

Category: Vol. 4, 2011

The Twenty-first Century Child of Northwest Indiana: An Initiative Developed to Ensure Success by Six

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Hits: 13424

The authors would like to acknowledge Dr. Janice E. Katz for her hard work and determination in bringing this initiative to Northwest Indiana.

Introduction

For decades in Northwest Indiana, policies have been enacted and services have been available to young children with the sole purpose of improving their condition. Those services are as diversified as the children whose needs these services meet. There is home-based care for children alone, in groups or care given in centers. There are services available to children whose development may be challenged by socioeconomic conditions developmental disabilities, mental health issues, or family trauma. Regardless of what type of service being provided, or policy for which they are advocating, the groups share one common goal; to improve the young child's circumstances early in his or her development, recognizing that such an investment can lead to favorable outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). One such initiative created to advocate for urban and rural children developing in Northwest Indiana, and supported by all of the United Way programs in Northwest Indiana is *Success by 6*.

The first *Success by 6* initiative was launched in 1989 by a group of business executives in Minneapolis. Their concerns about high school dropout rates and workforce development led them to examine the importance of the early years. Since then, over 350 public-private partnerships have built *Success by 6* coalitions across the country ("Partners", 2011). Within each community the priorities, definitions and focus for the efforts are uniquely defined and implemented.

When the United Way agencies of Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties chose to actively address the needs of young children in Northwest Indiana in 2009, a wide net was cast to capture a multitude of perspectives. This was necessary to assess the current compendium of services and to create an answer to the question "What does a successful 6 year-old from Northwest Indiana look like?" Representatives from the fields of pediatrics, early childhood education, infant toddler mental health, school corporations and the social services gathered to review the data, share information and begin to formulate a plan that would address the unique needs of families and children in Northwest Indiana.

The series of meetings, discussions and focus groups overwhelmingly revealed a need for the *Success by 6* initiative, especially at a time when profound structural changes in both Indiana and the country are impacting young children and their families. These include: 1). changes in the number of work hours parents of young children must engage in, at all income levels, to provide for their families, 2). economic challenges encountered by families in the current economy, 3). increases in cultural and ethnic diversity within our communities as well as the contrasts between racial and ethnic groups' health and developmental outcomes, 4). increases in children who from infancy are receiving non-parental caregiving (which varies greatly in quality) and 5). increases in awareness of family and community problems, which can have deleterious effects on the child's well-being (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Any one of the 61,455 children under the age of 6 living in Northwest Indiana may be affected by one or more of these factors (The United Way, 2009). Using KIDS COUNT 2010 data, the authors illustrate how some children of Northwest Indiana are likely to encounter more changes and challenges than others. The data also provides evidence that shows that Northwest Indiana is struggling in comparison to state and national averages in many areas. Taken together these data highlight that support by the Northwest Indiana community for initiatives such as *Success by 6* is essential to create impactful changes within the area (The United Way, 2009). At the conclusion of this paper, the authors discuss the need for support from those individuals and organizations in the region that have the capacity to bring about change, focusing on the institutions of higher education.

The *Success by 6* Initiative

The *Success by 6* initiative was introduced to Northwest Indiana to help meet the needs of children developing in the twenty-first century by creating optimal community conditions. In Northwest Indiana, the focus of the *Success by 6* initiative concentrates on four areas affecting child development which include: 1). home environment, 2). childcare providers and caregivers, 3). health, safety and physical development, and 4). social and emotional development. The welcome address identifies the goals of this preventative and proactive initiative to:

enhance the quality of education in Northwest Indiana, increase the economic development potential, ultimately reduce the number of social issues, raise awareness, improve access to information and services concerning early childhood education, and provide training and education to parents and childcare providers ("Welcome to NWI Success by 6", 2011).

