

United Way
bornlearning[®] academy

CASE STUDY

United Way Born Learning Academy
at United Way of Greater Cincinnati

ABOUT UNITED WAY BORN LEARNING ACADEMY

United Way Born Learning is a public engagement campaign helping parents, caregivers and communities create early learning opportunities for young children. Designed to support parents in their critical role as a child's first teacher, Born Learning educational materials have been available through the efforts of United Way since 2005. In 2007, United Way of Greater Cincinnati Success By 6[®], Kenton County Schools (under the direction of former Superintendent Tim Hanner) and Northern Kentucky University partnered to develop the United Way Born Learning Academy. The United Way Born Learning Academy is a series of school-based parent workshops that engage expectant parents and families with young children to support early learning and school readiness. Early childhood faculty members Dr. Helene Arbouet Harte and Dr. Jaesook Gilbert of Northern Kentucky University developed the parent workshop curriculum, training guide and supplemental materials.

Success By 6¹ in Northern Kentucky formed a statewide collaborative to expand Born Learning Academies throughout Kentucky with financial support from Toyota Motor Manufacturing Kentucky. Since then, Born Learning Academies have tripled in the Commonwealth, and Kentucky's Race to the Top grant will allow for an even greater expansion. In addition, United Way Born Learning Academies have undergone a national replication process to increase nationwide school readiness.

UNITED WAY BORN LEARNING ACADEMY BENEFITS

- They work. Data indicates that the workshop series effectively engaged parents and caregivers and increased their knowledge of how to support learning at home.
- Academies are the next tier of Born Learning tools. They are a step beyond building public awareness and simply passing along information to parents. Academies actually engage parents in getting their kids ready for kindergarten.
- Academies are a “product” that corporations can become excited about.
- They are a great way to build strong, authentic partnerships with schools. They offer schools a way to engage families—something many schools struggle with. In the United States, family engagement is a strategy that Title 1 schools could resource with Title 1 funds.

¹ Success By 6 is a collaborative community initiative focused on improving school readiness.

THE CHALLENGE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE READY FOR KINDERGARTEN?

When Northern Kentucky's Success By 6 work was expanded in 2007, this question could not be answered. Unlike some other states, Kentucky did not have a mandatory kindergarten readiness assessment. Districts were using a wide variety of screening and assessment tools or no assessments at all. Furthermore, before kindergarten readiness could be measured, it had to be defined. Northern Kentucky University, Success By 6, and the Council of Partners in Education formed a Kindergarten Readiness Steering Committee to define "ready" in Northern Kentucky using available research and literature.

In 2007, early childhood data in Northern Kentucky was very limited. Not much was known other than that before entry into kindergarten, 50 percent of children were in childcare while 50 percent of children stayed at home with a parent or caregiver.

Working with their early childhood experts from Northern Kentucky University, United Way defined kindergarten readiness, figured out how to measure it, and thereby encouraged the use of a tool, DIAL-3. In 2009, the state of Kentucky followed a similar process as United Way. In fact, United Way's work is noted in the document² that recommends Kentucky should adopt and distribute the school readiness definition to local communities, schools, state agencies and early childhood advocates. While United Way of Greater Cincinnati doesn't think that every community has to do it this way, they note that communities do have to measure and connect their work to the larger goal of kindergarten readiness. They also discovered that you have to find—or buy—a measurement tool. Then you have to train people how to use the tool, and sometimes you have to encourage partners to use the tool.

In 2012 the state implemented a school readiness assessment tool—[Kentucky's Common Kindergarten Entry Screener, the BRIGANCE Early Childhood Kindergarten Screen III](#). As a result, the community had data for the first time and it showed that 53 percent of kids were ready for kindergarten. Seven years ago, Greater Cincinnati had not established a Bold Goal that could have aligned the communities' efforts toward a common outcome of kindergarten readiness. When a community-wide goal exists, communities don't have to spend so much time figuring out what they are aiming for, how to measure it and how to talk about it.

² Early Childhood Services in Kentucky: A framework to ensure school readiness for our students, schools and communities. Final report of the Governor's Task Force on Early Childhood Development and Education, November 2010.

A VISION

The research is clear: the earlier in a child's life parent involvement begins, the more powerful the effect. Inspired by The Harlem Children's Zone Project in New York and the original Born Learning materials, Kenton County Schools Superintendent Tim Hanner approached United Way of Greater Cincinnati with the idea of creating a parent workshop that would engage expectant mothers and families with young children so that his school system could help set children on the right track for learning.

