

Region 6 Episode

Devon Camarota, Lizzie Cosse, Kanedra Brooks, and Kim Jones

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 B-5 initiative. Host, Laura Kassner, takes us to Louisiana where a successful pilot program is offering individualized guidance and support to a growing number of families across the state. 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 International. This morning, we have with us Devon Camarota, education program consultant for the Louisiana Department of Education.

Devon Camarota:

Good morning, Laura. Thank you for having me.

Laura Kassner:

Oh, sure. So glad you could be with us. We also have her colleague Lizzie Cosse, who is the director of access strategy at LDOE.

Lizzie Cosse:

Thank you for having us.

Laura Kassner:

And then two EC Guides or Early Childhood Guides, coming from the East Baton Rouge Parish, Kanedra Brooks.

Kanedra Brooks:

Thank you, Laura, for having me here.

Laura Kassner:

And we also have Kim Jones, early childhood guide from Jefferson Parish.

Kim Jones:

Good morning, Laura. Great to be here.

Laura Kassner:

So as we joined together today, we want to talk a bit about your Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five efforts, and what this grant over the course of the last few years has enabled you as a state to accomplish. So would you talk a little bit about how the PDG B-5 grant has enabled Louisiana to support

their regional early childhood care and education networks in new and innovative ways beyond what you had done before?

Lizzie Cosse:

Prior to receiving the preschool development grant, we had already established early childhood community networks in all corners of the state who are responsible for a number of things, including coordinating enrollment, coordinating local class observations for the QRIS System, bringing program partners together from childcare, Head Start, and public school-based pre-K. So they already were in motion and reaching families and reaching children and the preschool development grant gave us a great launching point to accelerate some of that work in networks that were ready for it, including this innovative, exciting pilot that we've been able to do known as the Early Childhood Guides, our EC Guides for short. So a number of networks have been able to raise their hand and say, "We're interested in reaching even more families than we currently are, how can we do this?" And that's how the EC Guides pilot formed and got launched. And we're so thankful that the preschool development grant gave us the opportunity.

Laura Kassner:

That's wonderful. Sounds like it was able to catalyze innovation in a way that took Louisiana beyond what was already established, which is really exciting. Can you tell us a bit about how this EC Guides pilot program innovation reached more eligible families to support a mixed delivery system and the role of parent choice in that mix?

Devon Camarota:

So thank you so much for asking that question. I think that the origin or the catalyst for EC Guides was because folks at the department and folks in the community networks knew that there were families in Louisiana who were not yet being reached by enrollment efforts and something needed to change with an in-person person who was able to reach families where they were, bridge any access or technology or language or literacy barriers that may have existed for those families that prevented them from being able to complete the enrollment process, whether it was for the coordinated enrollment at the community level or the childcare assistance program, which we call CCAP.

But we knew that families were not being reached. And we knew that an in-person body to go out to families, whether it was in their home, whether it was at the childcare center, whether it was community events, these people are there to reach out a hand and extend a hand and say, here, this is how we can get your child the care and love and support and education that they need.

Laura Kassner:

That's wonderful. So maybe even taking a step back. So the EC Guides, as I understand it is a program with a live person who reaches out to families to help connect them to programs for which they may be eligible. And so is there a particular age range that you're targeting with this program?

Devon Camarota:

So any child under the age of 13 or 18 or younger, if they are a child with special needs or a developmental disability, is eligible for that CCAP or childcare assistance program. There are other focuses that the EC Guides are targeting because we know that children aged birth to three in Louisiana and really across the nation are the most underserved, yet we know that 90% of brain development happens for those ages. So the EC Guides are really truly targeting families with children of that age,

because they're also the families who are probably new parents who may not know what is needed to get their child into care or what is needed to get their child ready for being in school, if they're about to enter kindergarten. So the EC Guides are really focusing on any family who needs that extended hand. However, there are... Louisiana has a vested interest in targeting those youngest learners, because we know if we can reach children early, it supports the school's experience for that child from kinder to 12 and beyond.