Success by 6 recognizes that development occurs rapidly from the time of conception until the time a child attends his or her first day of school (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; The United Way, 2009). During this time of incredible growth, there are many major developmental milestones to be accomplished including: linguistic, cognitive, emotional, social, physical, regulatory, and moral ones. Children at this stage of the lifespan can flourish in their developmental progress or be quite vulnerable to circumstances that can hinder their development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The attainment of these milestones can be greatly influenced by issues that young children and their families encounter long before a child's first day of school. Given that each

of these domains of development overlap and are interconnected, what affects one aspect of development can impact other areas as well (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

There is no consensus within the literature about what constitutes a successful 6-year-old. Some researchers suggest there are 15 necessary capacities while others suggest 9 (The United Way, 2009). Regardless of the actual number of capacities, there appears to be some agreement as to the domains a child needs to be sufficient in order to ensure success. Those domains include:

1. Self-regulation: the ability to control one's emotions, behavior, and attention
2. Communication and learning: the early development of language abilities, reasoning, and problem solving, and
3. Social and emotional health: including the ability to interact well with others, form friendships, resolve conflicts, as well as form trusting and nurturing relationships (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; The United Way, 2009). Children who are unable to hold their attention, follow instructions, regulate their emotions, and get along with others will not become successful students or citizens regardless of whether or not they can read, write, and have basic mathematical skills (The United Way, 2009).

Success by 6 also recognizes that quality childcare is integral to preparing young children to be successful not only in school, but also in life. Grunewald and Rolnick (2006) argue that children who have experienced high quality early care and education have an increased potential for higher earnings in their lifetime. Given that 65.8% of children under the age of 6 in Northwest Indiana are receiving non-parental childcare outside of their home, the quality of early childhood education they are receiving within the region is of great concern to *Success by 6* (Dawson, 2010; The United Way, 2009).

Other programs do exist in Northwest Indiana that address some of the goals outlined by *Success by 6*. Programs such as the [Indiana Parenting Institute](#), Parents As Teachers, All About Kids, and Prevent Child Abuse Indiana address the needs of children under the age of 6 and their families. Many of the region's school corporations are engaged in outreach efforts to help children obtain kindergarten readiness. School corporations such as School City of East Chicago and Michigan City Area Schools have invested resources to establish preschool programs within the public school setting.

However, while many agencies and providers throughout Northwest Indiana currently focus on the challenges faced by children in Northwest Indiana, there is often duplication of services (The United Way, 2009). Unlike these regional agencies *Success by 6* will not provide direct services to children under age 6. Rather, the purpose of *Success by 6* is to bring agencies together which are currently addressing early childhood issues independently. Collaboration among providers to pool resources, obtain funding and advocate with one voice for children in the community whose development may be impeded by the realities of local challenges offers opportunity to leverage resources and efficiently address these immediate needs.

A Review of the 21st Century Challenges Faced By Children Living In Northwest Indiana

Data used by *Success by 6* to evaluate the need for the initiative in Northwest Indiana was obtained from various sources including the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT project. The project provides national and state by state data that tracks the status of children in the United States (Annie E. Casey Foundation [AECF], 2010). There are 10 primary indicators of children's well-being on which KIDS COUNT provides data including: percent of low birth weight babies; infant mortality rate; child death rate; rate of teen deaths by accident, homicide, and suicide; teen birth rate; percent of children living with parents who do not have full-time, year-round employment; percent of teens who are high-school dropouts; percent of teens not attending school and not working; percent of children in poverty; and percent of families with children headed by a single-parent. KIDS COUNT is also able to provide background information for each state and the counties within each state regarding demographic and family income (AECF, 2010).

Data reviewed from KIDS COUNT 2010 revealed that, overall, Indiana ranked 33 out of 50 states on the 10 primary indicators of children's well-being. Regional data elaborating upon each key area of concern identified by *Success by 6* (the home environment; childcare providers and caregivers; health, safety, and physical development; and social and emotional development) are disaggregated by county and provided in Table 1.[1]

Related to the home environment the KIDS COUNT data show that there are more children living in poverty in Lake County than in Porter and LaPorte counties. The percentage of children living in poverty in Lake and LaPorte counties is higher than the state and national percentages. The data also show that the rate of abused or neglected children appears to be higher in Porter County than in Lake and LaPorte counties; however, the rate across the counties appears to be lower than what is average for the state.

