

Region 3 Podcast

Guests: Kris Meyers and Catie Sumner

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 Laura Kassner takes us to Virginia where a unique regional approach to early care and education systems building is strengthening provider relationships and driving improvements in access, quality and family engagement. That's right now, on Early Childhood Policy Matters.

Laura Kassner:

Hello and welcome to Early Childhood Policy Matters. I'm Laura Kassner, Senior Education Researcher and Technical Assistance Provider with SRI Education. Today, I'm very excited to be joined by two incredible early childhood leaders from Virginia, my home state. First, we have Kris Meyers, Associate Director of Quality Measurement and Improvement with the Virginia Department of Education. Welcome Kris.

Kris Meyers:

Hi, Laura. Glad to be here.

Laura Kassner:

Thanks so much for joining us. And also with her is Catie Sumner, the Preschool Development Grant Coordinator with the United Way of Roanoke Valley. Catie, thanks for taking time to talk with us today.

Catie Sumner:

I'm really happy to be here. Thank you.

Laura Kassner:

Wonderful. So ladies, to start, could you talk a little bit about the Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five and specifically how it enabled Virginia to innovate in the early childhood care and education systems building, in ways that you would not have been able to do otherwise?

Kris Meyers:

Sure. So when we first got our Preschool Development Grant, we took a lot of time to look at what we were already doing in Virginia at the local level, at the regional level, at the state level. And what we identified is there were a lot of good things happening in pockets and part of the state, but there wasn't really a unified approach to how we were doing that. And so we really tried to think about how could we start to build a more unified approach, starting with the benefit of having these local networks to really help inform that work, give us that feedback, get some data so that we could make decisions based on what was really happening in Virginia. And it just allowed us to set that initial infrastructure and throughout the three years of the PDG grant, we've been able to build and expand our PDG networks, which has ultimately led to this great new development of our Ready Regions that I know we'll talk a little bit more about today.

Laura Kassner:

Can you talk Kris, maybe a little bit higher of a level up, about what is it that you're asking these regions to do? So an entity such as the United Way says, "We are willing to be the coordinating partner in our area." What are the expectations that come along with that?

Kris Meyers:

Yeah, so there are really four main key assurance areas that we are tasking our Ready Regions with, and that is building relationships. And that includes building relationships with all of the publicly funded types of Birth to Five programs and partners that work within their region. So everything from family day home providers to school divisions, Head Start and any community partners that work with those programs. So building relationships is that first area.

Strengthening quality is the second big area. That relates to our quality improvement initiatives, our new unified measurement system, which really focuses in on the quality of interactions and curriculum using the class tool. So a lot of their work is around helping make sure that these local class observations and curriculum information is getting entered into our data system so that we can use it to target improvements.

So the third area that we task them with, is increasing access, because we know it's one thing to have quality programs, but if they aren't available to families, then that's not helpful. So under increasing access, one of the main areas that they're working on is coordinated enrollment and really looking at how do families find their child care options? How do they get enrolled in child care options and how can we do that in a more streamlined way? Which is something that our partners at the United Way of Roanoke Valley there in their Ready Region West, have worked a lot on.

And then the fourth area is family engagement. And so our regions are doing a lot of self-assessment within their regions, pulling together different partners and family voices to hear from the field about what are their needs related to a variety of topics. And they're in the process of forming family councils. And that will really help us get a voice of both again, from that state to that regional level and down to the local level. So four areas that they're working on, building relationships, strengthening quality, increasing access and family engagement.

Laura Kassner:

That's quite a comprehensive approach. So Catie, you work for one of these and coordinate one of these local or regional networks. Can you tell me a little bit about the responsibilities that you all have as a regional hub?

Catie Sumner:

Sure. I would say we act kind of like a connector, right? We're able to support sites with the boots on the ground work. Many of our site leaders have a lot on their plate, need guidance and support in completing the tasks. And so with the relationships that we've built locally, we're able to give them that technical assistance to some degree. Some need technology assistance, some need introductions to this information that's at the state level, that they have a harder time being able to access or understand. And some just need those reminders and gentle nudges to help them complete some of those tasks.

