

## **Kalamazoo County Ready 4s – the Origin Story with ISAAC**

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KC Ready 4s' origin is rooted in the social justice organizing process that ISAAC uses to identify and address significant issues in our community. **ISAAC – Interfaith Strategy for Advocacy and Action in the Community** – is an interfaith organizing network of about 30 congregations and organizations working together to build a more just community.

Together, we focus our collective peoplepower on pressing issues of injustice in Kalamazoo County that none of us could accomplish working alone. ISAAC is a 501 (c) 3 tax-exempt organization supported by foundations, membership dues, grass-roots fundraisers, and individual contributors like you and me.

Here is how that organizing process resulted in KC Ready 4s. Every two years, we start our issue identification process with a listening campaign in the community. Volunteers talk with people one-on-one and in small groups. We make a special effort to talk with people who face disparities and inequities. We ask them to share what they see as the most pressing barriers to social justice in our community.

### **The Need is Identified by the Community**

In early 2008, trained ISAAC volunteers listened to hundreds of people. Those people most frequently mentioned six issues. One issue was concern for the well-being of our youngest children and their support, safety, and preparation for life. Then, in May 2008, several hundred members from ISAAC congregations and community partners assembled at the Issues Convention to pick 3 from the 6 issues for ISAAC to address over the next year.

Early Childhood was a top vote getter at the Issues Convention! The goal statement was **to improve the early childhood experience of all of our county's children in order to improve school readiness and success, prevent involvement in the judicial system, and enhance the quality of our work force and economic competitiveness of Kalamazoo County.** After the voting, everyone attending the Issues Convention is invited to join one of the 3 task forces to work on the selected issues.

The Early Childhood & Education Task Force was led by Pastor Carol Richardson of the Christian Church Disciples of Christ. We were fortunate to have many very talented and committed people participate in the task force. Those members included Dr. Tim Bartik

from the Upjohn Institute, whose research centered on the value of high quality preschool; Jacque Eatmon, director of the Great Start Collaborative; and Dr. Regena Nelson, a professor and Early Childhood expert from Western Michigan University.

Task Force members interviewed leaders from education, early childhood, government, and business, as well as elected officials and others. In ISAAC's model, task forces identify root causes and possible ways to intervene early, to prevent problems before they develop. So, these interviews aimed to identify what our county could address through policy change and public support that would significantly improve early childhood for children in Kalamazoo County.

We learned about the frustration of area school superintendents who were struggling to reduce high school drop-out and improve the graduation rate. They saw that many children entered kindergarten already behind. Then-KPS Superintendent Janice Brown said, if you (the community) prepare them, we can educate anybody. State Rep. Robert Jones said, we cannot stand by when some of our children are already behind and not standing on the starting line when they begin kindergarten. The Task Force learned about the inadequacy of state funding for Early Childhood programs from local providers of early childhood education. The Task Force learned from business leaders at Southwest Michigan First that a qualified workforce and successful education system attract and retain good businesses and spur economic development of a community. The Task Force learned that research shows a strong return on investment in high quality pre-Kindergarten. That strong ROI makes high quality pre-K **a non-partisan issue**, which elected officials of both parties can support.

The task force developed a vision: that (1) every family in Kalamazoo County will be empowered to successfully parent and educate their children from birth onward, and (2) that there will be a system of community-wide support for early childhood education, so that all children in Kalamazoo County will arrive at Kindergarten ready to learn and succeed, and grow up to their full potential.

Given their vision and what they learn from interviews, ISAAC task forces formulate an "ask" that is specific, achievable, and in the hearts and minds of local residents. After considerable discussion, the Early Childhood and Education Task Force concluded that expanding access to high quality preschool would have the greatest and most certain benefit for our county. The Task Force determined that there was sufficient evidence and

public will to support this ambitious effort: that all 4-year-olds in Kalamazoo County will have access to high quality PreK.

Next the Task Force sought support for this ambitious ask from local officials and policy makers in the education system (KRESA Ron Fuller, KPS Dr. Rice, and all 8 other superintendents), in the early childhood system (GSC, CCRC, HS), in county administration and governance (County Commission), local foundations (UW, KZCF), local business community (SWMF, CofC), the Upjohn Institute, and our area state legislators. The Task Force asked all these community leaders to commit to the “ask” and to have a representative serve on a planning committee to realize this aspiration.

