach. This is clear in Nine PBS’s new early education flyer, which lists public libraries, crisis centers, public housing communities, and under-resourced school districts and home visiting programs under the header, “We work with families in these community settings.” The relationships Nine PBS and its partners have built through the CC-ELM leave them well-positioned to support communities through the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.