

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.

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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.



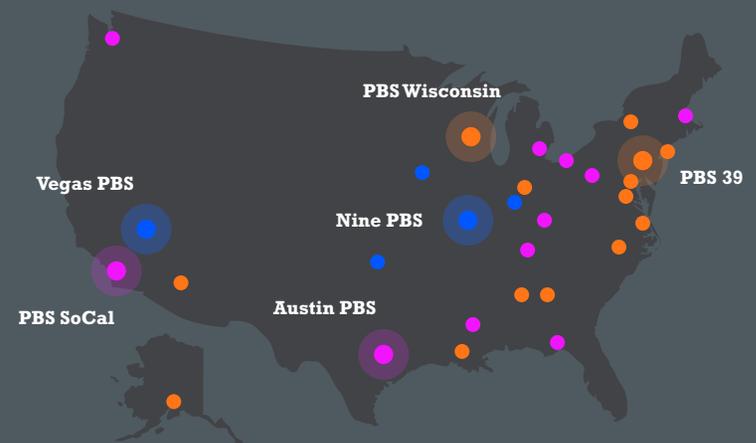
Note: **Case Study CC-ELM** (bolded) in the National CC-ELM Network

→ 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



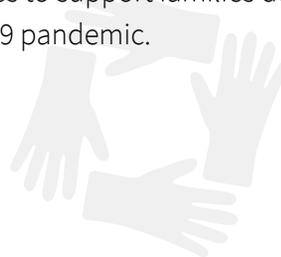
Partnership Activities

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.

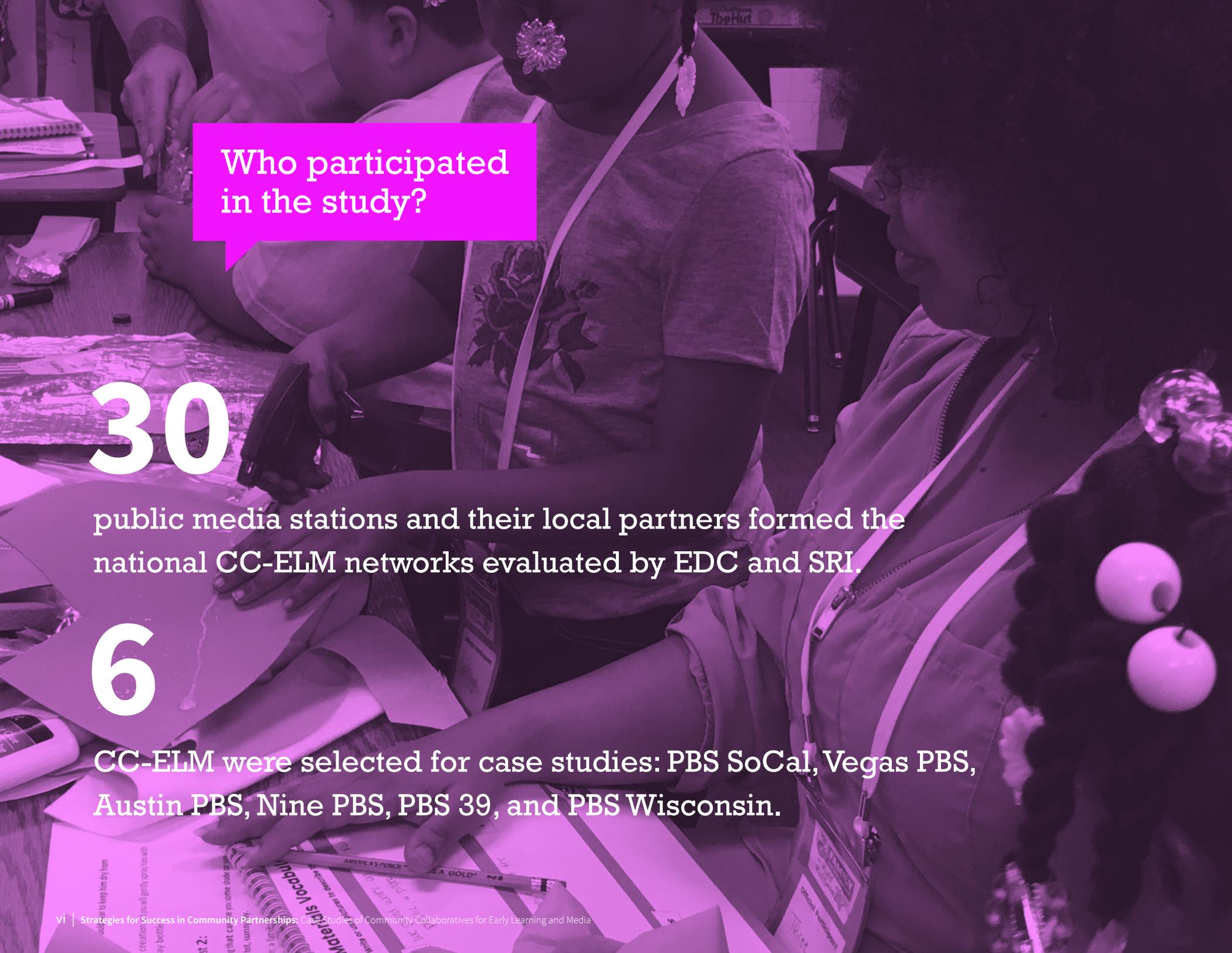
Over half of the CC-ELM also offered Educator & Community Learning workshops, professional development programs in which educators practice guided play strategies and learn about PBS KIDS digital resources.

