

BRAIDING, BLENDING, AND LAYERING FUNDING SOURCES TO INCREASE ACCESS TO QUALITY PRESCHOOL

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INTRODUCTION

This brief examines braiding, blending, and layering funding streams as possible strategies for supporting and sustaining high quality preschool programs. Interviews across three states with school district administrators, a Head Start director, and the director of a child care program illustrate how some leaders at the local level combine available funds to offer families the programming they need for their children.

Sustaining quality inclusive early childhood programs for children from families with lower incomes is a concern for all state and local administrators, including the administrators of the Preschool Development Grant (PDG). States have used PDG funds to expand access and enhance the quality of their subgrantees' preschool programs. As the PDG program enters Year Three of a four-year grant, integrating available funding streams may be one of the strategies these states and their local subgrantees use to sustain the PDG work following the end of federal funding.

The strategies of braiding, blending and layering federal, state and local funding streams to provide more comprehensive, inclusive early learning programs for young children and their families are not new. States and local communities have used these strategies for some time now. The goal of this brief is to increase awareness of these strategies, add some new funding streams (i.e., PDG funds) to the mix for consideration, and profile how local administrators are making it work in their contexts.

THE VALUE AND COSTS OF HIGH QUALITY PRESCHOOL

Over the last few decades, there has been compelling research indicating that children from families with low incomes accrue lifetime benefits from attending a high quality early childhood program (Garcia, Heckman, Leaf & Prados, 2016). The impacts that high quality experiences can have on children's readiness for kindergarten, for schooling, and for lifelong success have contributed to an expansion in state prekindergarten programs (Barnett, et.al., 2016), local publicly funded preschool (Muerchow & Weinberg, 2016) and increased federal funding for Head Start and child care. The economic return on relatively small investments in early learning has also fueled the growing awareness that greater access to high quality early learning programs is needed, especially for children from low income families (Heckman, 2011).¹ While increased funding for early childhood education is needed, it is "just part of the solution... governments need to ensure public funds are invested in highly effective early learning programs" (Barnett, 2011, p. 11).

Multiple funding sources are often needed to provide high quality preschool although most funding sources only support a portion of the day and year. PDG and some state and local prekindergarten (Pre-K) programs fund school-day, school-year preschool. Other states' PreK programs only fund a few hours per week during the school

¹ It is important to note that these positive outcomes have been demonstrated when children are in "high quality" settings.

year. Head Start programs often operate part-day school-year programs,² while others have expanded to offer full-day, full-year programs by including child care.

Public funding for early care and education consists of several federal, state, and local funding sources. These include: Head Start, Title I Preschool, preschool special education (federal IDEA Part B section 619, state and local funding), state and local funding for Pre-K, child care subsidies (federal Child Care and Development Block Grant and state funds), and the more recent federally funded PDG program. Each funding source has its unique eligibility requirements and regulations about how the funds can be used (Wallen & Hubbard, 2013). For example, PDG programs fund high quality preschool education and comprehensive services to support four-year-olds and their families who are living at or below 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL), whereas eligibility for Head Start is only 100%-130% of the FPL. Nevertheless, program administrators seeking to serve a socially and economically diverse group of children depend on using multiple funding streams and understanding how to navigate the various requirements and regulations to support their programs.

FUNDING STRATEGIES: BRAIDING, BLENDING, AND LAYERING FUNDS

Administrators from school districts, Head Start programs, and child care programs often need to use multiple federal, state and local funding sources to provide the programming children and families need. The way that they manage these various funding streams is through “braiding”, “blending”, and more recently “layering” funds. These terms have been used interchangeably; however, they are different. In the *Blending and Braiding Early Childhood Program Funding Streams Toolkit* (Wallen & Hubbard, 2013), the following definitions are used:

Blended... funds from two or more separate sources are wrapped together...to pay for a unified set of services to a group of children. In blending, costs are not necessarily allocated and tracked by individual funding source.

