

Early Childhood Policy Matters

Region 5

Guests: Lucy Littlewolf Arias and Janice LaFloe

Narrator:

Welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters, a podcast for early childhood professionals and strategic partners hoping to use research to inform policy and better serve children, families, and their communities. Today, we continue our regional story series looking at the innovative work being done in states and communities across the country with support from the Preschool Development Grant, Birth through Five initiative. Host Syritha Robinson takes us to Minnesota, where new state partnerships with American Indian and Tribal Nations are working to provide children and families often underserved by systems with equitable access to culturally responsive early childhood care and education programs. She speaks with two state leaders about those partnerships and their recommendations for states across the country. That's right now on Early Childhood Policy Matters.

Syritha Robinson:

Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters. I'm Syritha Robinson, Early Childhood Technical Assistant Specialist with the National Center for Preschool Development Grants Birth through Five. Today, I'm so happy to be joined by two early childhood leaders from Minnesota. First, we have Lucy Littlewolf Arias, Preschool Development Grant, Tribal Nations Lead at the Minnesota Department of Education. Welcome, Lucy.

Lucy Littlewolf Arias:

Thank you, Syritha.

Syritha Robinson:

And we also have Janice LaFloe, Founder and Primary Guide with the Montessori American Indian Childcare Center. Thanks so much for joining us, Janice.

Janice LaFloe:

Boozhoo! And good morning. Thank you for inviting me.

Syritha Robinson:

So to start Lucy, I'm curious about the partnerships that exist between Minnesota and the Tribal Nations and the American Indian serving organizations in your state. Could you tell us a little more about those partnerships in the role that PDG B-5 played in supporting the work?

Lucy Littlewolf Arias:

In Minnesota, we have 11 federally recognized tribes. We have seven Ojibwe tribes and four Dakota tribes. Across the state enterprise in Minnesota, we do what we call a Minnesota Tribal State Consultation, which is a unique government to government relationship, and requires consultation with tribes for any major legislature or programming or federal grants, implementation of federal grants. And in 2021, it was codified. Prior to that, it was usually done through executive order, but now it is state law. And so the PDG Grant took this to heart. And during the needs assessment did indeed consult with all 11 federally recognized tribes, and also worked with our American Indian servant agencies in the

urban parts of our states as well. In Minnesota, roughly about 50% of the American Indian population does live in our urban centers.

Lucy Littlewolf Arias:

And throughout PDG, this consultation has been important and continues. In fact, the position I hold came from that consultation. Tribal Nations and American Indian serving agencies felt it was important to have a staff member who represented them at the table when decisions are being made. And so across our grant making in Minnesota, we have a number of buckets of work that are going on with PDG, but two of the larger activities are community resource hubs in our Community Solutions foundations, which both have been designed and included Tribal Nations. In fact, nine of the 23 Community Solution fund grantees are either Tribal Nation led or American Indian organization led.

Syritha Robinson:

So Janice, how have those partnerships improved opportunities for children and families in Minnesota? Have they improved access to culturally responsive quality, early childhood program and support services?

Janice LaFloe:

Thank you, Syritha. Certainly. We are one of the unique opportunities as Lucy described Consultation with Tribal Nations, I'm an organization that serves the urban community in the East Metro of the Twin Cities. And as such, we're uniquely positioned because we don't necessarily get to be formally consulted as a Tribal Nation. We advocate just a little bit more to ensure that the needs of the early learners in the urban areas are understood and recognized for services. And that was what our project has been about, is creating access. I'm very proud and pleased that the Community Solutions initiative that Lucy cited is one of the funding sources that we were awarded. And so in that work, we've actually been able to expand from just serving three to six year olds with direct service to include birth to three. And in the past two years, it's been primarily virtual services because of the pandemic. But we are certainly grateful that the PDG Birth through Five work has reached our urban population and is reaching our native children.

Syritha Robinson:

Here on the podcast we love innovation. Lucy, would you say that these partnership efforts are a unique or novel approach to comprehensive early childhood care and education systems building?

Lucy Littlewolf Arias:

Sure. I think the innovation came from the whole process. So there was the needs assessment that meaningfully engaged communities across Minnesota, and the Tribal Nations and the American Indian organization in our urban areas. And I think it's really important because even though American Indians are not a large proportion of our state's population, we're very, very important and first population group of this state, and PDG noted that and made sure that they reached out to us and meaningfully engaged us so that we could be a part of this preschool development grant. And so what sort of innovation is happening? Well, first and foremost with the Community Solution Fund, it's exactly that. It offered grant making to communities to allow them to identify needs, and to come up with solutions with little guidance from the state. So really putting the community organization in the driver's seat for finding solutions for their community.

Lucy Littlewolf Arias:

In addition, our community resource hubs are also positioned in that way that communities were able to identify the needs they seen in the community, and to drive solutions as well through our navigation hubs. And I think across our system, that usually it's the grant maker who decides what are the needs and what the solution should be. But with this grant making, it was really put in the community's hand. And it's really kind of humbling to me to look across all of our grantees and seeing all the great work that's going on.

Lucy Littlewolf Arias:

For instance, the Montessori American Indian Childcare is really leading with a home visiting model or a virtual home visiting model, I guess you could say, or parenting model, because we had to make that shift with COVID as well, really bringing our culture to families and what it means to them as parents and caregivers. Also, other partnerships have really noted that within our communities. We have the knowledge, and a number of our community resource hubs have peer mentors and facilitators to help families navigate systems and to really move forward with their lives. So it's really allowing community to be the driver of change.

