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NOVEMBER 18, 2024 – CASEY STOCKSTILL AND HALLEY POTTER

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*This profile is part of a research project in partnership with the Trust for Learning highlighting how early childhood programs can blend and braid funding to serve diverse groups of children. The project also includes a report, [“Early Childhood Programs That Blend and Braid Funding to Achieve Diversity,”](#) and an additional profile, [“How a Colorado Early Learning Center Serves a Diverse Group of Families.”](#)*

Most young children in the United States who go to preschool experience classrooms [segregated by race and class](#). But some programs reject this model and instead work to create classrooms that children from all social classes and racial backgrounds can access. [The Playing Field](#), a nonprofit child care center in Madison, Wisconsin, is one such example. The center was born from the dedication of Abbi Kruse, the center’s founder and executive director. It is now nine years old, and their model is both popular and impactful, leading them to work on opening a second site on the other side of town.

## From All Head Start to a Mixed-Income Program

Abbi Kruse had experience working at both a Head Start program and an affluent center. Abbi first worked for [Reach](#)

[Dane](#), an organization that runs Head Start in Madison. She next served as the director of an affluent center. “I went from hearing, ‘my dad went to prison this weekend’ to ‘my dad is taking me to Argentina this summer.’” It was a huge change. Then, serendipity intervened. Early Head Start approached her with a partnership idea. “They wanted to put sixteen kids experiencing homelessness into a primarily affluent center. And I was like, this is genius. It would desegregate our early childhood programs. It would be such a rich learning experience for kids from all backgrounds.”

So Abbi launched The Playing Field to serve children from a range of family socioeconomic backgrounds. Her goal was to create a program in which one-third of families are low-income and qualify for child care subsidies and Early Head Start, one-third of families are middle-income and can afford to pay some of the cost of care but may need scholarships to make up the difference, and one-third of families are higher income and can afford to pay the full fees themselves. This results in a racially diverse population as well: roughly half of the children at The Playing Field are children of color and half are white.

Head Start and Early Head Start are federally funded programs that provide whole-child and whole-family

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This commentary can be found online at: [tcf.org/content/commentary/mixing-early-head-start-and-private-pay-tuition-at-a-wisconsin-early-childhood-program/](https://tcf.org/content/commentary/mixing-early-head-start-and-private-pay-tuition-at-a-wisconsin-early-childhood-program/)

supports for young children in eligible families with incomes below the federal poverty level or who meet certain other criteria. While Head Start serves children ages 3 to 5, Early Head Start supports pregnant women and children ages 0 to 3. Both programs focus on providing a wide range of supports to children and families, and in Early Head Start, this also means having a range of different program options, from home-based services to center-based care to family child care homes.

Abbi prioritizes commitment to running a mixed-income center when enrolling families. Her center reserves spots based on how families will pay for care. “We don’t say, oh, you need care, we’ll just throw you in this spot. We’re pretty strict about making sure that we keep the funding sources as the priority for enrollment.” To do this, The Playing Field has to turn some families away for now and put them on a waitlist. The waitlists are different for each type of spot. For affluent families, the waitlist can be especially long, as these families are more likely to make advanced plans for child care.

Early Head Start spots get filled somewhat differently than the other spots at The Playing Field. Abbi finds that some Early Head Start families need child care that is available soon. Abbi explains, “especially our families that are homeless, they come to us and they’re like, we need child care tomorrow.” The center follows the enrollment guidelines set forth by Early Head Start for those families; this work is done by Reach Dane as the coordinating local agency.

Talking about families served by Early Head Start, Abbi said: “Most of the families have a child care subsidy. And then we make up the difference between what subsidy pays for and what it costs to run a quality program with money from the city of Madison and United Way and other donations that we get.” Madison’s [Early Head Start model](#) is designed to use Early Head Start funding in combination with state or local child care subsidies in order to create high-quality classrooms for children.