Laura Kassner:

That's right. So having relationships there and being able to provide that technical assistance to local providers is probably very impactful. So can you walk me through the rationale for taking the regional

approach to systems building, as opposed to state level working directly with individual providers? Can you talk about this middle infrastructure and the advantages of that?

Kris Meyers:

Yeah, so Virginia's had a pretty long history of working more at a local level decision making type of approach. And so a lot of our early childhood work that has happened has been done at the local community level. Obviously, we've had some need, as all states do, to really think about where are we going as a state? What are our statewide needs? And so between the difference of what's happening locally and what do we need at the state, we realized that this local network we had that was both these PDG networks, we had these local SMART beginnings communities, they weren't touching every part of the state. And so what we were offering and while we felt like and we were seeing in the data that it was making a great impact and we were seeing these communities come together, it was only available still in about 80 or so percent of the state. And so to really get to a full statewide coverage, we knew we needed some kind of an approach that made sure we reached every corner of Virginia.

We also, we could have done this in a way that had a bunch of small local networks. And I think we thought about that, but then really realized too, that to a certain degree, when you're communicating from a state down, if you have too many small local networks that that might be complicated as well. So we fell into this kind of looking at a regional approach so that we'd have a way to touch every corner of Virginia, but still have a really consistent way that we could get communications out into the field, but meet those regional needs. So we have nine regional networks now that have developed from 17 PDG communities into these nine regions that also touch the areas that were not covered in our previous PDG networks.

Laura Kassner:

And so I'm curious, how are you moving from thinking about this as a PDG B-5 effort to having this be a Virginia effort that everyone can get behind?

Kris Meyers:

So last fall, so fall of 2021, we announced that we were going to be shifting to this regional approach. And so there was actually a competitive process that the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation led. And so they put out the application process and explained what was needed for these Ready Regions. And it was open to any of our partners who wanted to apply.

And so through that application process, we identified these nine Ready Region lead agencies. Announced that, I believe in January, to start the year. And they had a six month ramp up period. And so from January to July, they were given some planning time while also trying to do their PDG local work, because many of them were still those same PDG local community partners, but really trying to get that infrastructure in place and do some planning and preparation while both the Department of Ed and the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation gave them technical assistance. And then starting July 1 was when they officially took over the coordination of these activities. So I'm sure Catie can talk more about what that felt like on the local level, but from a state perspective, that's how we helped with that transition.

Laura Kassner:

Catie, is there anything you want to add about the local perspective on that?

Catie Sumner:

Yes, there is. I would say it really allowed us to hire the right people. So that transition gave us time to find the people that fit in each of these roles to be able to help us move forward with Ready Regions, because there was more added pieces to Ready Regions. And as we expanded into some of those rural areas, it allowed us to put the right people in the spots to make sure those things were completed.

Laura Kassner:

That's fantastic. Catie, what kind of improvements have you seen in the Roanoke Valley from the start of the PDG B-5 funding until now?

Catie Sumner:

Yeah, I think at the local level, the PDG funds allowed us to build our team out a little bit more to support child care sites with those tasks and those pieces that come with the PDG grant. And we always say, "Which human will do that job?" And this has allowed us to find the humans to help us with this job and increase the quality in those sites in that way.

Laura Kassner:

That's fantastic. Catie, can you give us a little bit more insight into what, for example, increasing access looks like? So you mentioned the relationship aspect and being there for providers, getting to know them, supporting their needs. And certainly the CLASS observations are part of that quality improvement. But how about this idea of increasing access? What are your strategies at a local level for doing that?

Catie Sumner:

So I know we've said it many times, but the relationship piece is so key. So a few years ago, even before I was with United Way, they were gathering the groups, those key players like Head Start, VPI, some key child care providers in the area, to have these conversations about a single point of entry, that coordinated enrollment. But that's tough, right? Everyone's doing it differently. Everyone has a different approach to that enrollment piece. So it took United Way as that connector piece to say, "Hey, this is going to benefit families. This is going to be the greater good of our region to work together to form this." But it took trust from those key players to be able to move forward in the coordinated enrollment and make that work. And we still have work in front of us to engage private providers and family day homes that aren't using the system quite as much, because of how does it benefit them and how does it benefit their site? So we're still working to include as many partners as we can in that work.