Lizzie Cosse:

In Louisiana, we're really driven by data. And when we look at the numbers of children that we're serving through our unduplicated child count, we realize we're doing pretty well when it comes to four-year-olds who are in economically disadvantaged households. We're serving approximately 90% or more of those children in a publicly funded seat. But as we go younger and younger, I believe for three-year-olds, it's around 33%. You get to twos, ones, and infants, it just lower and lower. So we recognized that that was a significant gap of service, which is why we place so much emphasis on birth to three seats in the EC Guides program. And we really asked our guides to prioritize serving those families if possible.

Devon Camarota:

And Lizzie, that's a great segue, I think some data just for contextualizing the incredible work that the guides have done. In the first year, our guides certified 738 cases from the five networks. For this year, and this count starts from July 2021, there have been 878 cases certified. So that's 878 families touched. 1,380 children certified in those cases. So that number is higher because there might be siblings. There might be many, many siblings in one family. And then of those 1,380 children, 986 of those are birth to three year old children. So you can see the vast majority of the children being served by EC Guides are in that underserved pool that Lizzie was talking about. And just, I mean, there are six people now, seven because Jefferson brought in a second guide, but between those seven people, 1,380 children are now in high-quality care, which is truly incredible. And that number's only going to continue to increase. I think that's pretty amazing.

Laura Kassner:

That's wonderful. So with the support of the PDG B-5 grant, my understanding is that this pilot program of the EC Guides is happening across six of Louisiana's regional networks. How is this working mechanically? Who's employing these folks? What are the qualifications of people serving as guides? And can you tell me a bit more about how they connect to families?

Lizzie Cosse:

Sure. So at this point in time, the Louisiana Department of Education has contracts with each of these six entities. Just for a little context, five of them are school systems. One of them is a nonprofit. Each of them serves as a community network. So we already have relationships with these leaders and connections with them and the work that they're doing. So we have a contract with each of them, and then they in turn, that entity that we contract with, has the autonomy to hire the person or persons, because some networks have more than one EC guide, that they think is most qualified to do this work. Although we did from the start kind of lay some qualifications that the department thinks would be most crucial to do this work and to do it successfully.

So this needs to be someone who is a people person, who can interact well with families, who's approachable, friendly, but who also can have attention to detail because they're helping them with CCAP applications, but we leave it up to those community networks to decide who they would like to

hire. So that is the mechanism of how it works through this contract. But I will say, we also work very closely in partnership with each of these EC Guides; the state and the EC Guides are in contact biweekly at a minimum, if not more.

Laura Kassner:

That's fantastic. Well, and it sounds like both these two parishes, East Baton Rouge and Jefferson, made some fantastic hires in Kim and Kanedra too. So ladies, would you tell me a bit about how you connect with families? How do you set about from walking into your office in the morning and thinking about my goal is to reach and connect with new folks. What are your approaches? What's worked for you?

Kim Jones:

Kim here in Jefferson. My supervisor here in Jefferson, she is really big on professional development. So her goal is to put these children in high-quality centers. So that's why she has us, myself and my new bilingual guide, we are certified to be class observers. Pre-K infant and toddler. That way we are familiar with all the centers. We know which ones are the high-quality centers, so we can place these children in the high-quality settings that they deserve. Also, reaching families, I would say that what has worked best for me here in Jefferson is to build the relationships with the providers. Most of my cases come from provider referrals. I'm reaching out to the centers on a daily basis.

I look back on all of my data at the end of each month and I realize, okay, look, these few centers haven't reached out to me. So I reach out to them and say, Hey, just letting you know, I am here, and I send them my flyer. If any updates need to be given to them as far as any income increases, or any qualifications that may have changed, I just have a really great relationship with my providers and that's how I'm primarily reaching my families. We also have a flyer that we put out at all the WIC centers, the food bank centers, health departments, anywhere where low income families may frequent.

Laura Kassner:

Those all sound like really great strategies that are yielding lots of connections. That's fantastic, Kim. Kanedra, how about you? How are you approaching your work in trying to connect families to services?

