

# **Community Partnerships for Children:**

## ***Building Learning Communities to Support Early Childhood Education in Rural New Mexico***



A *White Paper* written by Terry Anderson, Executive Director, Community Partnership for Children (CPC) and Vicki Barnitt, CPC Board of Directors

Grant County, NM  
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### *Voice from the Field:*

*“Being a part of CPC/LINKS’ shared services is important for the collaboration between early childhood education providers. We share a common goal: To do what’s best for children. As we come together, we support and provide each other with ideas on improving our programs. We have become allies for each other. This has made early childhood education in Grant County better.”*

**Misty Pugmire, Executive Director  
El Grito Early Learning/Head Start, Grant County**

# Executive Summary

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Every child and family in New Mexico deserves access to high quality, affordable early childhood education (ECE). Many rural, licensed ECE centers and home-based care providers serving children ages birth to five lack the support and resources necessary to operate a profitable business offering high quality programs and staff. Unfortunately, this results in rural New Mexico families that have nonexistent options for quality, licensed ECE programs in their immediate community.

## New Mexico Data 2018-19

- 27% of children live in poverty.
- 56% of children ages 3-4 are not attending pre-school.
- 75% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders are not proficient in reading.
- 36% of New Mexico's children have parents who lack secure employment.
- Family childcare homes have declined by 45% since 2010, resulting in fewer choices for working parents and less low-cost childcare options.
- Only 40.5% of licensed childcare providers participate in high quality programs.

**Source:** *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018 and 2019. New Mexico Voices for Children. [www.datacenter.kidscount.org](http://www.datacenter.kidscount.org)

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has been ranking the 50 states on overall child well-being for more than two decades. New Mexico's overall rank for 2018 and 2019 is 50th. This means that, **for two years in a row**, 49 states ranked higher than New Mexico and **none ranked worse**. New Mexico's *Kids Count Data Profile* child well-being indicators support the need for improvements in early childhood education and school readiness. We believe such improvements must begin with access to high quality ECE providers in **every** NM community.

Since 2004 *The Community Partnership for Children* (CPC) has strived to support the business and pedagogical needs of Grant County's licensed ECE centers and home-based childcare providers. CPC's efforts to build trust, collaboration, and shared services among local ECE providers have led to long-term, robust, and united relationships among local professionals in the field. These community partnerships have resulted in increased...

- Support for ECE center and home-based provider **business practices**,
- Training and technical assistance for delivery of **high-quality ECE programs**, and
- **Resources and support** for full enrollment of infants and young children in ECE centers, home-based care, after-school and summer programs.

As CPC's Executive Director and Board, we know that CPC has a long-standing, proven model of unifying resources to advance high-quality ECE programs in Grant County. We believe CPC's unified services and partnership model would strengthen **other** rural ECE providers challenged by like community, business and pedagogical demands. We also believe that targeted support and funding for New Mexico's rural ECE center and home-based providers will impact desired outcomes for children from birth into adult life. This *White Paper* is intended to give local and state lawmakers an account of the current challenges faced by rural ECE providers and recommended solutions for future decision-making.

# Introduction

What do a Pre-K teacher, parent, ECE program director, non-profit leader, college professor, and pediatrician all have in common? They're all committed to reaching a common goal: **Making sure infants and young children get the best possible start on a healthy, happy, successful life.**

Early childhood education practitioners and others across the country are working together to achieve the same goal. And they are making a difference by improving ECE programs through **structured learning communities**. According to the Harvard University Center for the Developing Child, *“Learning communities provide a space and a structure for people to align around a shared goal. Effective communities are both aspirational and practical. They connect people, organizations, and systems that are eager to learn and work across boundaries, all the while holding members accountable to a common agenda, metrics, and outcomes”*.

During the past four years, Grant County’s *Community Partnership for Children* has fostered and sustained a successful **learning community** called LINKS (Learning Network for Kids). LINKS partners include seven local ECE center directors and CPC’s executive director and technical assistance support staff. The primary purpose of CPC/LINKS’ learning community is to regularly engage in conversations to set and meet goals, solve problems, share best practices and resources, examine data and results, and cultivate local leaders with new, innovative ideas.

Recognizing that change doesn’t happen in a vacuum, CPC and its LINKS partners have improved local ECE programs by engaging in collaborative rather than competitive leadership. The learning community mindset has been an especially progressive model for Grant County, which, like many rural areas, lacked resources to support innovation and improvement efforts. CPC believes that bringing together people and organizations through **similar learning communities** can impact early childhood outcomes across other rural New Mexico areas.

New Mexico needs structured and well-funded approaches to tackle the interrelated set of complex problems found in rural communities. One approach to improving outcomes for children is to build strong communities of learning that engage local leaders, practitioners, family members, and others whose primary focus is to improve outcomes for infants and young children in **their** community.



New Mexico’s rural communities need an organization like CPC that has a proven record of facilitating and maintaining an effective ECE learning community. Through the development and expansion of CPC’s existing resources and unified models of services and collaboration, rural early childhood education programs can organize change agents across disciplines to connect, share improvement ideas and results, and learn from each other.