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

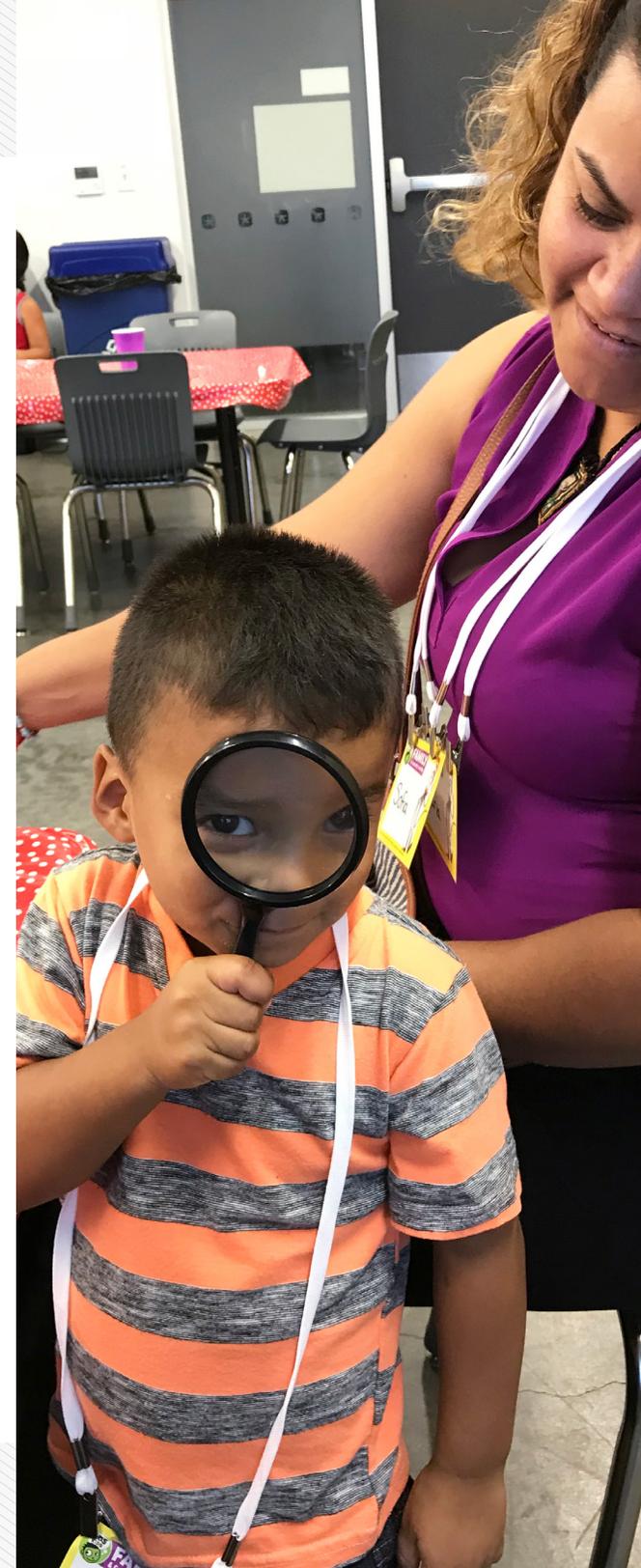
 **Strong partnerships cultivated mutual relationships among all partnering organizations and a deep, multifaceted sense of shared mission and goals.** They also continually assessed needs and opportunities over the course of the work, and adapted flexibly to changing circumstances.