The Born Learning Academy was developed to be a high-impact, low-cost strategy to increase kindergarten readiness rates. This data-driven outreach strategy aligns with their regional Bold Goals for 2020. **The community's Bold Goals, which United Way of Greater Cincinnati helped influence, included getting 85 percent of kids ready for school by 2020.**

United Way partnered with their local university to develop the United Way Born Learning Academies. Northern Kentucky University's former president, a strong advocate for regional stewardship, had created two university positions focused on early childhood, with half their time to be spent teaching and the other half supporting the community. These local experts, Dr. Jaesook Gilbert and Dr. Helene Harte, lent their time, talent and expertise in early childhood development, research and best practices. They committed to a more regional approach with partnerships that strengthen educational opportunities and student achievement across the region. They are the masterminds behind the development of Born Learning Academies, and they developed the workshop curriculum using Born Learning materials.



THE WORK

To achieve school readiness, families, schools and communities must work together to improve the quality of experiences a child has before kindergarten. From the beginning, United Way asked schools to be the lead in the initiative because they wanted parents to be comfortable in schools and to help everyone understand that parents and schools were partners. This thinking underlies United Way's goal to act on the entire age continuum to provide a seamless transition from prenatal care to kindergarten entry.

In 2009, United Way of Greater Cincinnati piloted the Born Learning Academy at Beechgrove Elementary in Kenton County, with whom they already had a strong relationship. Beechgrove Elementary was selected as the pilot project because of its demographics (60 percent of children are eligible for free or reduced lunch) and its capacity to launch the workshops. A dynamic Family Resource Center Coordinator and a principal with strong leadership qualities were key to the overwhelming success of the project. First-year data showed promising results:

- Parent's belief that the child's first year is the best time to start reading with them increased from 80 percent to 93 percent.
- Upon completion of the workshops, 80 percent of parents felt very informed about supporting young children's learning and development.
- Almost all parents increased their understanding of the importance of playing, talking, reading and singing with their children. Based on the post assessment data, 93 to 100 percent of parents indicated that they plan on conducting these types of activities more frequently.
- One hundred percent of parents indicated that the Born Learning materials had helped them understand how their children learn and that they had used the parent resources with their child.

“Ensuring that children enter kindergarten ready to experience success is the real game changer—we know that kindergarten preparedness is a critical academic milestone for young children, and a leading predictor of future academic success. The fact that Academies were adopted as a strategic initiative of Kentucky's Race To The Top Early Learning Challenge Grant and highlighted by the federal government as an innovative effort to increase family engagement in early childhood is a true testament to the infrastructure and relationships that have been built in Northern Kentucky.”

Terry Tolan, Executive Director of the Governor's Office of Early Childhood

In an effort to maintain the relationships developed during the workshops, Beechgrove Elementary continued to engage first year Academy graduates through educational field trips, including:

- Visiting a local grocery store to learn how to make positive nutritional choices.
- Going to a toy store in search of educational toys.
- Meeting with doctors from a local hospital to discuss stages of child development.
- Touring the local museum to see how to have fun while learning.

The goal was to keep these parents engaged until their child entered school and then beyond. This was not only an important step to improve school readiness; it also sent a powerful message to parents that they were a part of the school community.

Given their commitment to using existing tools, United Way started out in the pilot years using Born Learning's Are You Baby Smart quiz to evaluate the workshop's effectiveness. While it was a good try, it proved insufficient for measuring the impact of the Academy curriculum. Since the workshops are stand-alone, parents don't always attend each workshop. The quiz also didn't cover the exact content of the six workshop lessons. Ultimately, United Way reached out to Drs. Gilbert and Harte to develop its own evaluation. While this was a lengthy process, they were fortunate that they already had the right partner with the right experts in the local university.

From the beginning, the organization knew they needed data, both for continuous improvement and to measure progress toward the goal. The Northern Kentucky Early Childhood Database was built in 2007, initially to track the progress of children within the Newport Independent Public Schools. When launched in 2008, the data system empowered early childhood partners to access readiness data prior to their kindergarten registration. As a result, Northern Kentucky early childhood partners were able to intervene with needed services earlier and use data to understand successful programs, thus leading to improved investment decisions. United Way of Greater Cincinnati has been investing in the data system for many years. Leadership provided by United Way of Greater Cincinnati led to system enhancements and expanded partner engagement to include multiple school districts within the Northern Kentucky service area. The system was built by Northern Kentucky University's Center for Applied Informatics, who continues to house and manage the data system in partnership with United Way. The database was a trial and error process and determining WHAT to measure was a challenge when appropriate measurements were not readily available or when there was no standard of kindergarten readiness.