The following sections of this *White Paper* attempt to outline the major challenges faced by ECE programs in Grant County, and, we believe, across many of New Mexico’s rural communities. The reader will be introduced to specific and possible solutions and innovative ideas that could potentially meet those challenges. With appropriate funding at the state level, CPC’s leaders envision the statewide organization, implementation, and growth of **learning communities** that unite to improve the outcomes of all our state’s underserved infants and young children.

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***Voices from the Field:***

***Participation in this group has supported problem-solving and brainstorming critical issues and trends impacting the services for children and families in Grant County. Membership has strengthened networking and relationships to support enrollment of children, recruitment and retention of staff, workforce development, and sharing training opportunities.***

***Shannon Rivera, Executive Director  
Early Childhood Programs  
Western New Mexico University***



***“CPC/LINKS has helped my program provide a higher quality of care through professional support and shared training for staff. It's been great to learn from dialogue with other directors and professionals rather than having to figure out everything on my own - I am no longer operating in a silo.”***

***Catherine Tanner, Director  
Let the Children Come  
Grant County***

## Section 1: One Size Doesn't Fit All - Developing ECE Learning Communities and Resources in Rural New Mexico

Effective learning communities can identify needs and challenges unique to their community. Through a learning community approach, CPC has engaged Grant County's ECE practitioners and community leaders to develop and share resources that meet the unique needs of the children and families they serve. Rather than replicate "successful" programs, rural-based learning communities can problem-solve and share strategies, resources, results and metrics to determine what works best for **their** community.

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### *Current Challenges*

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#### **Rural early childhood education centers and home-based programs often lack...**

- Access to affordable, quality ECE programs.
- Qualified, highly trained staff.
- Ongoing training and technical assistance on evidence based ECE practices:
  - Developmentally appropriate teaching practices.
  - Assessment and child data analysis.
  - Social-emotional and behavioral supports.
  - Culturally appropriate family education and support.
- Assistance with small business development and resources:
  - State licensure requirements and subsidies
  - Enrollment and program-related software
  - Analysis of program and child outcome data
- Opportunities to build capacity through collegial relationships.

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### *Recommendations*

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#### **Establish learning community alliances to strengthen business and pedagogical leadership across ECE programs and sites by...**

- Identifying barriers to collaboration and coordination of ECE programs and services.
- Pooling and sharing services and resources such as enrollment and financial software, bulk-buying, professional development, and substitute teachers.
- Facilitating trust, collaboration, problem-solving.
- Engaging in collegial dialogue to develop improvement goals and plans of action.
- Determining and using a common set of metrics to measure results within and across programs.

## Section 2: Communities of Practice: Sustaining a High Quality ECE Workforce

Similar to a learning community, a “community of practice (CoP)” is a group of practitioners—*ECE program teaching staff*, who work in the same field—*early childhood education*, and engage in common practices—*caring for and teaching infants and young children*. Members of an early childhood CoP share a repertoire of pedagogical practices and resources related to ECE, i.e., experiences, knowledge, stories, tools, and intervention strategies. As part of a learning community, rural ECE leaders collaborate to support teachers and practitioners by providing regular opportunities for interactions, via CoP structures, that build core capabilities within and across personnel and programs.

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### *Current Challenges*

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#### **Teachers and other practitioners often lack opportunities for...**

- Ongoing, high quality, and accessible professional development.
- Targeted technical assistance and support to meet specific and unique child and family needs.
- Shared analysis and interpretation of student data and outcomes.
- Collegial problem-solving and sharing of strategies.
- Building trusting and supporting partnerships through collective learning.

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### *Recommendations*

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#### **Establish ECE learning communities that support CoP practitioners and ensure high quality programs through...**

- Ongoing professional development on evidence-based ECE practices:
  - Developmentally appropriate teaching practices.
  - Social-emotional, behavioral, and other supports, including those for children with disabilities.
  - Assessment and child data analysis and interpretation.
  - Culturally responsive family education and support.
- Job-embedded technical assistance, tools and support:
  - “On-demand” intervention strategies through accessible, web-based resources.
  - Online social media-based collaboration with other practitioners, e.g., *Live Binders*, *Facebook Education*, and *Google Docs*.
  - Online “virtual office hours” with experts, such as *CPC state-wide facilitators*.
- Learning and collaboration that occurs via accessible formats, including web-based, face-to-face, and blended.
- Ongoing training and support for community-based “Relief Squad” personnel to provide shared substitute services.

## Section 3: Community-based Leadership to Support Enrollment in High-Quality ECE Programs

Leadership at state and local levels requires a common goal, framework and language. Collecting and sharing data in a reciprocal fashion as part of a unified **learning community** supports continued learning, as well as a sense of continuity of purpose for current, emerging, and future leaders of the field. Capturing lessons learned and sharing of what did not work is a critical aspect of improving ECE in New Mexico's rural communities.