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

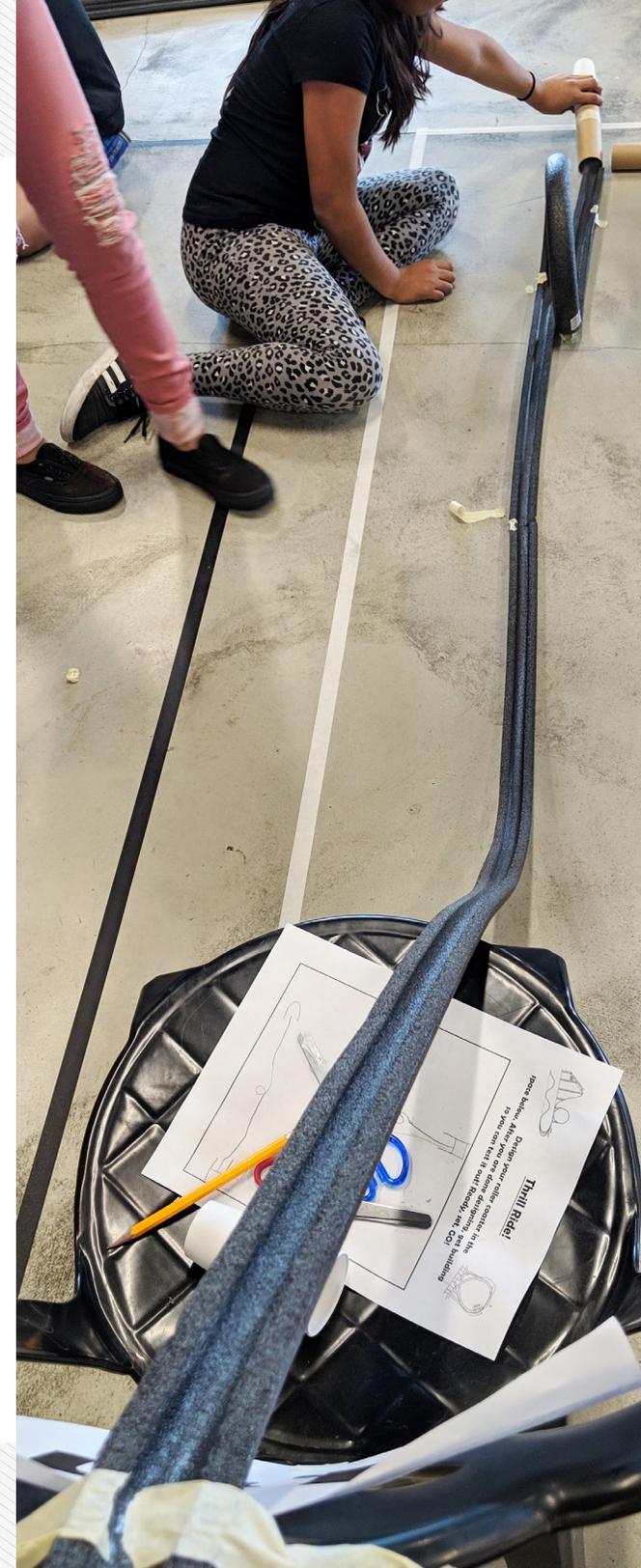
 **CC-ELM saw high participation from families when programs were designed to welcome them.** Accessible, inclusive programs had a foundation of trusted relationships, welcomed whole families in a familiar setting, featured a community meal, were scheduled around parents' work and other family obligations, 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.