In regards to health, safety, and physical development, Lake and LaPorte counties have higher percentages of low birth weight babies than does the state and national averages. Lake and LaPorte counties also have higher rates of teen births than the state and national averages, particularly so in LaPorte county. Finally, the average percentage of mothers receiving first trimester prenatal care is lower in Lake and LaPorte counties than in Porter and in the state.

Data providing information about the social and emotional well-being for children in each county does not exist. As a region, the Division of Mental Health reported that 10,468 Northwest Indiana children met their criteria for being "Seriously Emotionally Disturbed" (The United Way, 2009). Data from KIDS COUNT 2010 showed that 18% of children in Indiana between the ages of 2 and 17 have had a parent report to a doctor that their child has one or more emotional, behavioral, or developmental conditions. This percentage is higher than the national average of 15% (AECF, 2010). This lack of information about the social and emotional well-being of children in the region is a concern for *Success by 6*. It should also be noted that in Northwest Indiana, only children enrolled in Head Start programs have access to mental health and behavioral consultations ("Northwest Indiana Statistics," 2011). Currently, there are no consultation services available for other types of early childcare providers in Northwest Indiana with children enrolled who may

be experiencing mental health or behavioral problems (The United Way, 2009).

KIDS COUNT data pertaining to the quality of childcare in each county also does not exist. The only available data pertaining to childcare providers and caregivers comes from a state wide program called Paths to Quality. This voluntary enrollment program, introduced in 2007, has four levels. At Level 1, the most basic safety regulations are met. At Level 4, the childcare home, center or ministry has obtained accreditation. Families can be assured that programs that have secured Level 4 are also nationally accredited and uphold the highest standards and best practices. Within each tier, participants are rewarded for “moving up” the ladder toward high quality and accreditation.

In Northwest Indiana, there are 231 providers enrolled in Paths to Quality. However, the number of providers who have reached Level 3 or 4 remains low. Of the 163 childcare centers, homes or ministries in Lake County, 14 have secured Level 3 and only 6 have reached accreditation (Level 4). In LaPorte County, 2 of the 40 providers are accredited and only 3 have attained Level 3. Finally, in Porter County, only 3 of the 28 centers, homes or ministries are accredited and there are 0 Level 3 providers (K.D. Hendricks, personal communication, February 15, 2011). These data show that families seeking childcare in Northwest Indiana have limited access to a high-quality program. Of the 231 Paths to Quality programs across the region, only 28 fulfilled the requirements to achieve Level 3 (which include the provider’s existence for at least one year, a written curriculum, a plan for program evaluation and ongoing professional development) (Elicker, Langill, Ruprecht, & Kwon, 2007).

Collectively, the data reveal significant challenges faced by children and their families living in Lake, Porter, and LaPorte counties. In some instances, there appear to be more challenges for children living in some counties than others, as well as in comparison to children at the state or national levels. The patterns described demonstrate evidence for those community agents who have the ability to bring about change to support the regional *Success by 6* initiative.

A Need for Broad Community Support to Ensure Success by 6

Decades of research from early childhood experts, economists, and advocacy groups show that early intervention, high quality early childhood programs, and support for initiatives such as *Success by 6* are necessary not only to ensure that children are ready for school but also to improve their quality of life, reduce crime rates, and make the future workforce more productive, thus strengthening the regional, state, and national economies (Bartik, 2011; “Cradle to Prison”, 2008; Lynch, 2004; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders in the region. Gruendel suggests “Just as public and private entities take an active interest in the construction and maintenance of roads, public transportation, utilities, housing and educational facilities to support economic development, quality early childhood education should be considered essential to economic health” (as cited in Kostelnik & Grady, 2009, p. 14).

Research shows that many children who have been served by early childhood programs will remain in the states and local areas where they attended school for their adult working careers (Bartik, 2011). As many as half of Americans are estimated to spend their working careers in the local areas where they were educated. It has been argued that if investments were made to ensure high quality early childhood programs than it will result in a more skilled labor force, which will lead to more and better jobs in local communities such as Northwest Indiana (Bartik, 2011). Although there is no existing data about the effectiveness of *Success by 6* in Northwest Indiana, given the initiative’s infancy, there is an estimated \$3 to \$17 yield for every \$1 investment in programs such as this supporting early childhood (Lynch, 2004; The United Way, 2009).