### New Mexico Data 2018-19

- Congress increased funding by \$18.3 million for NM to strengthen the quality of childcare and increase access for low-income families.
- Access to affordable childcare increases labor force participation and supports state and local economic growth.
- New Mexico's childcare industry had a \$434 million impact on the state's economy.
- The childcare sector estimated a total job impact of 10,172 across the state.
- Access to affordable childcare supports parents seeking additional education and training, contributing to higher family earnings over time.
- Without affordable childcare, parents reduce their hours or opt out of the workforce.
- Only 38.2% of licensed childcare providers participate in high quality programs.
- New Mexico's grandparents are responsible for 37% of grandchildren under age 6.

Only through collective leadership and state-level support can New Mexico's rural communities increase...

- Overall participation of children ages birth to five in **high quality** ECE programs.
- Quality home-based ECE programs.
- Quality after-school and summer ECE programs.

With continuity of state and local leadership, fiscal support, and proven methods to build capacity, we can ensure that New Mexico's children grow up as stronger, healthier, more resilient, and contributing members of every community.

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### Current Challenges

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#### In rural New Mexico...

- A small percentage of licensed childcare providers in rural and frontier areas of NM participate in high quality and supporting partnerships through collective learning.
- Registered childcare homes are not required to meet minimal state licensing standards and must attend only six hours of annual training.
- Families lack access to and information about ECE programs.
- Employers experience a scarcity of reliable workers due to lack of childcare options.

*Continued...*

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## *Recommendations*

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### **We call upon New Mexico leaders and lawmakers to...**

- Devote time and focus to engage policy and lawmakers in the development of high quality ECE programs and support for rural NM communities and families.
- Provide fiscal and program supports to strengthen rural ECE programs at the community level.
- Coordinate state and nationally funded programs to support rural communities with differing capacities, resources and challenges.
- Dedicate resources to develop tools and processes for the development of **learning communities** in rural areas.
- Support the development of **ECE learning communities** and engage rural communities to meet identified needs such as increased enrollment capacity, extended, after-school hours of existing ECE programs, and summer ECE opportunities.
- Use existing organizations, i.e., *CPC* and *Opportunities Exchange*, that have demonstrated effective methods and resources to promote high quality ECE in rural communities.

### **WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY...**

***“WHEN LEADERS AND CHANGE AGENTS ALIGN THEIR AGENDAS, NETWORKS, AND RESOURCES IN SUPPORT OF A SHARED GOAL, THEY HAVE THE POWER TO ACHIEVE LARGER AND MORE SUSTAINABLE BREAKTHROUGHS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.”***

**HARVARD CENTER FOR THE DEVELOPING CHILD  
[HTTPS://DEVELOPINGCHILD.HARVARD.EDU/](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/)**

## Conclusion

Data indicate that New Mexico’s children and families are in dire need of accessible, affordable, and high-quality early childhood education opportunities—**especially** in our state’s rural communities. According to Census Bureau statistics released Dec. 8, 2016, data showed that New Mexico’s rural areas had the highest poverty rate in the nation at 21.9 percent. New Mexico was also one of six states where income inequality was greater for rural households than for urban households. With 27% of our states’ children living in poverty, we can presume that many of New Mexico’s underserved infants and children live in rural communities.

Current child and family statistics tell us we must give New Mexico’s early childhood education programs our highest priority. New Mexico’s state and local decision-makers have made many efforts to identify and concentrate fiscal and organizational resources that will lead to short and long-term improvements and change. Expanding those efforts to establish and facilitate CPC/LINKS’ model of **ECE learning community practices** can provide the means for community-based early childhood leaders and practitioners to set goals, share results, and cultivate new ECE programs and ideas. Such practices not only benefit rural communities—they are universal in their approach to **all** community-based ECE improvement efforts.

The *Community Partnership for Children* is poised to make a difference for New Mexico’s early childhood education programs through the establishment and support of rural **ECE learning communities**. We believe this view of unified learning and support can create a powerful shift in relationships and a deeper respect for practitioner knowledge. As leaders and practitioners engage in collective, regular and robust dialogue, they focus on achieving common goals through intentional activity, shared reflection, and participatory decision-making.

The Community Partnership for Children’s executive director, staff, Board members, and LINKS partners are eager to work with New Mexico’s leaders and lawmakers to improve early childhood education and lift our state’s *child well-being ranking* out of the abyss. Together, we can do better for New Mexico’s children and families. They deserve nothing less.

### **WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY...**

**“THE ABILITY TO COLLABORATE—ON BOTH A SMALL AND LARGE SCALE—IS BECOMING ONE OF THE CORE REQUISITES OF POSTMODERN SOCIETY. IN SHORT, WITHOUT COLLABORATIVE SKILLS AND RELATIONSHIPS, IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO LEARN AND TO CONTINUE TO LEARN AS MUCH AS YOU NEED IN ORDER TO BE AN AGENT FOR SOCIAL IMPROVEMENT.”**

**MICHAEL FULLAN, (1993): CHANGE FORCES, PP. 17–18.**