Encouraging guided play through educational playscapes: Dayton, OH

Early Childhood   **Kindergarten Readiness**

MORE ABOUT THE STRATEGY USED IN THIS CASE STUDY: Supports for expecting parents and families with young children, Early childhood curricula and interventions, Child care and early education programs

At-a-Glance

Summary

- Young children who participate in activities that facilitate learning and development enter kindergarten better prepared to succeed than their peers who do not. Unfortunately, in Dayton, as throughout most of the country, children from low-income families were the least likely to have access to such activities. This disparity was reflected in the racial achievement gap in Dayton, where Black children were about half as likely as their white peers to be kindergarten ready in the 2014-2015 school year.

- Building off of a long-standing commitment to early childhood outcomes, local leaders in Dayton established a working group in 2019 to explore how the city could create guided playscapes. Called Play on Purpose (POP) sites, these installations encourage children to engage in "guided play." Research has shown that guided play can have meaningful impacts on early childhood development that have the potential to reduce educational disparities. As of February 2023, Preschool Promise, the nonprofit organization that administers the program, has built six POP sites in Dayton, with a goal of installing 20 by year's end.

- Factors behind the program's success included a strong, existing network of leaders committed to early childhood development; an existing organizational structure to house early childhood interventions; strong support across successive mayoral administrations; a commitment to incorporating community voice into the design of sites; and strong partnerships with external organizations that host POP sites.

- Challenges the program has faced include operational challenges caused by COVID-19, issues ensuring physical accessibility in all projects, challenges scaling and managing a decentralized program, and difficulty measuring the program's direct impact on early childhood outcomes.

Results and Accomplishments

6	40+	15%
As of February 2023, Preschool Promise and their partners have completed six Play on Purpose sites in Dayton.	The POP program has worked with over 40 partner organizations as it has selected, designed, and installed POP sites.	In Philadelphia, the proportion of children and adults using numerical and spatial language was more than 15 percentage points higher in an "Urban Thinkscape" than in a nearby park.

- **Installing six Play on Purpose sites:** Since 2021, Preschool Promise and its partners have installed six Play on Purpose (POP) sites, which encourage young children and their parents to engage in guided play. These include POP spots at the Gem City Market, the Hope Center for Families, and other locations where parents and their children gather. Each site includes interactive components that support child development (e.g., a jump ruler, which allows children to practice numeracy skills).

- **An early leader in the field:** Recognizing the effort of Preschool Promise and its partners, the Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network named Dayton among the first cities nationally to be certified as a Playful Learning City.

- **Scaling up through partnerships:** To expand the POP program, Preschool Promise built partnerships with community organizations willing to provide space, funding, or ongoing maintenance to sites. A recent partnership with the Greater Dayton Regional Transit Authority will see a POP spot installed at a bus stop in the Spring of 2023, with more to come later in the year.

Overview

What was the challenge?

- **Low rates of kindergarten readiness.** In the 2014-2015 school year, less than half of children in Montgomery County entered kindergarten "ready to learn." For the county's Black children, the rate was less than 20 percent - nearly 25 percentage points lower than for their white peers. With kindergarten readiness linked to future academic achievement, local leaders recognized the need to better prepare the area's children for school and to eliminate the racial gap in school readiness.

- **Unequal access to early learning opportunities.** A child's school readiness is impacted by their exposure to high quality learning opportunities both at home and through early childhood care and education programs. In Montgomery County, access to these enriching experiences was unevenly distributed, leaving children from low-income families less likely to enter kindergarten ready to learn.

- **Reaching children and families in their everyday lives.** Most of a child's time is spent outside of formal educational settings. As such, while local leaders worked to expand access to early childhood care and education programs, they also sought a community-based intervention to boost school readiness. Guided by research that links play and child development, they began looking at the potential of placemaking to reduce educational disparities.

What was the solution?

- **Physical installations to spark interaction and guided play.** Play on Purpose (POP) is a community-based initiative, led by Preschool Promise, that builds interactive installations that provide opportunities for playful learning to families with young children. Spread throughout the community, POP "spots" use design elements to encourage guided play, where adults interact with and support their children as they engage in play. Research has shown that guided play can have meaningful impacts on early childhood development that have the potential to reduce educational disparities.

- **Designing sites to reinforce academic concepts and cognitive development.** POP spots in the City of Dayton are designed to help children develop foundational skills that support learning. For example, by placing a slidable yardstick at a bus stop and asking, "how tall are you?," a POP spot encourages children to measure their height with the help of an adult. This reinforces the child's understanding of numbers and counting.