Kris Meyers:

Laura, can I share one example that I know Catie had shared with me a while back about the work that they had done that I thought was so interesting is, it's something even as simple as at one of their early meetings, they just had people bring their applications and they just helped bring them together and helped point out, what do we have that's the same on all of our applications and what's different? And what would we be willing to say, maybe that's not as important, what do we feel is really important to keep? And they just step by step along the way, kept involving these local partners. And they built this joint application together that everybody could come together on. And like they said, it's still a work in progress, but the way they had that two way communication, I've just found really fascinating along the way, how much they've involved voices, but they've been that leader to make sure that those conversations are happening and the work keeps moving forward.

Laura Kassner:

It makes me think about from the parent perspective, as opposed to me needing to approach three and four providers and fill out an application three and four times that if there's a common application for all the providers in my region, I can fill that out one time and hopefully be connected with places that have vacancies that might meet my needs and preferences. I think that's a fantastic approach.

It sounds like these local networks are really a neutral third party that helps to your point, Catie you use the word connect, to connect and help to facilitate. As you were mentioning Kris, these conversations that will hopefully lead to less competition over kids, "Come to our center, come to our home, come to our school-based program." And instead, really think about how can we make sure that every child is covered in a way that when we coordinate and make sure that we're not competing over the same kids and families. That all sounds really wonderful.

So in addition to achieving this incredible goal now of having 100% coverage of all the communities in geography of Virginia, through the PDG B-5 efforts, what other impacts have you seen through building a state system of local networks that are focused on serving kids and families?

Kris Meyers:

From the state perspective, I think one of the biggest benefits has been just the multitude of data that we now have across all of our types of settings, Birth to Five. So Virginia's been fairly data driven in the past, but we tended to only have data on our school-based pre-K, to some degree, some Head Start data or some data that was fairly limited on our voluntary QRIS participation sites, but that was at most up to 25% of the population of sites. So we were missing a lot of data on sites and the data that was being collected was being collected in silos. And so different groups were using data to make decision, but we were not doing it in a unified way.

And so through the PDG grant, the other big thing we did was build this Link B-5 data portal system, where all of our site profiles and classroom information gets entered and our quality information gets entered. And we just have such a better view already, even though we haven't gotten to every site yet, but just way more information about the quality of interactions and curriculum and what's happening in these classrooms. And we are already starting to use that data to say, "Here are the sites that need support the most." And then we can say to the regions, "Here are the sites that need support the most. How can you help us connect them to these great improvement partners that we have in the state who can give them that support?" So this just wealth of data that we have and a much more unified approach to using the data has been a huge benefit.

Laura Kassner:

Yeah, so it sounds like the state's rationale for collecting this data is not for the sake of just to have the data or to have a good programs versus bad. High quality, low quality, and publish it and let parents decide. It sounds to me like you're taking an incremental and supportive approach to making sure that all kids have access to quality programs by improving the quality of each of those sites. Catie, did you have some more insight on that?

Catie Sumner:

Yes. At a local level, what we see is that our region expands and so we begin with funds that only reach our city or our urban areas. And we're able to now reach out to some of our rural areas, which I would assume a lot of the regions have that, right? We have that city space and then the rural areas that may not have been touched by a lot of these funds. And so what we have seen is we've been able to then build some more relationships out in those areas and touch sites and be able to get more quality into

sites that maybe have not gotten to benefit from that. And I think that's the piece that we have seen as our region has grown, is been able to reach those places.

Laura Kassner:

Kris, was there something else you wanted to add earlier?