Kanedra Brooks:

Yeah. So we have some of the similar strategies that we use. And I'd also like to say that I get a lot of my referrals from the providers as well. I also created, recently since I moved into this position, I have created a Google doc and it's almost like a questionnaire. And so I put it on our website that we have, for when parents like right now enrollment period is up. And so I have parents... A lot of parents are going to that website and they're registering their children for pre-K. And so they also see my Google questionnaire. And so if they see that, they're like, oh, I can get assistance here. And they answer those few questions that I have. And then they get in my line of contact and then I can follow up with those parents, but definitely the providers by word of mouth, they send those clients to me and they call and they say, Hey, I have a parent who really needs this assistance, can you follow up with them?

And so definitely a lot of referrals and then by word of mouth. When one person gets that assistance, they're telling their friends, they're telling their family members. And so this is how I connect with my families.

Laura Kassner:

That sounds wonderful. It seems to me like it serves not only families, but also local business owners who run these centers too, that you're supporting them to help families navigate the necessary channels to receive services.

Lizzie Cosse:

Yeah. I think that's a byproduct that we didn't necessarily anticipate before this started, but child care directors are pulled in so many different directions and we want them to be focusing on their business, focusing on being a leader in education. And so the fact that they can turn to the EC Guide to help their families, and that's one more load that's taken off of their plate.

Kim Jones:

I agree. Our providers are so grateful for what we've done here. They have spent so much time helping each individual family with applications and we've provided a person that could come in and help them navigate this whole process and tell each family exactly what's needed to be approved and go step by step from start to approval. Give them their time and attendance number and just provide so much support for them, not only the families, but specifically to providers. It takes a lot of workload from them.

Laura Kassner:

That's fantastic. So it supports, again, that mixed delivery system in the sense of not just public child care and the ways we conceptualize thinking about slotting kids into public pre-K or wherever the public slots are, but also thinking about publicly funded and publicly supported slots in private centers as well. So that sounds like, again, a win all the way around. So tell me a bit about how this is working for families. Do you have stories about families that you've helped and connect with over time that you could share as a testimonial of sorts to the way that this has worked?

Kanedra Brooks:

Yes. I recently had a client, she had been trying to get child care assistance for a while and she's a single parent and she has three children. And so she had been struggling and my heart goes out to them a lot of the times because I... Not that I understand it per se, but I definitely understand their emotions and their feelings. And so when she came to me, she was like, I've been denied like three times and so I want to know if you can help me this time. And I know that they increased the amount for parents, the eligibility amounts, which was really great. And so when I calculated her income and she was eligible, she was just like, "Oh my God, I'm so grateful."

And then some people really, they cry. They're like, oh my God, I've got this assistance. And so it's a really good thing. And I'm glad to be in that moment with that parent and share that with them.

Kim Jones:

I agree. I've had many families that have applied multiple times, and I think what we provide is individualized support for each of their specific cases, whether they're actively seeking employment, self-employed or they are working full time or a full-time student. So we know the specific documents that they need. And each case is very, very specific. CCAP is a federal and state program. So it's very, very tough on the guidelines, what needs to be submitted. And the average person will not know exactly what needs to be submitted. So we're there to provide that support, that way that we're not wasting

their time. They know exactly what they need to be approved. So it's individualized support that we offer.

Laura Kassner:

Absolutely. And I think about the impact of this, not only on the individual family, which cannot be overstated, right? To be a listener and a connector in a time of real challenge. The pandemic has certainly been challenging for every family, not to mention just families that are particularly struggling to find care, but to think about that at the individual level, and then to think about the ripple impact in the community. So that child is now getting high-quality care, which impacts brain development and their lifelong trajectory in school and in life. And then you also are stabilizing a pretty fragile workforce by being able to fill seats in child care settings that may be at risk of closing, if not for finding clients. And so I see this as just being such a great system support beyond just serving individual families, which I think is incredibly powerful. I love the unintended consequences perhaps of how this has worked out, that it supported families as well as the system, as a whole.