### **We summarized the arguments:**

- ✓ Children who participate in high-quality preschool grow up to have higher earnings. For each \$1 we invest in preschool, we get \$4 in extra earnings in our economy.
- ✓ Children who participate in high-quality preschool are less likely as teenagers or adults to become involved in crime. Among at-risk children, participating in high-quality preschool reduces involvement in crime by 80%.
- ✓ Children who participate in high quality preschool are more likely to graduate from high school. **Among at-risk children, high quality preschool increases the chances of graduating from high school by one-third.** Every additional high school dropout costs taxpayers \$127,000 in reduced tax revenues and increased social costs.
- ✓ **Over 40% of Kalamazoo County 4-year-olds are not enrolled in high-quality preschool. Although 1700 Kalamazoo County 4-year-olds are in preschool, 1300 are not enrolled in preschool.**

It was a win-win proposal. As one business leader pointed out:

If we projected out to 2025 with a 50% drop-out rate among significant proportions of the high risk students, with 1 in every 100 in prison at taxpayer expense, and with the number of workers retiring, we will not be able to sustain our current quality of life. All our children must be equipped to succeed in school and in our future workforce if our community is to compete in a global economy. Excellent school outcomes are vital to economic development. Creating a community expectation that every child is prepared for school success will help our county become a magnet for business and skilled workers.

With this analysis from a business leader, we believed that private sector partners would be eager to help find funding for this initiative and that county government would serve as a public partner.

## **The Public Meeting “Ask”**

The ISAAC Public Meeting took place at Galilee Baptist Church on October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008. Representatives from education, County Government, County Commission, the private sector, and community leaders who were to be involved in this initiative were asked to come forward and reply “yes” or “no” to the following question:

***Will you affirm your commitment to participate in this committee and to create, within two years, a public and private action plan for high-quality early childhood education that is fully accessible for all children in Kalamazoo County, and strategies for funding it?***

These leaders all replied, “Yes!”

1. Ron Fuller, Superintendent of KRESA and Dr. Michael Rice of KPS, on behalf of all school superintendents in our county
2. Jacque Eatmon for the Great Start Collaborative for Early Childhood
3. Peter Battani for Kalamazoo County Administration
4. Kalamazoo County Commissioners
5. Private Providers – represented by Kathleen A. Swikoski, YWCA; Ann Brown, Learning Village
6. Denise Hartsough for the Greater Kalamazoo United Way
7. Allan Hunt for the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research
8. Sharon Anderson for the Kalamazoo Community Foundation
9. Susan Seigfried Wilson for Head Start

After that, candidates for our area’s state and federal offices, who were present and prepared to respond, were asked to step forward and answer “yes” or “no” to the following question:

***If elected, will you commit to work for adequate and stable funding of high-quality early childhood education, while maintaining adequate funding of K-12 education, so that all families who seek early childhood education can obtain it?***

Those who stepped forward and replied, “Yes!” included incumbents and challengers for State House Districts 60, 61 and 63, and for the 6<sup>th</sup> State Senate District.

## **The Initiative is Launched**

The commitments made at the October 2008 ISAAC Public Meeting launched what became the Kalamazoo County Committee for Early Childhood Education (KCCECE). Its charge for the next two years was to create a public and private action plan for high-quality early childhood education that would be fully accessible for all children in Kalamazoo County, and strategies for funding that plan.

Key to the success of the KCCECE were commitments for housing, staffing and leading the committee. The Greater Kalamazoo United Way agreed to serve as the committee's organizational home, and to have its Community Investment Director, Denise Hartsough, staff the committee, its steering committee and five task groups. Dr. Hartsough brought strong organizational skills and extensive experience with community collaborations and grant writing. The United Way's Interim CEO, Phil Carra, recruited Dr. Eileen Wilson-Oyelaren, President of Kalamazoo College, to chair the KCCECE for the two-year planning period. Dr. Wilson-Oyelaren brought passionate commitment to and academic expertise in early childhood. She energized and steered the KCCECE with excellent skills in executive leadership, teamwork and strategy, her prestige and visibility in community, and her commitment to equity, accountability, and timeliness.

The KCCECE first convened in January 2009 with a very full table in the United Way Board Room. The group included parents and private providers, as well as representatives of the institutions that made commitments at the ISAAC Public Meeting. From the start, KCCECE members embraced a public-private model, that is, a plan including both public and private pre-K providers. Dr. Wilson-Oyelaren recognized the importance of early childhood care and education for female, minority-owned small business and employment. The KCCECE met quarterly with an average of 22 participants per meeting. A Strategy Group of 6-11 also met quarterly to guide the work of the larger KCCECE.

The complexity and enormity of the planning required task groups in **4 key areas**: 1. Implementation (subgroup—Governance); 2. Assessment; 3. Communication; 4. Funding Plan Development. Each group met regularly and at length for careful consideration of the many options for fulfilling the charge from ISAAC.

