

EDUCATION



A WISE INVESTMENT: EARLY CHILDHOOD

BY GAYLE NEU

Grant kicks off implementation of 5toONE project, a coordinated effort to serve families and children in need.

A comprehensive regional system to meet the region's "acute need" for more affordable, quality childcare options and provide connection points for families has gone from crawling to taking measurable steps.

In February, Consumers Energy awarded a \$50,000 grant to the Great Start Collaborative (GSC) of Traverse Bay, allowing it to hire a project manager and begin the implementation phase of its 5toONE project. The five-county initiative aims to improve kindergarten readiness and access to quality childcare and parenting education, while reducing abuse and neglect across all five counties.

"We don't get any do overs with early childhood," said Martie Manty, StoOne project manager. "When we get it right, we set them up for a lifetime for success. If we don't get it right the first time, expenses to remediate problems come into play. A healthy business community starts with investing in early childhood."

THE THREE-YEAR IMPLEMENTATION PHASE INCLUDES:

- developing neighborhood centers in the region's under-served communities
- building a network to ensure parents and caregivers are aware of services and have access to system resources, regardless of where they live

- creating a centralized hub, where more intensive services and a child development knowledge base would be available to families in a one-stop-shop environment, and where professional development and professional services would be housed.

While the hub itself will be located in Traverse City, a final location is undetermined and the timeline preliminary, according to GSC Coordinator Mary Manner, who joined the Traverse City Chamber in January 2010 to lead its work in early childhood development. "But we're hopeful it will be operational by late 2017," she said.

NEIGHBORHOOD CENTERS AND A NETWORK

Last year, Consumers Energy donated \$40,000 toward the design portion of the project, allowing GSC to enlist Traverse City's Cornerstone Architects to create a functional architectural plan for the hub and network.

From 2012-'14, the GSC worked with Cornerstone Architects President Tom Nemitz and a team of experts to survey parents and caregivers, hold focus groups and community cafes, gather regional data, review existing models and, finally, construct the StoONE model.

"The beauty of northern Michigan sometimes leads to

the belief that all is paradise, but in reality there are children and families that struggle with obtaining resources for better parenting information, health care, childcare/early child learning and other resources," Nemitz said of his company's involvement with the proj-

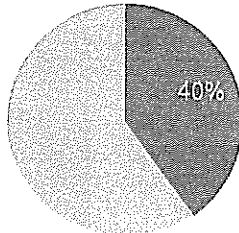
ect. "As a company, we saw a need for a more coordinated effort in providing services to and serving families and children in need. With many like-minded organizations doing very similar things, it seemed there might be a more efficient model that provided information; a 'one-stop, no wrong door' approach to helping."

The team's research uncovered that many regional parents have problems finding enough activities to do with young kids and navigating long distances to services. The 5toONE neighborhood centers aim to resolve that by providing parents a place to connect with other parents, do meaningful things with their children and get information on services.

The centers are hosted within

CHALLENGES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN (0-5)

MORE THAN 4 IN 10 SHOW UP FOR KINDERGARTEN WITH LOW KINDERGARTEN READINESS...



Source: TBAISD Kindergarten Roundup Assessment (using Boehm-3 test)

...INCIDENCE OF ABUSE AND/OR NEGLECT AT INTOLERABLE LEVELS...

400+ CASES

Source: Estimates based on Kids Count - Data Center 2012; Total for Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska and Leelanau Counties

...LIMITED AVAILABILITY OF QUALITY CHILDCARE.

- Long waitlists for childcare centers
- Limited access to before/after hours care, infant/toddler care
- 20% of those parents who need childcare say options are poor

Source: Parent Survey and Provider Interviews

PARENT SURVEY RESULTS

IN WRITE-IN COMMENTS, PARENTS THROUGHOUT THE REGION (AND ESPECIALLY THOSE IN ANTRIM, BENZIE AND KALKASKA COUNTIES), SPEAK OF FEELING VULNERABLE AND CUT OFF.

What are your biggest problems raising kids in your area? (other)

CHALLENGING CIRCUMSTANCES

- "Close to some areas that aren't so nice"
- "Drugs seem to be everywhere here."
- "Destructive older kids in town...vandalism, stealing"

ISOLATION AND LACK OF CONNECTEDNESS

- "Great kid activities (like arts programming, outdoor education, etc.) are far away"
- "Things to do with kids in winter/poor weather; lack of family support nearby"
- "Limited playgroups"
- "No indoor safe play areas/places"
- "Lack of kids in the neighborhood"
- "Would like to find more ways to socialize with kids"

Source: The Cornerstone Team - from StoONE Nov. 2013 presentation



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existing organizations, such as churches, libraries, schools and businesses. Lake Ann United Methodist Church in Benzie County became the first organization to host a center and has been offering playgroups since last November for children ages birth to 5 years old on the second and fourth Friday mornings of the month. The playgroups are structured, yet can be individualized based on parent feedback.



Mary Manner
Great Start Collaborative
Coordinator

"The children have fine and gross motor

bers and volunteers at each host building, with the expectation that the organization will use the "Strengthening Families" framework, which research indicates leads to better outcomes and reduced neglect/abuse, regardless of how much stress a family is under, Manner said. Each center's activities will be based on the needs of its surrounding community.

The last piece of the project - the 5toONE Network - will connect families with resources and provide partner

"We've seen this model in other areas as being successful and feel that a northern Michigan model can serve as an example for other communities that have similar chal-

lenges," Nemitz said.

The GSC is funded through a partnership between the Traverse City Chamber and Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District.

What Does 5toONE Stand For?

FIVE years from birth to kindergarten

FIVE counties connected

FIVE protective factors that strengthen families

FIVE State of Michigan Great Start goals

FIVE steps to realize the vision

ONE -stop places of support for families

equipment activities, a healthy snack, a story and an activity that relates to the story," Manty said, adding some of the parents have formed an advisory group to help shape activities for the center. "It's very relaxed, very welcoming and there's an attitude that you can't do this wrong."

Other organizations have been requesting their own centers. As of last month, Manty was initializing activities at the Betsie Valley Elementary School in Thompsonville (which will provide afterschool tutoring) and the Kalkaska Library. It's her goal to open at least one center in each of the five counties by this fall.

GSC will provide training and resources for existing staff mem-

bers and stakeholders and stakeholders with a common platform for exchanging ideas, gathering data and ensuring that barriers to access are eliminated. An internet-based database is in development.

"If we're looking to grow the economic base here and if we want to attract and retain highly-skilled workers, professionals and entrepreneurs to this region, we need to provide the social infrastructure for their families," Manner said, noting 35 percent of children assessed for kindergarten roundup last year were not ready for kindergarten. "Besides, it's the right thing to do."

The ultimate goal, however, is to replicate the 5toOne model in other areas.

PROJECT BENCHMARKS

OCT. 2015

- At least one 5toONE neighborhood center operating in each of the five counties
- Network discovery complete, shared database models identified
- 5toONE hub location and preliminary space use determined, permitting in process or secured
- Development plan prepared

OCT. 2016

- 5toONE neighborhood centers open in multiple communities in each county
- Functional 5toONE network with shared data capability
- 5toONE hub construction underway
- New 501(c)3 feasibility and analysis of potential to draw increased resources to 5toONE

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