Braided... two or more funding sources are coordinated to support the total cost of services to individual children, but revenues are allocated and expenditures tracked by categorical funding source. In braiding, cost allocation methods are required to assure that there is no duplicate funding of service costs and each funding source is charged its fair share of program and administrative costs. (p.5)

From an administrator’s perspective, blending funding streams into one lump sum is a much less burdensome process. Unfortunately, most government funding requires accounting for expenditures by funding source; hence, funding streams usually need to be braided. Since eligibility and regulations vary across funding streams, administrators must be able to verify that funds from a particular source follow regulations, and are spent only on those who meet its eligibility requirements. So as not to create classrooms segregated by funding sources, local administrators are left with the challenging task of allocating, prorating and having to meet stringent accountability requirements. Wallen and Hubbard (2013, p.5) suggest that federal and state agencies work together to align categorical funding streams. If they did so, the result would “make it easier for...early learning service providers to use multiple funding streams [and] attain the scale needed to efficiently deliver high quality services that result in meaningful outcomes for young children.”

Layered funding is a newer term that is often used in connection with Early Head Start (EHS) – Child Care Partnership Grants. The principle of “supplement not supplant” is a key feature of layered funding. The North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (2014) provides a clear description of the concept of “layered funding”:

- **First Layer:** This is the foundational layer. These are the funds that the child care program is already receiving to operate (e.g., child care subsidy). These funds cannot be supplanted.

² The new Head Start Program Standards phase in full-day school-year programming in all Head Start centers.

- **Second Layer:** These are the Early Head Start funds that pay for the program-level, comprehensive services required by Early Head Start that can benefit all children attending the child care center, regardless of their EHS eligibility (e.g., staff training, equipment, and supplies).
- **Third Layer:** These are Early Head Start funds that pay for individual child services only for Early Head Start eligible children (e.g., screenings, home visits, assigned family service workers).
(NC Early Childhood Foundation, 2014, n.p.)

Although primarily used in connection with EHS-Child Care Partnerships, the concept of layering can be applied to other early childhood programs. As one Head Start director stated when discussing her program, “We no longer braid funding, we layer because if you remove one funding source or part of the braid, it falls apart. But if you layer, you can take out one layer but you still have the remaining layers” (Personal Communication, 2016).

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF BLENDING, BRAIDING, OR LAYERING FUNDING SOURCES

The benefits and challenges of integrating funding streams through braiding, blending or layering were depicted in a recent *New America* blog posting appropriately titled “Barely Hanging On: The Acrobatics of Funding High Quality Care for Young Children” (Jackson, 2016). An executive director of a network of nine non-profit child care centers serving low-income working migrant and immigrant families in California states that he depends on multiple funding sources to keep the lights on, provide quality early learning experiences, and pay staff livable wages. Many of the children in his centers receive child care subsidy; however, as with many states, the subsidy rate does not cover the costs of providing a full-day high-quality program. Consequently, he must juggle twelve different contracts and their accompanying regulations, eligibility requirements and paperwork to make ends meet. These contracts include state Pre-K, support to migrant families, and welfare to work.

In this same posting, another program administrator juggles multiple contracts and grants to provide a comprehensive program for children and families. The California State Preschool Program covers the major operating costs of her center (e.g., staff compensation, facility costs), and her Head Start funds cover the comprehensive services such as screenings, mental health services and other supports for Head Start eligible families. However, despite juggling multiple funding streams, the administrator says she still needs to do fundraising in order to make ends meet. In that same blog, another program is profiled that uses Head Start funds as a base to fund a three-hour per morning program, but then layers state, local, other federal funding sources, as well as philanthropic and private funds to cover the remaining costs of offering a full-day quality program.

The findings from a recently commissioned study for Congress on integrating early care and education funding sources and partnerships reiterated the themes the program administrators spoke of in the *New America* blog summarized above (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). Several state and local early care and education administrators were interviewed for this study. The most frequently cited benefits of accessing additional funding by integrating federal, state and local funding sources heard were the ability to serve more children, increase quality, and increase families’ access to full day programming. The interviewees also identified several challenges to integrating funding sources and partnering. These included varying reimbursement practices, eligibility criteria, standards, and requirements across funding streams. They reported that the time needed to do cost allocation, monitoring, and data sharing was siphoning off funding that could be used to provide services to children and families.