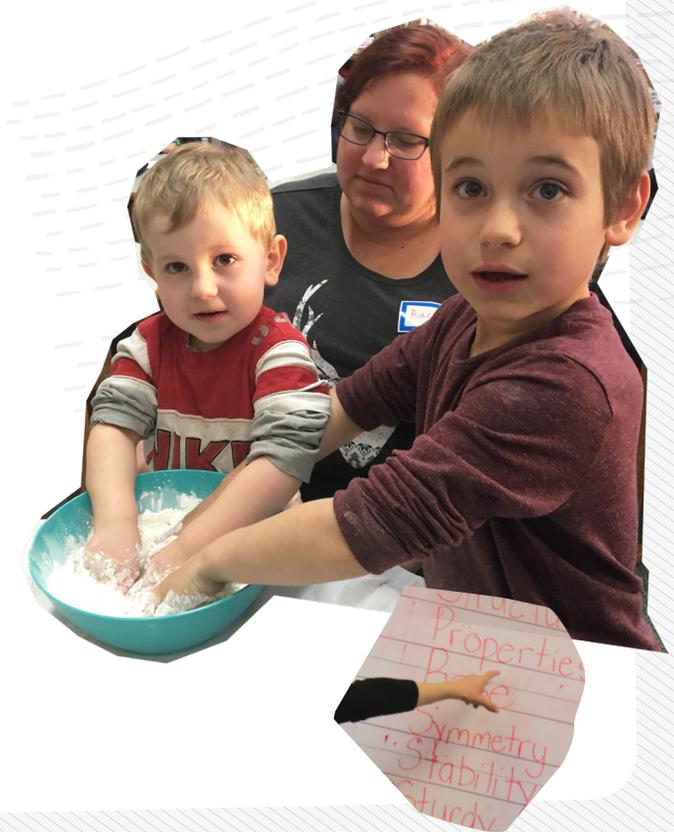
☆ **Staff your team with the right complement of expertise.** This includes hiring additional people with particular expertise to support the work, which may necessitate belt-tightening in other areas, but the benefits to programming over time

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>

PBS Wisconsin CC-ELM Case Report



Contents

- A NEW OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE RURAL COUNTIES3**
 - BUILDING ON THE STATION’S COMMITMENT TO EARLY LEARNING 4
 - THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL SCHOOLS IN ENGAGING FAMILIES.....4
 - LOCAL LIBRARY SOUGHT DEEPER CONNECTIONS WITH SCHOOL FAMILIES 5
- ORGANIZATIONAL ROLES.....6**
- PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES6**
 - PROGRAMS OFFER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES 7
 - BUILDING COMMUNITY TIES OVER TIME 7
- MAKING PROGRAMS ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL.....7**
- IMPACTS ON PARTNERING ORGANIZATIONS8**
 - BENEFITS OF THE CC-ELM MODEL AND HIGH-QUALITY LEARNING RESOURCES 8
 - EFFECTIVE COORDINATION SUPPORTED IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESS 8
 - HIGH PARENT ENGAGEMENT LED SCHOOL LEADERS TO REEVALUATE EXPECTATIONS 9
 - GREATER FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AT LOCAL LIBRARY 9
 - INCREASED ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY 10
 - STRONG COMMUNICATION SUPPORTED INCREASING COLLECTIVE IMPACT 10
 - IMPROVING RECOGNITION AND INFLUENCE..... 11
- IMPACTS ON FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES11**
 - CHILD LEARNING, ATTITUDE, AND SKILL GAINS 11
 - EMPOWERING FAMILIES, BUILDING COMMUNITY 11
- STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND EXPANSION12**
 - SUPPORTING PARTNER AUTONOMY 12
 - SECURING FUNDING 12
 - MAINTAINING AND ADDING PARTNERSHIPS..... 13
 - REACHING NEW COMMUNITIES..... 13



SNAPSHOT

Station	PBS Wisconsin
Station service region	The state of Wisconsin
Target community	Rural school districts Westby (Vernon County) and Cashton (Monroe County)
Partners	<u>Westby Elementary School</u> <u>Cashton Elementary School</u> <u>Bekkum Memorial Library in Westby</u>
Collaborative established	2018, after a one-year planning grant

A New Opportunity to Serve Rural Counties

In establishing the Community Collaborative for Early Learning and Media (CC-ELM), the Wisconsin Early Childhood Association advised PBS Wisconsin to focus its work in rural counties, where there is little funding for schools, libraries, or other educational resources that exist in urban centers such as Madison. The Association specifically suggested the small Wisconsin towns of Westby (population 2,200) and Cashton (population 1,100), in Vernon and Monroe counties, respectively, and PBS Wisconsin went on to partner with the school districts and community connectors in those towns and the surrounding areas.

Westby and Cashton are about 100 miles northwest of Madison, not far from the border with Minnesota and Iowa. Families there are predominantly English-speaking and White. One CC-ELM partner noted a small but growing number of Spanish-speaking, Hispanic families. The economy in Vernon and Monroe counties depends on farming, and the families residing there are among the state's poorest, CC-ELM leaders reported. Few parents can afford to leave the workforce, although one partner described the areas as a "childcare desert," in which families lacked adequate access to childcare, preschools, or out-of-school programming.