### **KCCECE Accomplishments**

During the very productive 2-year period of its formation, many milestones were achieved that would pave the way for KCR4s.

- Secured major funding: Kalamazoo Community Foundation (Kellogg Foundation funds for the Learning Network), Irving S. Gilmore Foundation, PNC Bank, Harold & Grace Upjohn Foundation, Dorothy U. Dalton Foundation, Marquez Foundation, Fetzer Fund of the Kalamazoo Community Foundation.
- Defined high quality pre-K and its cost.
- Created not a program of high-quality pre-K, but a system to a) increase the quality of pre-K in Kalamazoo County, and b) offer scholarships to families of 4-year-olds unqualified for Head Start or state-funded pre-K, but unable to afford private high-quality pre-K.
- Created sliding fee scale for tuition (reflecting scholarships for the remainder of the cost of high-quality pre-K) for families of participating 4-year-olds.
- Identified several high-quality pre-K curriculum packages.
- Identified 6 pilot providers: 2 group childcare homes, 2 childcare centers, 2 preschools.
- Arranged for small quality improvement grants and quality coaching for pre-K providers from Child Care Resources.
- Conducted an initial assessment with Dr. Regena Nelson and Dr. Kristal Ehrhardt of WMU of reading, math, and social-emotional skills of pre-K and Kindergarten students around the county. The pilot assessment allowed the KCCECE to collect baseline data and to test the process for evaluating the impact of what became KCR4s. This involved identifying and purchasing tools, recruiting and training assessors, and gaining access to area pre-K and Kindergarten students.
- With Head Start and the Great Start Readiness Program (state-funded pre-K), KCCECE set up a collaborative process for recruitment of 4-year-olds.
- Chose name—Kalamazoo County Ready 4s--created logo, and wrote bylaws.
- Incorporated as a nonprofit and obtained 501c3 status from the IRS.
- Found free office space offered by the Upjohn Institute (Michigan Works).
- Dealt with a major threat to the envisioned system of high-quality pre-K. State government threatened to eliminate funding for its Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) in summer 2009. With guidance and leadership from Rep. Robert Jones, ISAAC and the early childhood community, including KCCECE, undertook a major advocacy and education campaign. Vanloads of constituents traveled to Lansing to speak to their state representatives and legislative committee leaders. Constituents held state representatives to their previous promises to support early childhood.

Relationships previously developed yielded benefit. Constituents educated elected officials about the issue and obtained their public commitment. Funding was restored and then later doubled!

By February 2011, the Kalamazoo County Committee for Early Childhood Education, a broad and hard-working coalition, created Kalamazoo County Ready 4s.

In late February, the ISAAC and KCCECE co-hosted with the Upjohn Institute a book signing featuring Dr. Tim Bartik and his book about the positive economic impact of high-quality early childhood education. The event provided an opportunity for local community leadership to learn from their peers. Speakers included the CEOs or Presidents of the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, Chamber of Commerce, Kalamazoo Rotary Club, PNC Bank and the Great Start Collaborative.

After securing initial funding from local philanthropic and business sources, and with baseline data in hand, the KCCECE began to consider possible sustainable sources of funding. Those included a County millage, a KRESA school millage, an endowment, demonstration research grants, and social investing. Exploration yielded no clear path forward. Nevertheless, they persisted with continued support from local foundations and donors.

### **KC Ready 4s Begins**

The newly formed KC Ready 4s Board hired Executive Director Sandy Standish and Assistant Donna Neevel. They oversaw a period of tremendous growth and stabilization. Over the past ten years, KCR4s has grown to a staff of five; 50 participating providers, over half of whom have attained 4 or 5 stars on the State's 5-star quality scale, and scholarships for families of both 3- and 4-year olds. Following Dr. Standish's retirement, KCR4s continues to pursue its vision and mission for the next 10 years under the able new leadership of Kristyn Buhl-Lepisto.

### **Some Challenges for the Future**

- Gain legislative support to increase funding level for GSRP at the actual cost of high quality, to cover the total number of children to be served and recognize the need for full day (childcare) programs.

- Develop support for **sustainable funding at the county level** (e.g., through a county millage or KRESA millage) to make universally available high quality pre-K a special strength of Kalamazoo County and reduce reliance on grant funding.
- Increase and broaden investment from business and support from individual donors.
- Expand the system to include 3-year old care and education.
- Increase diversity of staff and cultivate closer linkages in communities of color.
- Increase opportunities for black women to become women-owned providers of high quality pre-K.
- Evaluate equity in access and service and continue developing an antiracist lens in staff and providers.