

Region 7 Episode

Guests: Melissa Rooker and Sara Gardner

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 communities across the country with support from the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five initiative. Host Mandy Reeve takes us to Kansas where a unique tool is being used to connect and engage with families across the Sunflower State. That's right now on Early Childhood Policy Matters.

Mandy Reeve:

Hello, and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters. I'm Mandy Reeve, senior education researcher and TA specialist with SRI Education and the PDG B-5 TA Center. I'm so excited to be here today with two early childhood leaders from the state of Kansas. First, we have Melissa Rooker, executive director of the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund.

Hi, Melissa.

Melissa Rooker:

Hi, Mandy. It's great to be here with you.

Mandy Reeve:

We also have Sara Gardner, assistant director of the Center for Public Partnerships and Research at the University of Kansas.

Thanks so much for joining us, Sara.

Sara Gardner:

Happy to be here. Thanks for having us.

Mandy Reeve:

I'm very excited to learn about the work your team is currently doing and has been doing for children and families and communities in Kansas. To start, I'd like to ask about system building work and the impact of the Preschool Development Birth through Five initiative or PDG B-5. What kind of work have you been able to do in Kansas with support from PDG B-5 that you wouldn't have been able to do otherwise?

Melissa Rooker:

Mandy, that's a great question. The work has been underway in Kansas since our 2019 planning grant year. Then obviously, we have a three-year renewal grant that has been serving us well, particularly as we navigate the pandemic and all of the extra issues that the pandemic relief funding efforts have created and the enormous strain on the system that conditions on the ground around have exacerbated. But I would say the planning grant year was particularly beneficial to us because the PDG grant funded a

comprehensive needs assessment and information gathering process that I think has created the foundation that all of our subsequent work has been organized around.

That needs-assessment work was pivotal and involved an incredible amount of time and energy spent traveling the state and listening to Kansans. So we are really proud of the input that communities across the state provided in a variety of different formats. That needs-assessment work provided the foundation upon which we work to craft our five-year strategic plan for early childhood. That strategic plan was presented to our Kansas Children's Cabinet at our February 2020 meeting. Then a month later, we all found ourselves in shutdown mode due to the declaration of a global pandemic.

So everything we have done since the work of our PDG planning year has been done with a connection to the needs assessment and strategic plan that were done in 2019 with our PDG fund, everything. So whenever we have meetings to collaborate and try and figure out the approach for pandemic relief programs, our team will refer back to the strategic plan and anchor recommendation for special use of pandemic funds to how that relates back to the strategic plan and the vision we have for early childhood in Kansas.

Mandy Reeve:

Thanks so much, Melissa. That was an excellent overview, and it's so encouraging to hear what an impact the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five has had on studying the foundation for the work in Kansas.

So let's dig a little deeper into that needs assessment process. Why was collecting qualitative parent community and cultural voices a priority? Why was that such a large part of your process in Kansas?

Melissa Rooker:

That's a great question that really at heart is anchored in the idea that we as state agencies didn't want to be making decisions that involve doing things to people. We wanted parent voice to be elevated. We wanted parent choice to be at the heart of our work. That is a principle that has guided our work for a very long time and we wanted to elevate that. It's really important for us to understand whether what we were proposing and the assumptions that those proposals were based on would actually be helpful to the people that we were hoping to reach. So it was critical to take feedback.

One of the things that I think we were super proud of is Kansas has 105 counties. We were able to document that we received input from every single one of those counties, so that we captured the experience of people in the urban core and in suburban Kansas City and mid-sized cities and small towns and frontier rural settings. So every form of population density was reflected and the experiences of the people incorporated into the planning that went on, and it was really important for us to build buy-in to the ideas being proposed. I think all of that listening and visioning done out in communities was instrumental in ensuring that our plan, our five-year strategic plan was embraced.

Sara Gardner:

Mandy, this is Sara. So one of the strengths of Kansas is the vast array of community champions who support children and families at a local level. So while the state newly received the systems building grant in 2019, we wanted to really acknowledge that a lot of the ideas and the idea generation had already been in place, or we wanted to build on that as well.

So it wasn't just individual parents and caregivers. Obviously, that's really, really critical, but the people who were serving them for years and years prior to us receiving the systems building grant. It

was as important to hear from them because they had the record of doing the great work on the ground, and we wanted to meet somewhere in the middle so that not everything is top down, but the state plays a role in supporting communities to do the work that best meets the needs of their families.

Kansas, believe it or not, is quite a diverse state. Melissa mentioned the 105 counties, and each of those counties looks a little bit different. They have different things that they're proud of. They have different strengths, and it was really critical for us to build not only a needs assessment, but then a strategic plan that acknowledged and honored and built from those individual unique strengths of each of our communities.