Partners responded positively to PBS Wisconsin coming to work in their communities to help fill this gap and to increase local family and community access to educational engagement opportunities and resources. According to Michele Engh, a CC-ELM partner and employee of the Westby Coon Prairie Lutheran Church who was instrumental in helping PBS Wisconsin forge relationships with the school districts:

"For somebody like PBS and Wisconsin Public Television [PBS Wisconsin] to choose two very small, very isolated communities that are underserved and also very low-income, was phenomenal. ... I think part of the reason why people were so excited was because it was bringing resources to an area that never gets resources."

Building on the station's commitment to early learning

For PBS Wisconsin, one of the nine public media stations in the CC-ELM network that serves an entire state, establishing the CC-ELM was a means to advance a station-wide initiative to improve infrastructure and supports for early learning across the state. According to a station staff member, "I can say our strategic priority includes building a foundation for the expansion of supporting early learning in Wisconsin. That's a station-wide priority. We feel strongly about the ways those things overlap, the station's mission and the CC-ELM."

One station staffer stated, "Our bosses believe that our education department is a primary focus of our work at PBS Wisconsin and has a seat at the table of the leadership team."

The importance of local schools in engaging families

To achieve statewide early learning goals in Westby and Cashton, PBS Wisconsin sought to empower like-minded local community organizations, increase caregiver capacities, and use technology and media in ways that support children's learning. A station staff member said, "Digital is the future. ... It's important to empower caregivers to know options created with [the] child in mind, with learning objectives and curriculum attached."

PBS Wisconsin did not work in Westby and Cashton prior to the CC-ELM, so it had to collaborate with already-trusted people and organizations in the education space there. In choosing CC-ELM partners, the station reviewed recommendations from the Wisconsin Early Childhood Association.

PBS Wisconsin prioritized CC-ELM partnerships that would be mutually beneficial and supportive, with all entities willing to join forces to increase their collective impact. The station also sought partners they thought could develop sufficient capacity to sustain the work after the CPB-PBS Ready To Learn award concluded. A station staff member said, “The ones that are truly invested are gonna say, ‘We love this, this is important to us, and we want to keep it going forever.’”

Partnering with the Westby and Cashton school districts provided schools with much-needed resources and helped connect the station with large numbers of children, parents, and educators. A station staff member described the central role of schools in engaging families. “There aren’t other easy-to-access resources or kids’ and youth activities, so the schools are kind of



Parents help their children build a ramp at a Ruff Ruffman program at Westby Elementary School. Photo: PBS Wisconsin

it.” For reaching parents, a school partner explained that schools modeled connecting with caregivers in meaningful ways. “As a school, we’re highly invested in community and families, so it aligns in that piece when we work with families, bring them here, and just to connect home and school relationships even tighter than they were before.” The school districts also had access to teachers to facilitate the PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programming while benefiting from the training opportunities and resources.

Local library sought deeper connections with school families

PBS Wisconsin partnered with the Bekkum Memorial Library in Westby to help build the library’s presence and influence as a community hub for out-of-school learning and family engagement. According to a library staff member, “Our main role is developing those connections with families so that they don’t see literacy as just coming from our schools, it’s out in our community.” The small library was not already a go-to place for members of the school community prior to the CC-ELM, so the library offered its PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programming first in the schools. This approach helped community members get to know library staff and resources and, over time, brought more families and community members into the library itself.

PBS Wisconsin achieved “good synergy” in its selection of CC-ELM partners. The station and its partners had aligned organizational missions, and together they had the resources, know-how, and relationships to achieve the intended impacts.

“We worked with principals, librarians, teachers, and that was a great blend of people who knew the families in town, who had spaces to host, who had teachers as facilitators.”—PBS Wisconsin station staff member

Organizational Roles

Station staff members described PBS Wisconsin's work in the CC-ELM as being two-fold: (1) to provide financial support and resources to CC-ELM partners and, just as importantly, (2) to serve as an on-the-ground presence providing guidance and trainings on how to use PBS KIDS Ready To Learn resources. As a station staff member explained, "It's not a situation where we can just hand off the materials and expect it to happen."

To serve these roles, the station hired additional personnel. Staff members supporting the CC-ELM work included an Education Engagement Specialist to coordinate activities, write reports, maintain budgets, and foster communication throughout the partnership. An Early Learning Specialist coordinated community outreach.

Partners engaged in the work included librarians, teachers, informal educators, principals, and others who had a range of experience working with children and families in schools and other learning settings. Station staff members said they also engaged the Westby and Cashton school district superintendents, who offered support for identifying families, securing programming space, and planning for sustainability.