Braiding, blending, and layering federal, state, and local funding sources can be used to meet the goal of increasing the quality of early learning experiences as well as access to these opportunities; however, doing so requires time, effort, and one or more knowledgeable administrators. These local administrators need to know the potential and the limitations of various funding sources, along with the various rules and regulations for each source (Mathews,

et al., 2015). Over the last few years, there has been an overall increase in funding early care and education. But the patchwork funding system for supporting quality preschool is complicated at many levels and not always logical nor efficient (Cooper & Costa, 2012).

PROFILES OF BLENDING, BRAIDING AND LAYERING FUNDING STREAMS TO SUPPORT QUALITY PRESCHOOL

To delve further into how various funding streams are integrated to support quality preschool, a series of structured interviews were conducted with administrators of early childhood programs from three states, two of which are PDG states (i.e., Illinois and Vermont). The administrators interviewed include school district personnel, a Head Start director, and the owner/director of a child care program that is a PDG subgrantee.

VERMONT

Betsy Rathbun-Gunn is the Early Childhood Services Director at United Children's Services, the Head Start grantee in southwestern Vermont. The catchment area of this Head Start program covers a major city and several small towns and villages. It serves 101 families; 13 of which have children in the infant/toddler program, and the remaining families have children in the four preschool programs in three different towns.

Ms. Rathbun-Gunn's Head Start program is a Preschool Expansion Grant (PEG)³ subgrantee, a qualified Vermont Act 166 Pre-K provider, and an approved subsidized child care provider. She reports that her total annual operating budget is a little over \$2 million. The major funding sources are her Head Start grant, state Pre-K, PEG, and child care subsidy. She also receives a small state Strengthening Families grant and sometimes applies for small foundation grants to fund specific projects.

Cost allocation is how Ms. Rathbun-Gunn manages her various funding streams. "Everything is broken down by child, time, and funding requirements. Everything has a cost allocation formula attached to it. It's a nightmare! It takes a lot of time, but everything has a bread crumb path back to the funding source." She said that this process has been especially challenging with the PEG funds due to the state's initial uncertainty as to allowable PEG expenditures. However, the benefits her program has realized as a PEG subgrantee have been worthwhile. For example, the PEG funds have stabilized her teaching staff since teachers are now compensated at the school district levels. PEG funding has also enabled families and children to receive mental health services. Ms. Rathbun-Gunn concluded her interview by saying, "You have to have three legs of the stool: state, federal, and local funding. I know no one [source] can do it alone. Without all three, you can't provide a quality program."

Another Vermont example of braiding multiple funding streams to offer a quality program is from the Little Ones University, a private child care center located near Burlington. This center demonstrates how various initiatives and funding sources can be used effectively to improve the quality of a program. Interviews were conducted with Caryl Corbett, the center's director/owner, and Erin Maguire, the Executive Director of Student Support Services at Chittenden Central Supervisory Union (CCSU).

The Little Ones University (LOU) is licensed for 80 children from infants to kindergarteners. LOU serves a high-needs population with 90% of the families living in poverty. Many of the children are from single-parent families who receive child care subsidy. Several years ago, the center was only at the 2 STAR level in Vermont's quality rating system. It wasn't approved to be a state Pre-K provider since it didn't have the minimum 3 STARS needed for quality, and it did not receive Vermont's higher child subsidy reimbursement rates that are tied to higher STARS levels. According to Ms. Corbett, her staff cared about the children, but they didn't have the skills and knowledge to provide high-quality care and education.

³ The PDG program includes two types of grants: Preschool Expansion Grants (PEG) and Preschool Development Grants. States that served ten percent (10%) or more of their four-year-olds, or were Early Learning Challenge Grant recipients when they submitted a proposal for PDG funding, are "Expansion" states. Both Vermont and Illinois qualified as PEG states.

Through partnerships with CCSU, the Howard Center (a mental health agency), the United Way, the University of Vermont Medical Center, and other groups, LOU has become a “full-service preschool” by providing services families need directly at the center. These “services” include: parent classes, Narcotics and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, a Women Infants and Children (WIC) program, and Working Bridges which provides a visiting resource manager to help parents with finances, employment, and education opportunities. LOU has become a therapeutic child care program and now has an early interventionist who supports children, families, and the child care staff.