The Nielsen Company, a United Way corporate partner, is a big believer in Born Learning Academies. They have analyzed Academy data since 2013, free of charge. Nielsen not only analyzes the data; they also provide suggestions about the data. For example, the data shows that close to 80 percent of families are using what they learned at the workshops. As a result, Nielsen suggested that schools should not just ask parents if they plan to use the information at home, but, more importantly, have they ACTUALLY USED this information at home?

THE RESULTS

1. In Northern Kentucky, over 98 percent of families reported using ideas from the workshop at home. Across the state expansion sites, 80 percent of families reported using ideas learned at home.
2. Overall, parents gained more knowledge from pre-to-post evaluation. Seventy percent gained knowledge in 2013-2014, compared to 40 percent in 2012-2013.
3. Across the state expansion sites, an average of two-thirds of participants showed improvement across the workshop series.
4. Data indicates that the workshop series effectively engaged parents and caregivers, and increased their knowledge of how to support learning at home.
5. Evaluations of the workshops were overwhelmingly positive, with a majority reporting that the information was useful and that the presenter was knowledgeable and skilled.
6. Attendance was higher in 2013-2014 versus 2012-2013.
7. Virtually all participants expressed interest in attending future workshops (96 percent across the state expansion sites and 97 percent in Northern Kentucky).
8. In the state expansion sites, 76 percent attended three or more workshops and in Northern Kentucky, 54 percent attended three or more workshops.

LESSONS LEARNED AND ADVICE

Born Learning Academies have been a huge success, but that doesn't mean that United Way of Greater Cincinnati didn't experience challenges along the way. United Ways implementing an Academy in their community should:

1. Work collaboratively, because you can't do this work alone. Make sure you use the [Startup Guide](#). Engaging families in a meaningful way is difficult, so you have to take the necessary time to build a foundation with the schools and other partners. Make sure you have a strong team in place to make this happen.
2. Manage the risk of getting too big too fast. Take the time to put into place implementation standards, branding guidelines for partners, and a monitoring process for continuous improvement. Start small and figure out how to do this with one or just a few schools rather than jumping in and doing it with a lot of schools all at once. Keep the scope of your work narrow and do a few key things well.
3. Put in the time upfront to make sure partner expectations are understood. Don't make assumptions about what everybody thinks their roles are. Lay out roles and responsibilities from the beginning.
4. Build on what you already have. Use your school readiness initiatives to push for using data to continuously improve a community's school readiness work.
5. Be creative about how to get the work done. United Way is uniquely positioned to find and convene experts and volunteers in the community and bring in varied perspectives.
6. Be data driven. From the very beginning, think about and plan for measuring results. Look at the data every year, and use it to make adjustments to the workshops. In 2013, United Way of Greater Cincinnati knew that only 40 percent of families increased their skills from pre- to post-evaluation. Because of that data, they did a lot of refining and training, and in the next year that 40 percent jumped up to 70 percent.
7. Having a strong relationship with a school is a must or the initiative won't work. If you are looking for a way to work with your schools, the Born Learning Academy could be the incentive that would convince a school to develop a relationship with United Way. Use a key school partner to bring other schools and potential community partners into the mix with United Way, and look at the data to influence enhancements for quality improvement.
8. Commit to continuously improve. It's okay to stop and ask yourself and your partners, "How is this working for you?"
9. Understand and value all the different perspectives in your project. You don't have to implement every idea, but do understand them and be in tune with that.
10. Make sure you have an important or high-profile ambassador for this work in your community who can help talk about Born Learning Academies. Give them talking points and set them loose!

11. Don't make this work harder than it is. Working with families is difficult because they are busy, but Born Learning Academy as a curriculum is not hard.
12. Ensure that the project is aligned with regional and community goals. Know what your goals are before setting a strategy. United Way of Greater Cincinnati knew that kindergarten readiness and relationships with parents and schools were already important goals for their community. Knowing this guided how they measured success. Have a definition of kindergarten success so you know what you are aiming for.
13. United Way is best positioned to play a variety of key roles:
 - Find and convene the experts in the community, so that you have all the varied perspectives.
 - Guide and monitor the vision.
 - Help the community commit to continuous improvement.
 - Convene the community and provide the research and data.
 - Offer opportunities to celebrate success.
14. Don't reinvent the wheel—use what's already out there.

“The Capacity and Commitment Checklist (within the [Startup Guide](#)) came from a parent! We had asked a parent to present to a board meeting, and he was great! We wanted to expand the initiative, but we were nervous about what it would look like. During a conversation with that parent, he asked questions and we put those on paper. We worked with him to come up with our checklist.”

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