The Early Childhood Initiative was a local program, but its impact has been felt far beyond Pittsburgh and even Pennsylvania.

On a cold March morning at the 4 Kids Center in Braddock, a struggling former mill town on the edge of Pittsburgh’s eastern border in Allegheny County, harried parents do their early-morning drop-off routine—pulling children out of coats and mittens and planting quick kisses before heading to work.

Barbara Willard, the director of 4 Kids and several similar centers, is moving a bit slower than usual. She’s conducting a tour with a half shuffle, thanks to a devoted 2-year-old clinging tightly to one leg. Willard, a tall woman with an air of authority, is wearing a crisp business suit to match her administrative title. Still, she is very much a mother figure at the center, which operates 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. five days a week.

“Hold on tight, honey, we’re going to go over the baby gate,” she says. The girl’s pigtails fly into the air as Willard picks her up and swings the giggling cargo up and over to the other side. Willard is physically strong, which comes in handy when managing the center’s 106 children.

In this early spring enrollment period, there are two infant rooms where a teacher, a teacher’s assistant and a teacher’s aide are interacting with a group of 11 infants. In the transitional toddler room, a pack of eight 13- to 18-month-olds, just learning to walk, are gathered around another three instructors, including an education specialist who is leading them in organized game playing. In the “toddler 1” room, 10 children between 18 months and 2 years are riding around with
But since September 1998, the Braddock center, operated by the Heritage Health Foundation where Willard is vice president of children and youth services, and a similar operation in Wilkinsburg, operated by Hosanna House, a community social-service organization, have been staging areas for early-childhood education’s dream project, the Early Childhood Initiative. The centers are organized from the inside out: they’re anchored to neighborhood organizations where parents are partners, and they’re run by managers and preschool educators who follow curriculums designed to instill an amazing capacity for learning in children who otherwise wouldn’t have had much of a chance for school success.

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In Denver, former banking executive Doug Price was inspired by the wide-ranging coalition assembled for Pittsburgh’s Early Childhood Initiative and thought his state could mount a similar effort. He quit his job to found Educare Colorado and hired one of the former managers of Pittsburgh’s Initiative to begin the ambitious program that is on its way to providing preschool education to tens of thousands of children. But since September 1998, the Braddock center, operated by the Heritage Health Foundation where Willard is vice president of children and youth services, and a similar operation in Wilkinsburg, operated by Hosanna House, a community social-service organization, have been staging areas for early-childhood education’s dream project, the Early Childhood Initiative. The centers are organized from the inside out: they’re anchored to neighborhood organizations where parents are partners, and they’re run by managers and preschool educators who follow curriculums designed to instill an amazing capacity for learning in children who otherwise wouldn’t have had much of a chance for school success. The combination has created one of the richest preschool education environments in the state. Now, child development experts say that two independent evaluations of the
Initiative—one showing substantial gains in some 1,000 children tracked in the program, the other offering process and management lessons for more successful large-scale implementation—are expected to have a profound influence on early-learning programs throughout the country.

In fact, early-education leaders elsewhere in Pennsylvania, Colorado, Washington and Georgia, to name a few, have been reflecting the Initiative’s quality triumphs and distilling its hard management lessons for several years now.

“Pittsburgh’s Early Childhood Initiative was the first to think about this in an organized, big-picture way, and it was our inspiration,” says Doug Price, president of Educare Colorado, a coalition of business, philanthropic, government and education leaders that has been working since the early 1990s to create a statewide early-education system. “Pittsburgh’s experiences have taught us a lot about developing partnerships and holding realistic expectations connected to funding.”

The reason program leaders around the country have been such quick studies of the triumphs and pitfalls of the Early Childhood Initiative is that many of its original planners have been offering honest assessments of the program’s successes and failures, even as independent studies were just beginning. Key backers like Teresa Heinz, Karen Shapira and Allegheny County Executive Jim Roddye, and key staffers like Martha Isler, the former director of the program through the United Way of Allegheny County, have been sought-after speakers through all its milestones: in 1996 when the Initiative began,
“Pittsburgh’s Early Childhood Initiative was never about building better day care. It was about getting children ready to succeed in school and supporting every child with all the resources they needed to do that. This is the framework that caught the rest of the country’s attention.”

Martha W. Isler  Former Director, Early Childhood Initiative
In Denver, banking executive and investor Price quit his job in 1998 to work full-time harnessing a wide-ranging coalition of community leaders similar to that in Pittsburgh to create Educare Colorado. He cites the Initiative as “the standard out there that told us what we should be expecting of ourselves and our community in early education.”

Price and other community leaders set out to revolutionize a system of lackluster day care in Colorado into one of the best early-education systems in the country. Their bipartisan advisory team, which ranged at one point from Focus on the Family representatives to liberal Democrats, has made significant strides in learning how to sustain a statewide system of high-quality preschool education in the day care setting. Included among Educare’s successful fundraising strategies is a voluntary tax check-off that allows taxpayers to donate a portion of their refunds to a child-care quality improvement fund.

While financial sustainability is important to Educare, Price says developing community sustainability is just as essential. “That’s one of the things we learned from the Pittsburgh program, that you need to support parents as decision makers, that the community must be connected at the neighborhood level and that the program must be monitored and evaluated at all levels.” Once that part of the system is solidly in place, says Price, “you can move to the next level of building accountability and incentives into the system.”

While Educare had to take a different tack in funding strategy—“we didn’t have a force as powerful as The Heinz Endowments behind us the time”—addressing the business side of the Colorado Initiative was key. “We learned from Pittsburgh leaders that this was not a programming issue. It was a systems issue. Pittsburgh had the resources to do brick and mortar and the philosophy of ‘if you build it, they will come.’ But we learned to reverse that, based on what Pittsburgh’s experience was telling us. We’ve formed partnerships with government, even down to the level of local politicians.”

In York and Lancaster counties in Pennsylvania, lessons from Pittsburgh’s Initiative have been shaping early-learning programs since 1997. The York program, Focus on Our Future, which had early funding from The Heinz Endowments and the Pew Charitable Trust, has been thriving.

A stakeholders leadership group similar to Pittsburgh’s, whose members represent business, philanthropy, education, child care and education, has carefully monitored funding levels and ensured sustainability by finding solid partners like the York Campus of Pennsylvania State University. “Honestly, our strategy from the beginning was to follow Pittsburgh’s lesson of getting quality education programming into the existing child-care system,” says Gail Nourse, Focus on Our Future’s executive director for the past five years. “What the Pittsburgh Early Childhood Initiative leadership was telling us was that if we wanted to engage the child-care community and make them partners in the program, we had to take their concerns seriously. We needed to give a lot of attention to helping these centers become accredited rather than work around them. What the Pittsburgh Initiative did so well was to set a standard of intensity in programming and in mentoring. That’s what we’ve followed but we’ve done it working in the system of existing agencies.”

A key goal of Focus on Our Future has been to improve the quality of care offered by existing providers and to assist those providers in meeting accreditation requirements. Twinned with that goal has been a successful effort to train child-care workers in child development and preschool education. In its first three years of operation, the program turned 22 centers and 21 family child-care homes in York County into licensed, effective early-learning programs.

standards established in Pittsburgh’s program but being much more realistic in relations with donor groups. “If I had it to do over again in Pittsburgh, I would have prepared investors better to expect a 10-year time frame for seeing significant returns instead of five years. These other agencies have learned a lot about donor financing based on our experience in Pittsburgh.”

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