The quality of LOU has improved tremendously over the past two years as a result of these partnerships. This increase in quality has enabled LOU to avail itself of other funding sources. After LOU achieved 3 STARS, CCSU became a PEG subgrantee on behalf of LOU. Ms. Corbett stated that the PEG funds enabled LOU to purchase much needed equipment and materials, increase salaries to attract and retain qualified staff, and provide professional development opportunities. Ms. Maguire concluded, “The PEG money was a game changer”. With \$100,000 of yearly PEG funding, LOU was able to obtain 4 STARS which led to a higher child care subsidy reimbursement rate.⁴ Ms. Maguire added that the plan for sustainability after the PEG sunsets is for LOU to achieve 5 STARS; the higher subsidy payments will nearly fill the void left by the end of PEG funds.

Ms. Corbett manages the center’s budget of \$776,000 which includes: federal and state child care subsidy funding, state pre-K funding, PEG funds, parent fees and co-pays, and grants from philanthropic organizations. Ms. Corbett summed up the impacts of LOU’s multiple funding streams and partnerships in the following quote:

This has changed the lives of children at my center. . . . Recently we had a [licensing] compliance visit and she...said it was so unbelievably better. [It has] changed the dynamics of the center. [Staff] now have joy in their jobs. All staff are becoming more informed and aware of developmentally appropriate practice. Parents are amazed because we now have lots of beauty in our space.

PENNSYLVANIA

Pennsylvania’s Act 45 established Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts (PA Pre-K Counts), the state’s publicly funded prekindergarten program. PA Pre-K Counts is a competitive, renewable grant program designed to provide quality early learning experiences for three- to five-year-old children who are at-risk of school failure. “At risk of school failure” is defined as lower income families (below 300% FPL), English Language Learners, or other factors (e.g., homelessness) (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2015).

The Pittsburgh Public Schools is a PA Pre-K Counts grant recipient and a Head Start/Early Head Start grantee. In an interview with Carol Barone-Martin, the Executive Director of Early Childhood Education for the Pittsburgh Public Schools, she described how the total of seven federal, state and local funding sources work together to serve the 2,000 three- to five-year-olds, and 108 infants⁵ in her programs.

The Head Start/Preschool program operates in 82 mixed age classrooms. Most of these classrooms are in the city’s elementary schools, but two are located at the Pittsburgh Children’s Museum. Preschool follows the school day (six hours per day) and the school year calendar. Part of Pittsburgh’s PA Pre-K Counts and Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program funding is directed to partnerships with community child care programs to provide comprehensive services to 409 children who meet PA Pre-K Counts eligibility. The comprehensive services provided to partner child care programs include a coach to work with the teachers, pass through funding, screening, and enhancing the curriculum.

⁴ Vermont’s child care subsidy rates are tied to a program’s Step Ahead Recognition System (STARS), the state’s quality rating and improvement system.

