



Why community developers should care more about early childhood education

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A blog by IFF CEO Joe Neri

At a recent gathering of friends from my first job, we were reminiscing about some of our triumphs, defeats, and growing pains – and I was reminded of what a complete dunce I once was about the importance of early childhood education (ECE) to community development.

Let me be clear – no type of facility development in the nonprofit sector is more daunting than early learning centers. They are highly regulated (as they should be), the operating margins to pay facility debt are minimal, the appraisals on the final single-purpose buildings will never be adequate, and assembling subsidy dollars is a bespoke endeavor.

But before you flee from the idea, please learn from my mistakes. As a community developer in the early 1990s, I was laser-focused on housing and adamantly opposed to working in the child care space, which I saw as inherently outside our “lane.” I’m so glad our Board pushed me out of my comfort zone to see the error of my ways.

I've now been incredibly fortunate to have built, underwrote, or consulted on more than 100 early learning centers. And I've started this blog to share IFF's and others' knowledge and to encourage community developers to be involved in the sector.

Early Resistance

In my late 20s, I was the development director at a start-up community development corporation founded by six Catholic parishes to address quality affordable housing in a very low-income Latino community in Chicago. Our team of young community developers were laser focused on new in-fill housing and multi-family rental rehabilitation. It was a daunting task of assembling land and subsidies, bank mortgages, and government subsidies – challenges we still face today.

A few years into our work, the Archdiocese shuttered one of the founding churches. Our Board, comprised of other parishioners, wanted to redevelop the now-vacant church. We jumped in and evaluated the facilities and quickly determined that conversion to affordable housing was just not financially feasible. In my mind, we were now done. Back to our laser focus on developing housing elsewhere in the community.

But our Board was not so ready to give up, and our community organizers surfaced the idea of redeveloping the vacant school into a child care center, which was desperately needed in the community. I was adamantly opposed to the idea.

“What do we know about child care? We're a housing organization!”

All of my organizational management training took over – focus your efforts, stick to your core mission, “stay in your lane.” I figured we were still learning the alphabet soup of housing development and all of its struggles and challenges, and others were probably doing the same for child care. So reasonable...

Fast forward to the groundbreaking of Guadalupe Family Center. We learned the alphabet soup of early learning – Head Start, child care block grants, state licensing, teacher-child ratios, space requirements, etc.

I thought that low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC) work was impossibly hard, but it's got nothing on child care.

We did it!

And I vowed never to do it again.

Acceptance & Advocacy

Except that community development is about people thriving.

Families need stable housing for stable employment. And they need to work to pay the rent or buy homes. But families with young children also need child care in order to work. And young children need early learning to be ready for kindergarten...so that they are reading by third grade...which prepares them for success in high school...which prepares them for college so they can gain the work that lets them **thrive**.

Luckily, our offices were next to the Family Center, and I had a daily reminder of how vitally important that quality care was to those working families.

But most of our political leaders and community developers don't work next door to quality child care centers. As a nation, we have not advanced much from my realization in 1997.

James Heckman, the Nobel Prize winner for Economics, has documented that very few public policy programs for human development have as high a rate of "return on investment" as early education – about 13 percent. And yet, the United States is behind most developed countries in all areas of early education – participation, access, starting age, subsidy and access for low-income parents, and quality of services.^[1]

Perhaps that's because – as I noted above – there are so many challenges to financing and developing high-quality early learning centers featuring best-practice design. But community development professionals are the best possible people to take on those challenges because we understand the power of partnerships and the necessity of an ecosystem approach to meeting a community's needs.

Community developers are needed to demand more financial support of ECE in our low-income communities and to partner with the incredible ECE leaders and institutions to provide what we do best – plan, develop, and finance the facilities. So before you dismiss the idea of working in the (challenging but important) early childhood space, I implore you: visit a center and talk to the low-income working families lucky enough to have a high-quality ECE facility in their community. It will remind you why you got into community development in the first place.

[1] Juliana Herman, Sasha Post, and Scott O'Halloran Posted on May 2, 2013, Center for American Progress