Children get gooped up as they create playdough at a Ruff Ruffman program at Westby Elementary School. Photo: PBS Wisconsin

Programming for Children and Families

In its role as a Ready To Learn CC-ELM, PBS Wisconsin implemented six PBS KIDS learning experiences during its first programming year, more than most of the other 14 CC-ELM established with CPB-PBS awards at the same time. The programming included an even mix of Family & Community Learning programs (each of which typically has four 2-hour workshops) and camps for children (which typically take place over a week or more in an out-of-school setting).¹

Program facilitators included a principal, library staff, and educators from the school districts. A CC-ELM partner estimated that almost all of those trained to facilitate these media-rich PBS KIDS programs were

¹ In addition to PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programming, PBS Wisconsin provided programming for older students, such as media production workshops for high-school students, and educator professional development.

teachers or had a background in education, resulting in a large group of facilitators who were prepared and comfortable using the resources.

Programs offer professional learning opportunities

The fact that the PBS KIDS Ready To Learn resources “were laid out so well” made learning to lead multi-session programs an easier lift, partners reported. As one partner put it, “You give a 4th-grade teacher a fairly laid-down curriculum, they can run with it fairly properly.” A school partner praised teachers’ willingness to run a camp for children, and to consider the experience a professional learning opportunity.

A library partner also viewed working with the PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programs as a valuable staff development opportunity, in two regards. First, she reported, programs enhanced the library’s focus on younger children relative to the wide age range it typically served. The programs’ early STEM content also was new to the library, where literacy had been the primary focus of most programs, she said.

Building community ties over time

A station staff member recalled that, prior to the CC-ELM, the station’s main community activities were an annual block party and other events that attracted crowds. As a station staff member said, that type of programming “reaches a lot, but not with depth,” whereas multi-session family learning programs and camps for children enabled relationships within and among families to develop over time. A school partner made a similar distinction; in contrast to the typical single-session events open to all families, the Family & Community Learning programs nurtured more intense collaboration among parents and children, included meals, and required a four-week commitment from a small group of families. In the small communities of Westby and Cashton, families who attended often knew or knew of each other as programs began, and were able to build stronger ties by participating over time.

Making Programs Accessible for All

PBS Wisconsin was determined to engage families and community members who did not typically participate in educational engagement programs. A station staff member explained, “You always get the families that come to everything, right? ... You really want the families that aren’t joiners, and that might be under-resourced.”

Church staff member Michele Engh championed PBS Wisconsin’s effort to expand its community reach. She shared with them her deep knowledge of the Westby and Cashton communities, providing what station staff members described as “a critical mindset” for anyone wanting to enter a community and build relationships in ways that are mutually beneficial.

“It’s not ‘What do we have to offer?’... It’s not going in as a savior. 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*

Drawing on Engh’s and other CC-ELM partners’ knowledge of the targeted rural communities enabled the CC-ELM to enhance children’s and families’ access to programming, including by navigating around the seasonal demands of agricultural work. The station and CC-ELM partners began hosting events in the evenings to accommodate working families who could not attend Family & Community Learning programs in the afternoon, and shortened PBS KIDS Ready To Learn workshop sessions from two hours to 90 minutes. Providing the programming right in Westby and Cashton was essential so that families would not have to travel far. Including a dinner in family programs also made it easier for parents to participate, one partner reflected, because parents “were able to get their kids, feed their kids, and then do activities with the kids” rather than having to rush home to eat and try to leave home again.

Impacts on Partnering Organizations

Benefits of the CC-ELM model and high-quality learning resources

Station staff members said they benefited greatly from the CC-ELM model, which provided new PBS KIDS science and literacy resources, as well as an approach for collaborating with partners in Westby, Cashton, and beyond.

“It was a great way to build awareness of what we were doing, and it was a channel for us to become more educationally involved in the early learning community, and it’s a great vehicle for us to reach around the state.”—*PBS Wisconsin station staff member*

Partners appreciated that PBS Wisconsin provided high-quality learning resources to places and communities that are normally overlooked. According to a CC-ELM partner, “We’re so underserved that anybody taking notice and providing us with any resources would be welcome. The fact that it was a high-quality program certainly added to that.” Partners and parents praised the quality of the PBS KIDS Ready To Learn resources, but some station and partner staff members found the programs’ facilitator materials quite dense and at times a bit overwhelming.