- **Partnerships with local organizations who connect to families with children.** The POP program encourages the participation and self-direction of local organizations who have access to families and are well-suited for playscapes. To that end, Dayton has partnered with small businesses, schools, the public library system, and local community organizations to support the development of independent POP sites. The POP initiative is all about bringing playful learning to the places families are already going.

- **A new microgrant program to encourage construction of POP sites.** To encourage broad participation, Preschool Promise created a micro-grant program to help local organizations design and construct their own POP sites that adhere to the initiative's guidelines. The grants have been funded in part by PNC Bank, a long-time supporter of early learning in Montgomery County.

What factors drove success?

- **Existing relationships across the county.** To launch the POP initiative, city and community leaders leveraged long standing relationships with organizations to form crucial partnerships and build momentum. When Preschool Promise was attempting to get organizations on board with the effort to develop POP sites, it helped that they had already worked together on other efforts to raise awareness of kindergarten readiness and the importance of **reducing disparities** in early learning. The initiative started by focusing on educating organizations on the potential of POP sites and sharing research findings to persuade partners to get involved. These relationships and efforts led more than 30 organizations to get on board.

- **Building on previous efforts.** POP was a natural extension of the Preschool Promise and Learn to Earn Dayton initiatives, both of which focused on early childhood development. These programs laid the foundation for POP because the city had already raised awareness on the importance of early childhood and created buy in. City leaders believe that these pre-existing efforts helped make POP possible.

- **Including community voice:** The city's first major POP site, the "Mosaic of Hope," memorializes and commemorates the community's struggles and joys during and since the pandemic. To accomplish this, the city tapped local artists and community leaders to contribute to the effort, including Omega Community Development Corporation, Omega Baptist Church, and the Mosaic Institute of Dayton, among others. By channeling community voices into the project, city leaders believe that they built public support and created excitement and momentum around the idea of POP sites.

- **Champions in the mayor's office**. At the launch of the initiative, then-mayor Nan Whaley was a strong advocate for early childhood education. In addition to supporting early efforts including EDvention and ReadySetSoar, Whaley proposed a tax increase that ultimately funded Preschool Promise, which administers the POP program. Support for early childhood efforts has continued under Dayton's new mayor, Jeffrey J. Mims, Jr.

- **Facilitating partner-led implementation.** The POP program is designed to encourage local organizations to identify potential sites and lead the design and construction of new POP installations. This increases the city's capacity to create sites and creates the opportunity for external organizations to feel ownership in the project.

What were the major obstacles?

- **Adjusting to work under the pandemic**. As it did for so many organizations, COVID-19 disrupted operations at the city and created operational challenges. While the city found it logistically easier to meet remotely, it has been harder to follow up on discussions and execute decisions. Social distancing also required the initiative partners to find ways to design and implement POP sites without meeting in person.

- **Establishing structure and scaling in a decentralized model.** One of POP's strengths is that it leverages resources of community organizations by allowing them to take ownership of sites and lead the design and execution of them. The downside of this model is that operational responsibilities are not as consistent across sites as they would be under a more centralized decision making structure. As such, initiative partners has had to put a great deal of effort into establishing who maintains the sites, who is responsible for meeting accessibility requirements, translation, and other responsibilities. Given the wide distribution of responsibilities, it is challenging for the city to scale the POP project quickly.

- **Ensuring accessibility at sites.** A key challenge for Preschool Promise and its partners is ensuring that each POP site is accessible to all users. This involves ensuring physical accessibility, but also making sites accessible to those who do not speak English or who have a lower level of literacy. Partners are constantly pushing themselves to think more creatively.

- **Outstanding questions on maintenance.** Currently, Preschool Promise conducts annual site visits to check the condition of each POP site. While certain sites are maintained through an agreement with an associated partner organization, not all sites have such contracts in place. The City of Dayton and Preschool Promise are still determining how all sites will be maintained over the long-term, and how such maintenance will be funded.

- **Identifying rigorous evaluation strategy.** While Preschool Promise collects qualitative data and tracks certain quantitative metrics (e.g., number of partner organizations), it has not identified a strategy to directly measure the impact of POP sites on early childhood outcomes. To remedy this limitation, Preschool Promise has partnered with the Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network and are in the process of creating a new evaluation strategy.