Abbi finds that middle-income families are the hardest to serve. These families do not qualify for child care subsidies,

but they still cannot afford high fees. For example, a family of four earning \$58,000 would not receive subsidies from the city of Madison or the state of Wisconsin. Yet if this family were to pay \$2,300 a month for infant child care—the tuition at The Playing Field—that would require 47 percent of their monthly income. That family would likely be eligible for the federal [Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit](#), which offers child care support for families, including those with middle and higher incomes, at phased levels; however, the current benefit levels were set in 2001, and the average benefit for working parents is just \$587 per year. This challenge hits close to home for Abbi. Her daughter is a nurse and is expecting a baby. She does not qualify for any subsidies but could not pay full price at her mom’s five-star child care center.

Abbi’s strategy for supporting these middle-income families is to create a private scholarship fund, but it has been hard to find donors for this. “Right now, the scholarship money really goes to folks who have child care assistance, but they need the money to close the gap for what quality really costs.” Abbi’s vision is for the scholarship money to fund the missing middle of child care. To achieve that mission, she needs more funding from foundations, the government, or grassroots donors. “We’d like to have a sliding fee scale. You can pay something; you just can’t pay all of it.”

## The Power of a Great Staff

To build her high-quality program, Abbi leaned on her knowledge as a former teacher and director with Head Start. She wanted her teachers to be equipped to support all families at the center, and she knew that some of the families had experienced trauma as part of being homeless. “It took us a while to get our sea legs. I was the only one that had any trauma background. I was the only one that had any conscious discipline training. The first couple of years were pretty hard.”

To help teachers excel at supporting child development, The Playing Field keeps a low teacher–student ratio so that they can meet the needs of kids. “If a child needs their clothes washed or they need extra food, somebody can just take them aside and take care of those needs and we aren’t running with the max ratios. That’s really key to our success.”

Abbi uses the metaphor of a family for the school:

In a family, people have different needs at different times, and you meet everyone's minimum needs while sometimes prioritizing one person in a season of need. Which says everybody's got different needs, and just because you come from an affluent family doesn't mean your needs are not important. It doesn't mean we're not going to meet your needs, but in a healthy family, everybody gets their needs met, whatever those needs are, and we can do that by keeping the ratios low.

Some of the Early Head Start families, Abbi said, have higher needs:

They live in crisis mode. And so something that seems small can kind of blow up really quickly. But we're pretty well equipped at being able to respond. It comes back to relationship. In the end, we have got solid relationships with people, and when you have a relationship, you can solve conflict. When you don't have relationship, you can only punish conflict.

## Building a Classroom Community

The Playing Field's focus on relationships spreads across families. Abbi has been pleasantly surprised to see parents form community with one another. Because she was familiar with Head Start families at the start, she was unsure what it would be like for privately funded families to share space with low-income families. But The Playing Field has committed families. "Most of our privately funded families are here because, number one, they want good care for their own children. Number two, they're realizing we [as a society] can't continue to do things the way we've done it." Privately funded families see the value of a diverse classroom setting for their children. And some of these parents find they grow from these experiences too.

Each month the center hosts well-attended family nights that Abbi describes as "packed out." Abbi shared a story from a private-pay father who was impacted by one of the family nights. After his child had left the preschool, he ran into Abbi and shared that he remembered one of his first

family nights at the school. The parents and teachers went around to share something good that had happened in their lives. This father told Abbi, "I was listening to people talk about somebody helping them when their car broke down or their boyfriend getting out of jail. And I was like, I went to visit my in-laws. I just came face to face with my own privilege. I didn't know how differently other people lived."

In other cases, families make connections that benefit everyone. "The families build relationships. And there's social capital. We've seen one parent say to another, 'oh, my office is hiring. You should apply and you can use me as a reference.'"

It's clear that there are benefits available to all families under the mixed-income model. Abbi says, "I always want people to know it's not just like, oh, aren't these poor kids lucky to go to school with affluent families? It's like, no, the benefits go both ways."