Effective coordination supported implementation success

Station staff members and CC-ELM partners sometimes struggled to coordinate efforts around implementing PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programs. For example, when television production delays at a national level caused delays in releasing learning materials for local use, the station and Cashton Elementary School were unable to implement their scheduled *Ready Jet Go!* family workshop series.

They had to delay programming until the summer, resulting in record low attendance. Additionally, after training facilitators too far in advance of its first Family & Community Learning program, PBS Wisconsin learned how important it was to offer facilitator training closer to the scheduled learning event so that PBS KIDS content, schedules, and roles are fresh in the facilitator's mind.

High parent engagement led school leaders to reevaluate expectations

Local school leaders were concerned that it would be difficult for working parents and families with fewer resources to commit to attending programming over multiple weeks. One CC-ELM partner said that, despite leaders' advice to enroll families with a history of engagement, she persisted in recruiting other families to participate. Teachers, school secretaries, and others helped, spreading the word about programming through message boards, phone calls, emails, and text messages. Superintendents and principals also helped expand the reach of the programming by calling families directly, securing program locations that were accessible to families, and offering technology support to help families access PBS KIDS resources at home.



Children measure distance from a ramp covered in various materials to test friction at a Ruff Ruffman program at Westby Elementary School. Photo credit: PBS Wisconsin

Despite school leaders' recruitment concerns, the CC-ELM successfully recruited families who were infrequent program participants. A partner said,

“[The kids] showed up and their parents showed up. And you could see the parents' joy and, all of the sudden, working with their kids, and having conversations with their kids.”—Michele Engh, partner from Westby Coon Prairie Lutheran Church

The active involvement of school staff helped; a parent we spoke with said she initially ignored information the school sent home about an upcoming workshop, but came on board after the principal called to personally invite her family.

Greater family engagement at local library

In Westby, parents' high engagement in the school-based programs translated to higher engagement with the local library, too. After having gotten to know families in school programs, the library staff were able to entice students to participate in its summer reading program, as well as increase its family participation overall. The library partner noted, “Since this, we have seen more families come in, and it's due to the fact

that we touched base with them to begin with at the elementary school.” She said that although some of the new visitors had never been to the library before, “Our summer reading program stats were huge. We went through the roof on those, and I attribute it to the information that we were able to get out to families through this.”

Increased organizational capacity

Station staff members said they gained from the CC-ELM knowledge about how to engage families, how to select the right partners, and how to implement programming in meaningful and engaging ways. The knowledge and capacity the station team gained in turn helped them extend their reach around the state and build ties with other organizations supporting early learning. For example, after attending a facilitator training, a principal from nearby Kickapoo Elementary School began working with PBS Wisconsin to infuse family engagement and STEM in the school community. The station also has been working with a local school in Madison, called One City Schools, implementing in-person and virtual science labs that use PBS KIDS Ready To Learn content. For the library, the CC-ELM enhanced its work with child and family learning by expanding its programs and services to include STEM. The training, technology, and materials that PBS Wisconsin provided to the library and schools, such as STEM carts, books, and what one partner member referred to as “the massive amount of supplies,” increased partners’ capacity to reach and engage children and families.

Strong communication supported increasing collective impact

Station staff and partners reported that ongoing communication and collaboration led to stronger partner relationships. The station’s CC-ELM coordinator, Mouna Algahaithi, earned praise for her skill in leading meetings and her ability to collaborate rather than direct. Partners viewed Algahaithi as a “help leader” who “did a phenomenal job” supporting staff. They also noted that her arrival had brought stability to the work after the station had multiple leadership changes in its first year, and different visions and expectations with each change.

During quarterly joint planning meetings that one partner described as “vital,” partners discussed plans to ensure everyone was aware of what was happening: “We’re all busy so it’s important to have that scheduled time to have one of our staff attend and represent.”

Ongoing communication also helped CC-ELM partners identify ways to support each other and join forces for collective impact—an approach that greatly benefited the schools and library. The library partner said that “creating further ties” with the school district enabled them “to develop a lot of great programming along with them and get the word out.” The school and library made use of each other’s facilities to host events and share resources. The library partner appreciated the extent to which teaching staff “put in hours outside of school with families.”

Improving recognition and influence

PBS Wisconsin, and the education department in particular, has gained recognition as a result of the CC-ELM work. A partner noted that the CC-ELM helped increase its program's presence in online communities. The station also benefited from parents, teacher facilitators, and other members of the school community promoting the CC-ELM programming by word of mouth. The area's newspaper, the *La Crosse Tribune*, highlighted the work of the CC-ELM. A school partner included PBS KIDS Ready To Learn camps for children as a summer offering in its course catalog. A station staff member expressed her hope that the CC-ELM will now participate with other trusted education leaders in state-level discussions.