Timeline

2010
County leaders and philanthropists recognize a need for investment in youth development

The Montgomery County Commission and several philanthropists recognized the importance of early childhood development for long term educational and economic outcomes and formed the Montgomery County Early Care & Education initiative. As part of their work, they created the ReadySetSoar project, which focused on Pre-K through 3rd grade reading proficiency.

2011
The city of Dayton establishes its childhood development initiative, Learn to Earn Dayton

Dayton had a preexisting program aimed at improving science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) opportunities for young people called EDvention. In 2011, the city expanded this program into a "cradle-to-career" youth development program and renamed it "Learn to Earn Dayton."

2012
Dayton makes funding available for playscapes, raising awareness of this tool for childhood development

The city of Dayton issued $187 million in bonds to help improve and renovate its public libraries. Part of this funding went toward creating playscapes inside the libraries for children. This effort laid part of the foundation for POP by raising awareness of the benefits of playscapes and giving key city staff experience in their design and implementation.

2015-2016
County and city leaders work side by side and then create a joint organization

After working together for years, recognizing the complementary nature of their work, the county and city merged ReadySetSoar and Learn to Earn Dayton into one organization.

2016

Dayton voters approve sustained city funding for early childhood programs

Following a campaign by then-mayor Nan Whaley, Daytonians pass a 0.25% income tax increase to support critical city services and one year of affordable, quality preschool to all families of 4-year-olds, known as "Preschool Promise." This also allowed the city to devote funding to complementary childhood development initiatives.

2018

Inspired by research and momentum on early childhood efforts, city leaders begin to consider guided playscapes

City leaders began to take note of promising research findings by Kathy Hersch Pasek and others on the benefits of guided play. Hope Vuto, then a consultant for Learn to Earn Dayton, convened a group of interested parties to discuss how the city could create playful learning landscapes in line with the research. The group discussed how the idea could be implemented in Dayton's specific context and brainstormed potential sites such as bus stops, grocery stores, and other public spaces.

SPRING 2019

Dayton joins What Works Cities Economic Mobility Initiative

Dayton was selected as one of nine cities to participate in the What Works Cities (WWC) Economic Mobility Initiative. The program provides technical assistance to help cities identify and implement strategies to improve economic mobility. Dayton chose to focus this support on improving early childhood outcomes, with a key deliverable being a plan to expand POP locations across the city.

FEBRUARY 2020

Dayton meets with experts to learn best practices

City officials and Learn to Earn Dayton Staff attend a Brookings Institution event on playful learning. The conference included Kathy Hirsch Pasek and other specialists in playful learning as well as city leaders from around the country who had implemented the model. The experience helped inform Dayton leaders on how best to develop the POP program at home.

MARCH 2020

Experts provide direct guidance to the city

Shelly Kessler and Kathy Hersch Pasek, both experts and members of the Playful Learning Landscapes Network, visit Dayton, provide guidance, and further galvanize the group to move the project forward. The city then divided the team into subcommittees including the evaluation team, early childhood design committee, and branding committee.

SUMMER 2020
Partnerships and first implementations begin to form

The early childhood design committee begins working with partners and designing the first implementation of POP sites. The committee started with Gem City Market, a co-op market in what was previously a food desert, and Omega Community Development Center, a senior living and family center.

JULY 2021
POP holds its kickoff event for the first installation

The city holds a launch event for the Mosaic of Hope at the Hope Center for Families. The event included community leaders and organizations who were involved in the effort and generated publicity for the POP project.

Implementation Process

How did leaders confront the problem?

- **Recognizing early childhood's role in educational disparities.** By the early 2010s, civic leaders in Dayton increasingly focused on the role of early childhood development in shaping long term educational and economic outcomes. Children from low-income families in Dayton were lagging behind their peers on literacy rates, graduation rates, and other outcomes, yet few programs existed to serve them. Leaders recognized that there was a need for investment in programs to serve disadvantaged children and public funding to support it.

- **The mayor pushes for a tax increase to support early childhood education.** Hoping to expand the county and city's efforts, then-Mayor Nan Whaley proposed a 0.25% income tax increase that would support 1 year of affordable, high-quality Preschool to all families of 4-year-olds. The ballot initiative was approved by Dayton voters, allowing the city to establish a program called Preschool Promise.

- **A collaborative effort forms.** In order to explore new ways to serve children from low-income families, a local foundation and Montgomery County established the "Birth to 3 Collaborative" in early 2018, an interdisciplinary group of government organizations and community leaders who aimed to explore the next steps for early childhood education in Dayton. The group investigated what services were available, where families with young children lived, where child poverty was concentrated, and more key questions. The collaborative gathered data by race, income levels, family structure, and more.