Mandy Reeve:

It's wonderful that you were able to capture voices from all 105 counties in Kansas. I know that it can often be difficult to reach some families and communities, so that is an incredible effort.

Were there any innovations in the way that you involved communities in the needs assessment process? Any activities and engagement strategies that were different from the traditional engagement process as we often think of?

Melissa Rooker:

Yes. This is Melissa. I would say the biggest innovation was Our Tomorrows. That is a story-gathering tool that was created to be able to take input online from ordinary Kansan. They didn't have to run a program or be receiving services. It's just an open portal for people to share their stories. When we started in 2019, the prompt on Our Tomorrows was tell us about a time that your family was thriving or just barely surviving, raising your kids in Kansas.

So a very broad prompt that allowed people to craft the narrative, whatever they felt comfortable sharing: a particular example, an overall feeling, however they wanted to describe their experience is at the heart of this. Then there's probably 10 minutes worth of prompts that are designed for people to then begin to make sense of their story for us. There are different questions based on...we had triads where they would click on the triad to indicate what had the most effect on the experience they shared.

So the choices for a given question might be, where did you find that you had the most support? It might be friends and family. It might be government services. It might be either I didn't get support or other sources. So they were generalized questions, but they could allow to help us detect trends, and for every region where we could gather at least 100 stories, we could then offer what was called a sense-making session, which was back in the days when in-person convenings were free and easy to set up, we were able to go into communities and analyze with community participants the trends that emerge from the stories in their particular community. So it might be a town. It might be a type of provider network. It might be, there were different groups that could be considered stakeholder groups that had the 100-story threshold, but we did these sense-making sessions.

And out of that, the goal was to generate ideas within the community that came from the ground up, ways that they saw that they might change the nature of the stories coming from their community, and we were able to use PDG funds to provide mini grants to catalyze those ideas. So these were small dollar amounts, talking an average of \$2,000 grants to do little things. But we began to see really nice return on that investment of time, analyzing with communities and the ability to do little projects that came out of that analysis.

And then we were able to turn that into, Our Tomorrows 2.0 became a response to the pandemic. So we changed the prompt in March of 2020, and we made it more time-sensitive. I think the

prompt was tell us about something that impacted your family in the prior week. So we weren't saying specifically how is COVID having an impact on your family, but the timeframe and the generality of the question really helped us understand how families were experiencing the pandemic firsthand and in real time. Out of that, we were able to really deploy the trends that we saw to help our agency partners with the crisis response that was going on.

So it wasn't just for PDG purposes, but it really helped inform the work going on across multiple state agencies in partnership with us to help analyze and determine what might be needed. So there was a COVID outbreak inside our correction system, and we shared feedback with the Department of Corrections about the experience families were having, as they worried about loved ones that were incarcerated. So that's just one example of the ways that Our Tomorrows leveraged to provide some pretty in-the-moment analysis and feedback that has helped the process, and I know it's really had some broader implications.

Sarah, maybe you want to weigh in and share some of those.

Sara Gardner:

Yeah. I think it has helped build a culture of everybody can participate in developing solutions, that it isn't a one-way dialogue where families share their thoughts and ideas, and then they go live in some kind of idea generation tank and solution tank that comes back to them. So it really facilitates what I think is community members feeling really accountable and responsible to their own, to their neighbors, to their friends, to their families, and it does it in a way that also allows us to put some dollars behind it, as Melissa referenced for those small mini grants that have shown to those who were sharing their stories that we're listening to you. And we want you to be a part of the solution, what do you think you can do, what would you like to try, and here's some support to make that happen.

I think the other thing that's really the takeaway from the Our Tomorrows is that none of us are simple creatures. Humans are complex and on any given day, our answers change. Traditional survey and engagement methods, they certainly have a place. We certainly use them when we gather data for our needs assessment. But the Our Tomorrows allows people to engage at the level that is meaningful to them, and it really allows the nuances that their experience entails to come through.

So the example Melissa gave about the triad. Where did you get support for your story? It's very rare that someone says, "All my support came from one place." So I wouldn't just say friends and family. I wouldn't just say my local community. I would say somewhere in the middle, and the triad is set up to allow people to share that nuance and that really is I think the beauty of Our Tomorrows is that it's not simple responses with simple solutions, but it allows us to dive deeper into the complexities that make up our communities and then give that back to members of a community to help provide those solutions.

So it's been a really exciting project, and it's really helped I think set the stage for the kinds of ways that we build solutions for kids and families here in Kansas.