“My big goal is that, increasingly, if there's a gathering in the state of Wisconsin where community leaders are getting together to talk about how to transform early learning and serve families and kids better, when they look around that table, someone asks if anyone has called PBS Wisconsin.”—PBS Wisconsin station staff member

Impacts on Families and Communities

Child learning, attitude, and skill gains

Partner and parent feedback lend credence to the research team's evaluation survey data on child gains from PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programs. Specifically, survey findings suggest that children are savvier about, interested in, and engaged with STEM after attending PBS Wisconsin events. A local parent of two young children described the program her 4 year-old attended as offering the balance of structure and autonomy that provided the basis for these sorts of gains. A parent of 6- and 9-year-old children who also served as a camp facilitator credited the PBS KIDS Ready To Learn media, books, and parent-child interactions with getting her children interested in STEM and inspiring them to think creatively. Finally, a CC-ELM school partner who ran a camp described engaged children and impressed parents. She said, “I'm running the camp again this year and will run another as well. Stakeholders are kind of hard when you're a school. But we got the parent buy-in. ... Kids talked about it all week, they were excited to come back.”

Empowering families, building community

Station staff members, partners, and parents described the PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programming they experienced through the CC-ELM as providing positive models of media and technology use, as well as modeling effective early science practices such as describing observations and asking questions. A parent told us that the ability to bring resources home added to her sense of empowerment by giving her concrete ways to extend learning. A partner described “phenomenal discussions” that a father had with his child about the weather and other science topics in one of the programs.

“Parents don’t often think ... ‘Let’s have a conversation about what makes the rain, or why is it that we have shadows’. ... So, I think of it more as, ‘This [is] really empowering, that you can have conversations beyond how much did you get your schoolwork done, how much homework do you have, what did you do in the playground today?’ You can also be an educator of your child.” —
CC-ELM partner

The CC-ELM additionally helped parents connect with other families. One partner described interactions among parents as the biggest success of its Family & Community Learning programs. A parent said that the programming made her family “feel more a part of the community.” In a report to the Educational Communications Board, PBS Wisconsin reported that the experience with the family engagement resources had inspired more efforts to offer STEM family activities beyond school hours, such as hosting a Math Night that attracted more than 70 participants.

Strategies for Sustainability and Expansion

Station staff members credited the CPB and PBS planning grant process as helping them be more intentional in their efforts toward sustainability and expansion.

Supporting partner autonomy

Developing partner autonomy is important for sustaining the CC-ELM work, and although guidance and resources from the station continued to help partners run programming well, station staff members described ways in which partner organizations were making good use of PBS KIDS content on their own. Cashton Elementary School, for example, had already hosted two camps independent of station support.

Station staff members said that CC-ELM partners were developing the know-how to incorporate media-rich resources into their work and to build momentum for these efforts. PBS Wisconsin planned to provide additional support to partners around funding, sustainability, and expansion, as well as to offer partners leadership opportunities by inviting them to attend and co-present their joint work at national conferences and CC-ELM training events.

Securing funding

In pursuing funding, station and partner staff members explained that organizations in rural areas must compete with those in surrounding cities. Typically, this has been a losing battle, but they said that receiving Ready To Learn funding has made them more confident in their ability to secure additional funding to sustain or expand their work.

“There’s a hope that, if we’ve already received a grant like this, ...we could qualify for something more and we could continue to offer things like this again for a small community, so we don’t fall off the face of the planet again.”—

CC-ELM partner

Maintaining and adding partnerships

PBS Wisconsin and its CC-ELM partners planned to continue collaborating after the CPB-PBS Ready To Learn award. The station also had begun to consider new partners as a means to expand its work and impact. Station staff members identified organizations doing similar work, such as the library in Cashton. Station staff members said that the PBS KIDS Ready To Learn programs provided a great, “packaged” model that they could take to potential partners. To help identify and attract new partners, station staff members planned to develop a Web page with details about its educational programming, and criteria for selecting partners and target communities.

Reaching new communities

CC-ELM partnership members want to continue serving the families and communities they already reach, and also intend to expand their reach to new community members. PBS Wisconsin noted in its proposal that other communities in Wisconsin have needs similar to those of Cashton and Westby. With an eye toward scaling, station staff members had already begun to pursue opportunities in Madison, North Central Wisconsin, and in other parts of the state.