Devon Camarota:

Definitely. Laura, I want to just jump in too and say that not only is it stabilizing the workforce for the child care centers, but it's stabilizing the general workforce of Louisiana, because one of the requirements is for families to either be working or actively seeking employment so that they can be stable for their family and be able to provide the financial stability that their children need in order to live and grow and be in a stable household. But it's also helping Louisiana's economy by keeping people in the workforce because they're able to go out and not have to worry about who's going to watch their children because they have a safe and stable place to put them. And so it's truly every single person in this state is touched by this work, whether they're a colleague of a family member who applied for CCAP, an employer of a person who applied for CCAP or the actual centers where the children are attending.

Lizzie Cosse:

And I will say, I believe in Louisiana, two out of three children are in families who either their single parent or both parents are working. So we know that this is an extremely high need. We also know that we are not reaching every child that we can. So this has just been an extraordinary endeavor. And I'm really thankful for the work that the EC Guides are doing.

Laura Kassner:

Absolutely. Kim, Kanedra, your colleagues, just what incredible work and an incredible sense of mission you must have to come to work each morning and think about the ways that you're impacting families, businesses, children's trajectory, as well as the broader sense of how your community's doing. The health and vibrancy of your community. That's amazing.

So if a locality region or state was interested in exploring this idea of Early Childhood Guides, what advice might you share based on the lessons you've learned so far through the PDG B-5 initiatives? What advice might you give them for replicating this in their context?

Kim Jones:

I would say that the main thing would be to really train the guides from the beginning on what is a certifiable case and what is not a certifiable case. And I think it's important to have incentives. I know that our goal from the jump in Jefferson was 40 cases per month. And I strived, I worked hard to get to

that 40. Some months I fell a little bit short, some months I surpassed it. So if you set up a goal, you'll likely surpass it.

Kanetra Brooks:

Yeah. I was going to say that I've made goals for myself as well. Like Kim was saying, train the EC Guide, make sure that you go very into detail about what a parent would need. Make sure you ask as many questions as possible because I'm always asking Devon questions, but my advice is just to try it and you will go through different tests and you'll see what works for you and what doesn't. So my advice would be just to do it. Just do it and you'll see how you impact the families. And then you'll be like, I don't know what would've happened if I never had this.

Kim Jones:

Now I just want to add that if any other state department would like to pick up on this EC Guide pilot program, you have to have someone like Devon in the driver's seat to guide us guides because we ask Devon so many questions every single day. I mean, I know how many I ask and I know the other guides ask as many as well. If she wasn't here for support, this pilot program would not be nearly as successful as it has been.

Kanetra Brooks:

Yes, she is very patient.

Lizzie Cosse:

I'm so glad you said that because I was going to say, I've kind of seen it from a little bit bird's eye view and I support Devon, but I think it's a true collaboration between the state and locals, which has helped it lead to success. And then at the local level, they are truly immersed in the community. So I think it's just a lot of collaboration and a lot of communication. I will also say we launched this in highly populated parishes first. And then we took on one new network this year, that's serving a more rural area. So something we're exploring is what this looks like in more rural parishes, but Children's Coalition of Northeast Louisiana, who is the entity serving the rural parishes, is doing a great job. And I think there's a lot to learn from them.

I think they've gotten cases from up to five different parishes. So we have a lot to learn from them because we have a lot of rural areas in our state. So we would love to see this spread as widespread as our community networks. We would love this to touch every corner of the state, but I do think starting in highly populated places is a good place to get the momentum and get the ball rolling.

Laura Kassner:

Wonderful. It sounds like PDG B-5 funds have enabled you all to innovate, to try something new and to really reach out a hand in a very personal way to families who are trying to navigate a very challenging time in life, a challenging time in history. Connecting them to meaningful services and thereby impacting the whole community at large, which is so very exciting. This has been a wonderful conversation and a really valuable look into the great work of your team, the impact of PDG B-5 and the work that so many are doing in Louisiana that makes a difference for kids and families every day. Thank you so much for sharing your time and your knowledge with us.

Devon Camarota:

Thanks, Laura.

Kanendra Brooks:

Thanks Laura.

Kim Jones:

Thank you.

Lizzie Cosse:

Thank you so much for featuring Louisiana. We are always excited to share the great work that we're doing on behalf of our children and families.

Narrator:

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