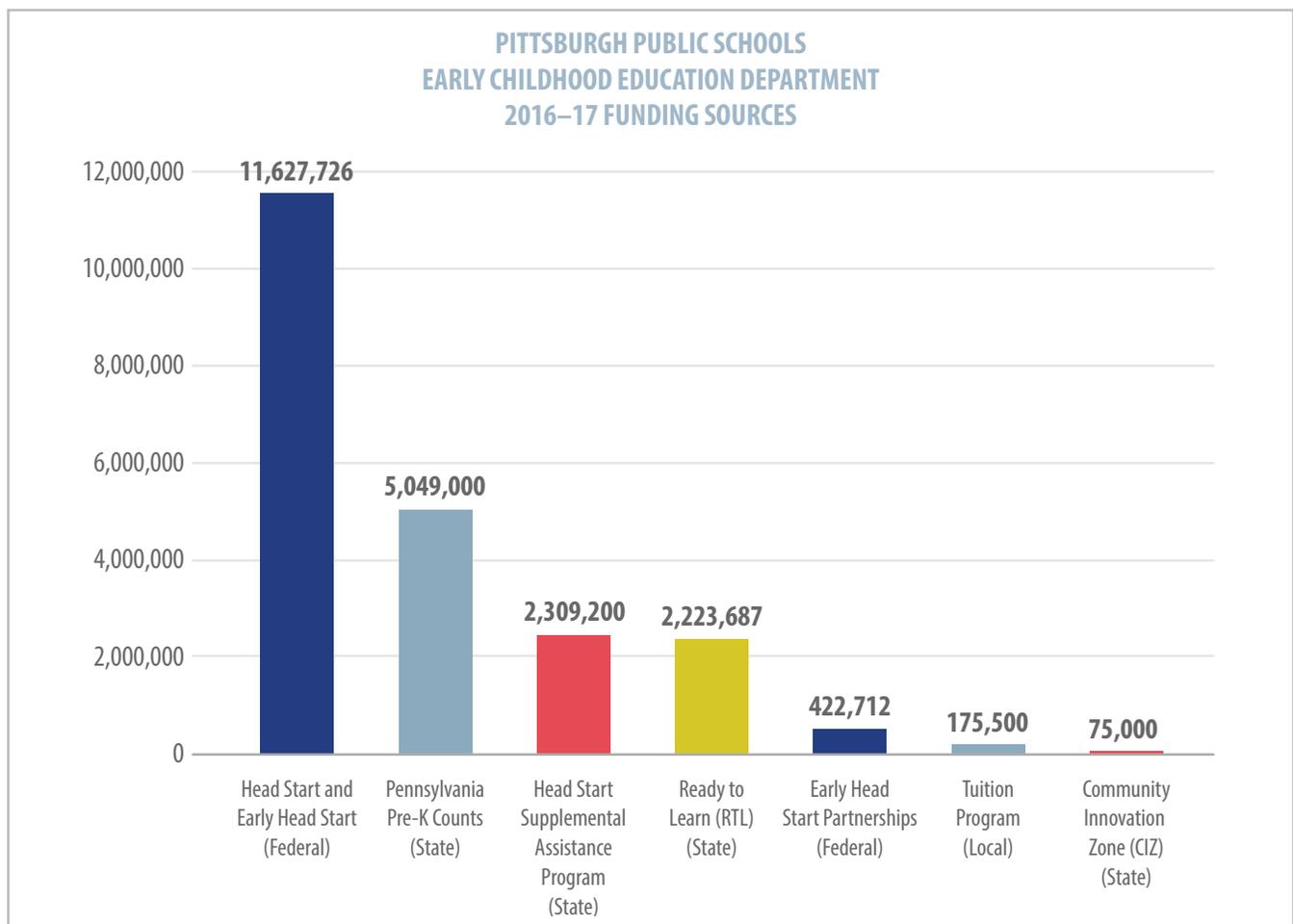
⁵ The infants are primarily the children of high school students.

In addition to the federal Head Start/Early Head Start and state Pre-K Counts grants, the Pittsburgh early childhood education programs are also supported by the following funding sources (refer to Figure 1):

- State Head Start Supplemental dollars
- Ready to Learn, a state funded Accountability Block grant. This formula based grant is awarded on an annual basis to all school districts. Districts choose which of 11 priorities to support. Pittsburgh is the only Pennsylvania district to use 100% of these funds to support preschool
- Early Head Start Partnership funds
- Local tuition dollars for children to attend preschool who live with families that are over-income
- Community Innovation Zone funds coming from the state’s Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant. These funds are for community specific activities related to school readiness and families.

According to Ms. Barone-Martin, the district initially used some of its Title I dollars to fund preschool; however, due to other needs, those Title I funds were shifted to pay for remedial services in K-12. Figure 1 shows the amount of each funding source for the current school year.

FIGURE 1



Children with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are included in the Pre-K classrooms as the child’s Least Restricted Environment. Two slots per classroom are kept open to accommodate children transitioning from early intervention (Part C) into preschool. These transitions occur throughout the preschool year upon the child’s third birthday. The special education dollars pay for the child’s specialized IEP services, and Head Start or the PA Pre-K

Counts grant pays for the child's classroom program. Ms. Barone-Martin oversees the distribution of IDEA Part B 619 funds but this funding source is not added into the braided funding equation. These dollars are exclusively earmarked for services for preschoolers with disabilities.