Melissa Rooker:

Well, and Sarah, to build on that, we have also leveraged certain other forms of communication during the pandemic, and it's really all driven by our PDG work. We have been holding a biweekly webinar live on Wednesdays at noon every other week since the beginning of 2019 when we landed our planning grant. During the pandemic, we have had certain moments where we just turned it into a listening session. So instead of us having a formal presentation or guest that come to do a presentation with Q and A, I mean, there's always been a limited amount of interaction on those webinars. Then they're recorded for posterity, so people who can't join live can see them.

But we held a listening session the week Kansas shut down schools and the pandemic really hit home. We went from, we average 50 to 80 people on a given webinar. We had over 500 at our pandemic listening session. Again, it was an opportunity to listen to lived experience and understand what it was people were grappling with, and we've tried to incorporate that kind of opportunity into our work. Last spring we did over 400 one-on-one interviews with childcare providers to, again, map out what their experience with our system involves and where they're encountering barriers and obstacles to providing the level of care that they were hoping to be able to provide.

So those types of interactions, I don't think had been done to great extent before, and certainly being powered by PDG funding has given us the flexibility to be responsive in the moment.

Mandy Reeve:

Thanks so much for sharing all those amazing innovations that PDG B-5 has allowed you to do. It really sounds like you took the mission and vision for community engagement to heart and went all the way with it. I hope that other folks are able to learn from the innovations that you shared.

So on that note, do you have any words of advice or wisdom that you'd like to share with others who may want to replicate this work or engage their communities in a similar way? What was the most valuable thing you've learned during the process?

Melissa Rooker:

This is Melissa. I think I rely on training that I received in my prior role as a state legislator. When I was first elected, the Kansas Leadership Center invited us in for leadership development. There are certain lessons that I took away from that and have applied routinely in this work.

I think the most important one is remembering that we, as much as we would like to bring a technical solution that will say, "Okay, we have this amount of money and we're going to start this particular program and it will make everything all better," life doesn't work that way, and this is a constant iterative process where we have to be willing to be very flexible and very open to feedback that changes our course trajectory and that flexibility, that willingness to adapt and overcome challenges and be open to a different way of solving problems, that has served us well.

And I think the collaborative nature of our PDG work in Kansas, I hope that never changes or goes away even when the grant timeline wraps up. I think we have benefited so much from having the connection of PDG and the growth and development of the relationships between directors at the various state agencies, and I think that is something that should inform the work. From this day forward, that's my hope for our system is that we maintain those close collaborative ties.

Sara Gardner:

Mandy, this is Sara. I'll add to what Melissa is saying just briefly, and just note the need for ongoing dialogue. She noted the adaptive challenges, the adaptive times really that we live in and that people really engage on their own timeline. So asking a question once is not going to be the approach that we want to take. I think it's just continuing to figure out how do we engage with communities and with stakeholders on a routine basis so that it isn't a blip that we are asking for something and then going back and creating solutions, but that we're having routine opportunities for people to tell us their needs, to tell us their stories, to tell us their ideas. Because we know that they're in a different spot perhaps than decision makers are at, and it's really critical to hold the space for people to be able to engage when and where and how they can actually engage.

So at the beginning of the conversation, Melissa kind of went down the rundown of all the different ways that we heard from Kansans, over 6,100 Kansans to be more specific during our needs assessment. We looked at all of those different ways because we know that people need different opportunities to engage. So that would be my, I think my big takeaway and something we're continuing to infuse into the work we're doing now to strengthen the early childhood system.

Melissa Rooker:

I would just also add that, this is Melissa, that sharing back with people the progress we've made and the bright spots that we have encountered along the way has been critical as well. Helping people see that there are workable solutions and innovation happening in areas where challenges were great, but the community rose up and crafted a path forward, those opportunities to highlight those good things that are happening are really key to helping people see that it's possible to think differently and grow and change and develop new solutions to problems.

And I think that's played out in the sub grants that we've been able to give with our PDG funding to community-driven projects. It's been really fun to be able to point to different activities happening that can be used as prototypes for other programs that are developing along the way. So that's to me been one of the most important things we do is learn from the work that we're doing along the way and share what we're learning back with the field.

Mandy Reeve:

Well, those were some great nuggets of advice to share back with the field, to ask questions more than once, to be adaptable and flexible. Hopefully, those will stay with folks after they've listened to our conversation.

So this has been a great and wonderful look into the valuable work that you and your great team and others have been doing in Kansas to support children and families. Melissa and Sara, thank you so much again for sharing your time and your knowledge with us.

Melissa Rooker:

Appreciated the opportunity. Thanks for having us.

Sara Gardner:

Thanks, Mandy. We appreciate it.

Narrator:

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