

Early Learning Network coordinates response to families and childrens needs in COVID-19 emergency

By Bob Driehaus

The abrupt closure of all schools and most childcare centers in Ohio to slow the spread of COVID-19 threw working families who rely on childcare into crisis and created an instant challenge to providers that feed and support children.

With no playbook to follow to ensure a smooth transition and avoid duplicating scarce resources, the Early Learning Network that StrivePartnership had been coordinating snapped into action. It is regularly drawing its many partners together to share ideas, support each other, identify needs and make sure that services were being distributed as efficiently as possible.

“The biggest strength is the amount of people who just want to do good, said Heather Gerker, Manager, Early Learning Success. “How do we make sure their work is coordinated rather than duplicating services?”

Forty-five early learning stakeholders quickly huddled online through Zoom and a Basecamp group established by StrivePartnership and got to work. The frequent gatherings have continued.

Kevin Kushman, a board director at Blue Manatee Literacy Project, said the platform has been invaluable.

“We were really in a silo. What Heather did was provide an instant level set on how things are done, who we could rely on in terms of resource delivery and support,” he said. “We felt instantly connected.”

Multiple initiatives have already launched, including an aggressive book drive led by Blue Manatee, Literacy Network of Southwest Ohio and Wordplay. They’re reaching out through social media to gather 10,000 to 15,000 books for young learners that they’ll distribute throughout the Tri-State when it’s safe to do so.

Kushman said StrivePartnership made it possible to understand the channels, the delivery and timing issues that will be critical to the project’s success.

The Network gatherings also have proven to be a place where new strategies can gain feedback and be promoted. One innovation has been an online mapping tool developed by 84.51, the brand marketing juggernaut, in collaboration with Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center and others. Using the same mapping technology used to serve its private clients, the tool identifies where social agencies are distributing food and other staples in Greater Cincinnati.

The data greatly improved the ability of non-profits to reach as many needy children and families as possible and to avoid gaps in service.

“That mapping to me is something that will survive long after what we’re dealing with now,” Kushman said.

City Gospel Mission COO of Youth Programs John Allbrittin said his organization has quickly forged several new partnerships through the connections.

Its Hispanic Outreach program is now collaborating with Children’s Hospital’s Carly Riley, Cincinnati Public Schools’ Vera Brooks and others to support the food distribution effort that Arturo Minera at City Gospel Mission conducts every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

“Heather connected us and Carly facilitated a meeting between folks working with her and some of our City Gospel Mission folks,” he said.

Instead of only distributing food, the partners are distributing toilet paper, gloves, toothpaste, diapers, masks and other hygiene and medical supplies.

Allbrittin said his organization’s Little Village Director, Melanie Gomez, has shared numerous resources they learned about through the network to parents, caregivers, youth and educators. These include links to medical videos in English, Spanish and Arabic produced by Children’s Hospital that explain what to do if the viewer starts having coronavirus symptoms, and the [Wide Open School](#) online teaching resource.

Gerker and her colleagues at StrivePartnership are working from home but have been pleased to support front-line responders from behind the scenes.

“We’ve been working to decrease the number of organizations that have similar work plans towards the same goals but maybe are not necessarily aware of it,” Gerker said. “The connections and energy from so many people, it’s been good.”