Ms. Barone-Martin shared some of the specifics of how she braids and integrates these multiple funding streams. First, she prorates everything: salaries, benefits, materials, etc. When the program first started, there were fewer funding sources so it was less complicated than today. Since the funding streams have different requirements, she follows the highest standards required of any of the funding streams. For example, lead teachers in all settings are certified early childhood teachers as required by PA Pre-K Counts, and all teachers conduct home visits as required by Head Start.

ILLINOIS

Established in 2006, Preschool for All (PFA) is Illinois' state funded part-day Pre-K program for three- and four-year-olds. The federal PEG funding Illinois receives enables it to provide funds to high need communities to expand their PFA program from two and a half hours per day, five days a week, to a full school day (i.e., six hours). One of these high-need communities is Rockford. The Rockford Public Schools is a PEG subgrantee. In addition to braiding, the Rockford Early Childhood Program illustrates another funding strategy: coordinating funding with other entities' funding to expand access and/or quality beyond what each entity could do independently.

Kim Nelson, the Executive Director of Early Childhood for the Rockford Public School District, provided information about her programs and how they are funded. The total operating budget for the Rockford Early Childhood programs in 2015-2016 was \$13.83 million. There were three major funding sources and two partnerships:

- PFA provided most of the funding at \$8.78 million
- PEG contributed \$1.35 million
- Local Funds were \$3.71 million. These local funds are specifically to support children with disabilities and developmental delays. They are used to fund 240 "seats" in inclusive classrooms. These funds pay for specialists to deliver specialized education and related services, and for transportation if specified on the child's IEP
- In its partnership with Head Start, the Rockland Public School District provides space and a licensed teacher for the Head Start classrooms to qualify for PFA
- In its partnership with a child care center, the school district provides a licensed teacher and the center provides the facility and other staff for the center to qualify for PFA funding

The Rockford Early Childhood Program collaborates with two partners, a local child care center and a Head Start program. The child care collaboration enables the center to offer eight full-day classrooms that include a PFA funded morning. The child care center provides the facility and staff; the school district provides a licensed early childhood teacher, additional curriculum, and professional development for the child care staff. The Head Start collaboration involves the district hosting seven Head Start classrooms in one of its early childhood centers; all the children are Head Start eligible. The district also provides a licensed teacher. Head Start provides a teacher, a family support worker, and the requisite comprehensive services Head Start offers.

When Ms. Nelson was asked how she braids these different funding streams, she responded saying that she does not consider managing these funding sources "braiding" since "no money exchanges hands". Although the services are integrated in the partnerships, the funds remain separate. When asked about managing the three funding sources she controls, Ms. Nelson replied that the district's payroll system tracks staff time and effort by funding source. Additionally, the PEG classrooms are separate from the state Pre-K classes since the PEG classrooms are full-time and only enroll children who are PEG income and age eligible.

CONCLUSION

A series of structured interviews with school, Head Start, and child care administrators across three states was conducted to delve further into the what and how of integrating various funding streams, including Head Start and PDG funds, to support high-quality services. The information demonstrated that program administrators find themselves braiding, blending, and layering these funding streams to offer quality programs and to “keep the lights on.”

The cost of quality preschool is beyond the reach of many working families. It is estimated that the cost is between \$10,000 and \$15,372, which is more than in-state college tuition in some states. Federal, state, and local government funding helps to fill the gap between the cost and what families can afford, especially for children who are from low-income families, have disabilities or developmental delays, or have other risk factors (e.g., homelessness). Each of these various public funding streams has its unique purpose, regulations, and eligibility requirements which program administrators have to learn how to navigate when they integrate funding streams.

Utilizing the strategies of braiding, blending and layering multiple funding streams can increase access to inclusive, high quality preschool programs for all children. The strategy of creating partnerships between programs to share resources and coordinate services (e.g., the Rockford Early Childhood Program’s partnerships with Head Start and a child care center) can also expand children’s access. These different funding strategies can contribute to sustainability over time.

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PENNSYLVANIA

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