## The Challenge of Braiding Funding

For all the good that Abbi sees in her program's model, there are challenges in managing multiple funding streams. In some cases, Abbi finds herself at the intersection of well-intended policies with tough consequences for keeping her program funded. For example, Early Head Start requires certain quality benchmarks, and also strives for kids to have stability, so that means that programs must keep children enrolled until age three, even if that family loses a state child care subsidy that was helping to pay for the cost of child care.

Abbi uses a cupcake metaphor to explain this:

The child care subsidy pays for the cupcake. Early Head Start pays for the frosting—pays for qualified teachers, lower ratios, all those things. So when you come to me with your cupcake, Early Head Start gives the frosting, but if you lose your cupcake, I still have to maintain your enrollment. I still have to keep your child enrolled until they turn three years old. And so you can have subsidy for one day and lose it, and then I have to pay for your cupcake the whole time until you're three.

Abbi works with families to help get their child care funding sorted, because she wants families to have stability and stay with their program. The reasons that families lose their funding vary but could include the family going past the income limits, being under a child care sanction, or quitting working.

The spirit of Head Start’s policy is good—to keep children stably enrolled in good child care. But directors like Abbi need child care subsidy policies that support them in continuing to provide this child care.

## Expanding with a Two-Generation Approach to End Poverty

The Playing Field has grown immensely, and one recent change is that they received a grant from The Madison Community Foundation to fund a grant-writer on site. This will help support the center’s goal of a good scholarship fund for low- and middle-income families and will also help as they look to expand to a new site on the East Side of Madison. The new site will take a two-generation approach to fighting poverty. This approach is all about supporting both children and parents with resources to thrive. Homeless families will be able to access affordable housing through the local nonprofit [The Road Home](#) Dane County, and will access child care through The Playing Field.

As the center works to find additional funding to support the new site, Abbi is relying on the same thing that she believes got The Playing Field to where it is today: People. “We have really good people. We have really good people at the sites. We have really good people on our board. We have generous people in the community. We’re very lucky that way.”

## Recommendations and Takeaways for Programs and Policymakers

For program directors looking to expand access to different families, The Playing Field offers several ideas:

1. Carefully consider family engagement, and creating free opportunities for families to connect with one

another and with the teachers.

2. Lower ratios can support teachers in addressing the unique needs of some families in poverty who may have crisis moments.
3. Teachers and staff will need training in trauma-informed teaching.

For policy makers and foundations, The Playing Field offers promising data on the benefits of a mixed-income design:

1. For low-income families, sharing classrooms with affluent families can provide helpful “social capital,” or access to new people or opportunities they would be unlikely to find otherwise.
2. For affluent families, sharing classrooms with middle-income and low-income families may increase empathy and community support as these families engage with schools and peers in the future.
3. For low-income families, the welcoming funding model of a mixed-income family can support their ambition to earn more income without falling off the funding cliff of child care subsidy limits. The center can provide scholarship funds so these families can afford to keep their child at the same center even after getting a raise or a promotion at work.

State and federal agencies should make the following changes to make it easier for programs to blend and braid funding and serve diverse groups of families:

1. State child care subsidy programs could identify Early Head Start or Head Start students, and ensure continuous subsidy funding for these students, without the need for families to recertify with the state. This would ensure that Early Head Start or Head Start students have consistent funding from both sources, through age five, even if their eligibility changes.
2. State child care subsidy programs should ensure that Early Head Start or Head Start families do not have a copayment. A new federal rule regulating the Child

Care and Development Block Grant, which funds state child care subsidies, makes it easier for agencies to waive copayments for Early Head Start and Head Start children who are receiving subsidies, but it still does not require agencies to do this.

3. State child care subsidy programs could consider more flexible sliding fee scales that allow families to slowly take on child care tuition costs as their family income increases.