Syritha Robinson:

So Janice, tell us what does comprehensive early childhood care and education systems building mean for you and the community you serve?

Janice LaFloe:

That's a really good question. What it really means to me in the community that we serve is that a comprehensive model when you're thinking about early learning is child centered, experiential based and holistic in approach. And I use those phrases purposefully, because they are best connected to our cultural ways and our ways of being and our ways of knowing. The most important opportunity the last few years through the Community Solutions Grant initiative has been that we've been an entity who has defined what our next steps are. What are our goals? What are our intentions, and what work is it that we need to do to build that early learning care system. And so we've been working diligently and very purposefully in how we expand our services to be more inclusive. Our first few years were really about how we embed language and culture into our delivery and how we share that knowledge.

Janice LaFloe:

And so when you're thinking about how a system is built, it really needs to start with the community in a place where they recognize and know what they need and want to support, and how those values come through in that early learning process. It's been a wonderful journey to be with Lucy and others at the state level who are actually listening to and paying attention to how we are doing our work. So much of our work is relationship based in early learning. And so it really does need to acknowledge and begin where children are and where families are in their early learning needs. And so, in my opinion, when you're thinking about a comprehensive system, it really needs to start with the family system and be responsive to those needs and build up. Community is the best intermediary from such a large state system. And so being a community partner is important because we know our families best.

Janice LaFloe:

We work with that next level of systems to try and ensure that resources are efficiently and effectively delivered and provided, that meet those unique learning needs and learning situations of young

children. Ours purposefully is specifically to engage the American Indian community in the urban area. And one of the other points in that about why it needs to be culturally specific really is about the fact that for so long native kids are often invisible in systems. Until we started this work in the East metro, not a lot of native kids had opportunity or access because when you're in a large urban area, there is a large need, and you don't have enough resources.

Janice LaFloe:

So we said and stepped forward and advocated because our native children are so invisible. Our community can be so small that larger systems don't see them. We don't show up in statistics. We don't show up in the data. And if we do, it's excluded because it can be uniquely identified because the numbers are so small. So when you're thinking about what a comprehensive system should look like, it first of all, also needs to see all of our children and the culture that they represent and come from.

Syritha Robinson:

So many states are now looking at their systems and trying to identify ways to leverage culturally responsive practices and create more equitable outcomes for children and families. Share your wisdom. What lessons have you both learned during the process, and what recommendations would you offer to other states? Lucy, I'll start with you.

Lucy Littlewolf Arias:

Sure. I think it's important to always know your community. And just like Janice said, often American Indians are kind of the forgotten community or invisible community. So I think it's important for state systems to know their communities, because they look different in different pockets of the state, right? One Metro area could have a very different population group and level of diversity than another area, right? So I think it's important first to know your communities and to make sure that they're at the table helping to make decisions. And that's just not at decision-making. This goes from creating RFPs to reviewing RFPs, to ongoing support for grantees, and to always make sure that your community is a part of that system is important, and will naturally embed the cultural response and practices by having your community represented.

Syritha Robinson:

Janice, do you have anything to add to that?

Janice LaFloe:

I would certainly support Lucy in what she is saying about bringing them to the table. We were certainly grateful that the Community Solutions initiative put together an advisory council made up of community members to help guide the process of the development of the request for fund proposals, because decision-making and involving community really starts there. When you're willing to share decision-making and you are inviting and including the community in the process, it does make a systems shift and a systems change. And for our native community, we are blessed in Minnesota because consultation is required as Lucy cited. It's not necessarily the same in other states and/or other communities, which I think is why it is important for any of our listeners to take a good hard look at where are your native communities and how do we engage with them? And I use the term with them on purpose because you don't want to do for anyone.

Janice LaFloe:

If you truly believe that you want to engage and empower families and communities, then you want to work with them in sharing all of the decisions that need to be made so that you can engage in community in a meaningful way. That at least is the work I feel is important in serving and working with the American Indian communities. They often know their communities best, which I would also say that, that works well with other communities of color because they're the ones connected in community. I think culturally responsive practices starts with culturally responsive, meaning you got to really kind of go to that community so they can help build that response together. And then you can begin meeting those needs in a more equitable way. In the process over the last couple years, I think some of the lessons that we've also had the opportunity to learn is the opportunity to be connected to each other. By bringing the grantees together, I've also been able to continue to learn and connect with other early learning grantees and tribal grantees as well. So just a couple of thoughts, at least. Lucy, any others?

Lucy Littlewolf Arias:

I really appreciate that we can learn from each other, and there's always the discussion of sustainability, right? And a lot of times we attach that to funding, which I'm not opposed to, but there's other forms of sustainability. And that is just the system changing that sustainability. When the system becomes more flexible to the needs of the community that naturally builds sustainability, but also that community learning between grantees from grantees to state partners, from community to state leaders. That's a form of sustainability too, because that wisdom isn't lost. That was gained through working with families and serving families.

Syritha Robinson:

Well, this has been a wonderful conversation and a valuable look into the great work your organizations and so many others have been doing in Minnesota. Lucy and Janice, thanks so much for joining me today.

Lucy Littlewolf Arias:

Yes. Much gratitude for you, Syritha and your team. Thank you.

Janice LaFloe:

Thank you for allowing us to be a part of your conversation.

Narrator:

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