In Northwest Indiana, such an agenda can only flourish if it is grounded in broad backing from the community. Funding, support, and cooperation from all sectors is essential to address the specific needs identified in the *Success by 6* strategic plan and to create an impactful change. Regional businesses, government agencies and non-profit organizations must dedicate resources to assist and sustain this initiative. Social service agencies, educational systems and programs must collaborate to provide the most effective, efficient, and accessible delivery of services. Partnerships and communication across the region directed at supporting the *Success by 6* initiative will promote a shared understanding of the value of the early childhood years and the critical need for increased awareness and allocation of resources toward these efforts.

During its first year of implementation, *Success by 6* has already garnered the support of a wide spectrum of partners: parks and recreation departments; mayors’ offices; local banks; school corporations; non-profit community foundations; service clubs; and chambers of commerce. With funding allocations from each of the United Way agencies, the *Success by 6* initiative has started to address the issues identified by its Steering Committee as critical to serving the unique needs of Northwest Indiana’s youngest citizens. *Success by 6* has provided training for early childhood professionals at regional conferences and speaker series. Collaboration with Indiana University Health has resulted in a summer kindergarten readiness camp. Funds have been committed to provide early learning tools in local libraries and child care centers. (J. Wright, personal communication, July 5, 2011).

Institutions of higher education in Northwest Indiana also have a vested interest in and important resources to ensure children’s success and readiness to enter the kindergarten classroom, long before they enter the college classroom. Many of the region’s children who face the challenges identified in this review may attend the institutions of higher learning that are located in Lake, Porter, and LaPorte counties. Students need to be prepared for the intellectual demands of post-secondary education that include critical thinking skills, strong writing ability and proficiency in communication. Beyond academic skills, those students must also be equipped with the social-emotional capacity to function as independent young adults to advocate for one’s needs, to be accountable, and to relate to peers.

Purdue University North Central (PNC) is one of Northwest Indiana’s institutions of higher learning that is taking an active role in building and supporting the regional *Success by 6* initiative. Over 85% of the Purdue North Central student population is from Lake, Porter, or LaPorte counties

(“Purdue North Central Enrollment Reports”, 2010). Since most of PNC’s graduates remain in Northwest Indiana, it is within PNC’s scope of responsibility to educate and prepare the region’s future workforce. Purdue’s core values of Learning, Discovery, and Engagement explicitly charge the university community to embrace this responsibility for the purpose of education, dissemination of information and cultivation of partnerships within the service area.

PNC is currently creating a culture to support *Success by 6* in several ways. Members of the PNC community have already become involved with the *Success by 6* initiative by serving on the Steering Committee, preparing research for strategic prioritization, and promoting the initiative through projects, internships, and volunteerism. PNC’s support for the initiative extends to a physical presence on campus as it is the site of the only campus-based Born Learning Trail in Indiana. The Born Learning Trail is an interactive and playful outdoor pathway that uses colorful signs and games to encourage family involvement, activity, and awareness. The signage promotes language, conceptual, and spatial development. For example, one sign reads, “Find a flower or a tree. Touch it. Talk about it. Is it hard or soft? Rough or smooth?”. Together, children and adults enjoy the environment within the context of positive interactions. This Born Learning Trail on campus allows PNC to provide the community with an early learning opportunity for the region’s young children as well as spotlight the significance of learning in the early years (“Born Learning Tools”, 2010).

The authors challenge other institutions of higher education to embrace this initiative as PNC has. The view from campus to the kindergarten playground provides the higher education community with a rich landscape of opportunities to strengthen the *Success by 6* initiative. Possibilities exist for faculty to serve the coalition as service learning partners, researchers, evaluators, and informed proponents. As there needs to be a collaborative effort among service providers, the universities in Northwest Indiana also hold a mutual obligation to educate, advocate, and serve the cause of ensuring that all children are prepared and equipped to enter school successfully. This genuine effort to broaden opportunities for student success must occur long before a student begins freshman year. Creating partnerships with the region’s institutions of higher learning, social service agencies, child-care providers, and elementary schools strengthens the network of support for future students and their families.