- **Recommendations and an idea for guided playscapes emerge:** Building on their analysis, the Birth to 3 Collaborative arrived at 12 sweeping recommendations for supporting children in poverty. One of the recommendations was to embed opportunities to learn into the day-to-day life of children up to five years old. Dayton continued to explore the concept and bring in additional stakeholders to discuss how it could be implemented.

How was the strategy designed?

- **Assembling a broad coalition.** Building on the recommendations and idea of guided play, the city formed a broad coalition of organizations and leaders who could contribute to the idea and implementation. The group was made up of 30 stakeholders, including the library, neighborhood associations, the University of Dayton, Sinclair Community College, the regional park system, and other early childhood leaders.

- **To make a novel concept understandable, a branding committee forms.** Because the concept of guided playscapes scattered throughout the city was new, the city believed it would be important to explain the idea and make it recognizable to parents. To do this, the city formed a marketing and branding committee that developed communications materials and iconography such as a "play on purpose" logo that is affixed to each installation.

- **Creating a design team for playscapes.** The city began with broad discussions of what playscapes could look like and where they could draw inspiration. The team included experts in early childhood development as well as representatives from University of Dayton, Sinclair Community College, and local teachers. They considered locations such as children's museums, community gardens, and parks.

- **Ensuring that each site meets key guidelines for "guided play."** Building on the research and expertise the city had cultivated, the city developed guidelines and principles to make sure that every site was educational for children and approachable for parents. This ensures that each site is designed to address the "six Cs" of early childhood learning: communication, critical thinking, creative innovation, collaboration, content, and confidence.

How was the approach funded?

- **External funding to cover additional costs:** In addition to public funds, Dayton officials secured $50,000 in external funding from WWC, and three years of funding from the Pritzker Children's initiative totalling over $350,000. Preschool Promise also secured smaller philanthropy funding from PNC bank and the Spurlino Foundation to support the micro-grant program that allows non-government organizations to design and construct POP sites.

How was the plan implemented?

- **To make POP sites fit into various kinds of locations, a tiered system of installations.** Dayton's team hoped to create installations in various types of locations, as long as they were places that attract families with children. Initiative leaders created tiers of involvement that helped the city organize their work into places that were low-cost and low-involvement to more elaborate new constructions. For example, some sites only required a sign that could spark an interaction between an adult and child and foster learning, whereas others would be significant construction projects.

- **Harnessing the power of word of mouth, prioritizing landmark projects.** Preschool Promise knew that building awareness would be a critical part of the project. To build that awareness, community leaders and partners worked together to select two "cornerstone" projects for the first POP sites. These sites would be significant investments designed to get attention and generate word-of-mouth promotion.

- **The first POP installation is implemented at the Hope Center for Families.** As their first cornerstone POP project, Dayton chose the Hope Center for Families, an intergenerational community center that includes senior living facilities, early childhood programs, and health resources for community members. The project, called the "Mosaic of Hope," is a 19-foot art installation that commemorates the losses of COVID-19 while also celebrating the community's resilience. In line with POP guidelines, it is also interactive to encourage "guided play." The installation includes signs, games, and images that encourage children to learn while playing. The city organized an event with the Omega Community Development Corporation featuring community leaders and local artists to unveil and celebrate the installation.

- **A second cornerstone POP installation at Gem City Market.** In addition to the Hope Center, Dayton officials worked with Gem City Market, a new cooperative grocery store in a neighborhood that was previously a food desert, to create another cornerstone site that would generate awareness of Play on Purpose. Dayton officials believed that because Gem City Market already attracted low-income families, it would be an effective place to create opportunities for guided play and spread the word about POP. Gem City Market's installation is called the Playful Path, a pathway for children to walk along and find over 30 hidden fruits and vegetables.

How was the approach measured and refined?

- **Collecting feedback and tracking metrics:** Since the program's inception, the POP team has collected qualitative feedback from community members and partner organizations. Additionally, Preschool Promise tracks key metrics that align with programmatic goals, like the number of formal partnerships they have developed.

- **Developing a strategy for measuring impact:** Due to the logistical challenges associated with collecting data at POP sites, Preschool Promise has not identified a strategy to directly measure the impact of POP sites on early childhood outcomes. To remedy this limitation, Preschool Promise has partnered with the Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network to create a new evaluation strategy.