Kris Meyers:

Yeah. So I was just going to add to that when you were talking about the focus on quality and not just pointing out which sites are good or bad, because really when we talk about our approach, we actually very consciously use the word measurement versus rating, a unified measurement approach, because this isn't your typical marketing type of QRIS strategy. We are really trying to get every publicly funded program the support that they need so that they can offer a quality program. And so that ultimately no matter what program a family would choose, they're going to find a quality option in Virginia. And so we are working really hard and we have already started this summer by taking that data and saying, "It's not just who wants support the most it's who needs support the most." And we're going to prioritize those publicly funded programs based on their results from these measurements to say, "These are the programs that need support the most. And we're going to make sure that we give them those supports."

One example is our curriculum piece too. We found a big discrepancy between programs that already had access to quality curriculum and those that did not. And so we were able to take that data from the field, from these local PDG communities around the state and say, "Let's target these curriculum funds specifically to the centers and family childcare homes and a few public schools, but for the most part, centers and family child care homes, that need this approved curriculum." And so it was very a quick turnaround by having this data to take it and make it a decision on how we can better target our curriculum improvement dollars.

Laura Kassner:

Yeah, that's a great point because often the squeaky wheel, the people who ask for help are not always the ones who need it the most. And so I think there's probably a real equity component around looking at those perhaps that are not aware or don't know or don't have the kind of infrastructure perhaps that a school system or a daycare center might have to have a one off a teacher, a director of a small place to be able to outreach and support them too. That's really important.

So what advice might you all have for other states that have interest in implementing the same model of developing local or regional networks?

Kris Meyers:

That's a great question. The main place to start would be to look at what's already in place. And so don't try to start with something completely new. Look where things are working, what is working about that, involve those local voices, make sure to involve the voices of areas that may not be as involved that's harder to do, but making sure that you're trying to find out if you've been offering things in the past, but you've certain areas or certain types of partners that haven't been involved. Why is that? And so trying to get as much input from the field about what is, and what isn't working.

And then just, I think being really clear about the goals and so having the leadership that we've had at our state level about really the vision of what this unified approach could be. And this is part of a larger effort to consolidate state agencies at the Department of Education from moving some of the services from Department of Social Services over to Department of Education. And what that really has done is given us a bigger vision that if we can have a unified vision at the state, what does that mean to

have a unified vision at that local and regional level? And so really being clear about sharing that vision to help everybody understand, why is this important? It's important in your local community like in Roanoke, but it's also important in every corner of the state in Virginia and it's important for all of our Virginia children and families.

Laura Kassner:

Catie, how about advice on implementing as a local partner if other states are interested in replicating this approach of regional networks?

Catie Sumner:

Yeah, absolutely. And I know I've said this a lot today, but I cannot talk enough about how strong relationships are so important. The reason we have been pretty successful in our area, is years long relationships that started just looking at Virginia Quality and how we were bringing sites on board to Virginia Quality and moving them along through PDG and now Ready Regions. We've gained that trust with so many of these partners to be able to then move forward with them and help them to move forward, support them. Because as we've said, there is some fear behind change. So to have that strong relationship has helped them to move forward along with us.

Laura Kassner:

Yes. So taking the time to build relationships sounds incredibly important. Building on what already exists versus starting new and then sharing this common vision that folks can get behind. That's fantastic advice.

So Kris and Catie, if folks wanted to learn more about the Ready Regions approach that Virginia's taking, where could they learn more about this?

Kris Meyers:

So a pretty simple website to go to that our Virginia Early Childhood Foundation partners help host is readyregions.org. On that Ready Regions website you'll find a lot about the role and responsibilities of Ready Regions. There's also a great map. Catie is with Ready Regions West. So if you want to learn more specifically about that region, you can click on the map and find that information there.

Laura Kassner:

Fantastic. We'll be able to connect faces to names and regions to stories. So it's so obvious that you all have created and implemented an intentional plan to serve all of Virginia's families and children with high-quality services. This has been a fantastic conversation and a really valuable look into what's happening on your teams and what so many others across the Commonwealth of Virginia are doing for families. So I want to thank you both Kris and Catie. Thank you for your time and thank you for your really important work on behalf of Virginia children and families. It's been lovely talking with you.

Kris Meyers:

Thank you, Laura. We really appreciate all the support from the Preschool Development Grant as well.

Catie Sumner:

Thanks for your time. I appreciate it.

Narrator:

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