Call to Action

A child’s development early in the lifespan can be modified by interventions to exchange maladaptive child outcomes for more adaptive ones (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The development of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers should not just be a concern for their families but should be a concern at the regional, state, and national levels as well (Novotney, 2011; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Infants born today will be future students, parents, workers, and citizens. Investing valuable resources in them today will significantly increase the quality of life for children being raised in Northwest Indiana as well as within their communities. It is necessary to obtain funding to remedy the problem of inadequate service availability in meeting the needs of young children with mental health problems (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Even with the spotlight on early childhood care and education from institutions, public policy initiatives, community and family resources, the single most important factor remains for young children’s success are teachers (Hyson, 2003; Hedges, 2006). Therefore, it is also necessary for funding to be set aside and dedicated for child-care and early childhood education programs in order to raise the standards of the programs, as well as the compensation and benefits of early childcare workers with whom so many infants, toddlers, and preschoolers spend their time (Lynch, 2004; Novotney, 2011; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Success by 6 aims to assemble a cadre of stakeholders to champion this cause of early childhood in Northwest Indiana. This collaboration will foster cohesion and continuity across services and schooling for all children. At this early stage in its development, *Success by 6* has achieved notable accomplishments “to create optimal community conditions to meet the developmental needs of children under age six and their families.” (“Welcome to NWI Success by 6”, 2011).

Community members and organizations have contributed over \$42,000 in donations (cash & in-kind) to support the Born Learning Trails sprouting up all over the region. Over 75 early childhood professionals braved the snow and ice this winter to attend three evenings of speakers at Valparaiso University focused on addressing children’s challenging behaviors. In August, 28 incoming Westville kindergartners participated in a “Kindergarten Countdown” camp. These children gained essential knowledge and skills to equip them with the confidence, experience, and know-how to be successful on their first day of school. Medical residents took part in “What’s Up Doc?” designed to train pediatricians to tune into families’ concerns about their child’s development. Other possibilities on the horizon include scholarships for visits to our region’s attractions such as BellaBoo’s in Lake Station and the Born Learning Trails, sponsorships to ensure that every child receives books before they enter school and, of course, more professional development. Each of these opportunities is possible only because some member of the regional community embraced this call to action.

Initiatives such as *Success by 6* are important for the children from Lake, Porter, and LaPorte counties. The attention that needs to be given to early childhood is not just necessary to make them high-functioning adults able to contribute to the gross national product. Shonkoff & Phillips (2000) believe cares for children is necessary because, “what is learned at the beginning of life establishes a set of capabilities, orientations to the world, expectations about how things and people will behave that affect how new experiences are selected and processed” (p. 90). Growth in all domains of development during the early years is the foundation for learning, relationships, and a stable sense of identity and self-worth. *Success by 6* needs the support of those who have the capacity and the determination to transform – regional businesses, agencies, and institutions of higher learning to create impactful changes to improve the quality of life for the twenty-first century children of Northwest Indiana and the communities in which they live.

“The time has come to stop blaming parents, communities, business, and government – and to shape a shared agenda to ensure both a rewarding childhood and a promising future for all children” (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 414). The authors invite you to join in this endeavor.

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Table 1

Regional data for children living in Northwest Indiana in comparison to State and National data[2]

Indicator	Lake County	Porter County	LaPorte County	Indiana	U.S.
Child abuse/neglect rate per 1,000 children under age 18	9.7	13.0	6.6	15.6	6.8
Annual average unemployment rate (%)	10.4	9.2	11.5	10.1	9.3[3]
Percent of children living in poverty (Age 0-17)	24.7	11.2	19.0	17.9	18.2
Percent of low birth weight babies	10.6	7.7	11.1	8.5	6.7
Teen birth rate per 1,000 females age 15-19	43.1	25.0	58.2	45.0	43.0

[1] Please note that data from the report come from the 2008 American Community Survey's questionnaire and do not reflect the current national economic recession (AECF, 2010).

[2] Data retrieved from: the Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center, www.kidscount.org . Retrieved 2/11/11.

[3] Data retrieved from: the Bureau of Labor Statistics, www.bls.org. Retrieved 2/11/11.