



Housing and Education Partnerships

A Case Study of Akron, Ohio

Erwin de Leon and Priya D. Saxena

March 2015

Introduction

The housing and education sectors are being asked to do more with fewer resources. School districts often struggle to meet the needs of low-income students who deal with challenges outside of school and to connect them to resources that can strengthen their academic competencies. Public housing authorities and other assisted-housing providers similarly recognize the need for an array of support services to help their clients achieve financial and family stability. Housing providers have been exploring the role they can play, particularly in improving child outcomes overall and educational outcomes specifically. The premise is that housing providers have a unique opportunity and entry point to improve children's outcomes by connecting them to services and by bringing opportunities right into their homes or developments. Housing authorities in particular are in a favored position to reach low-income families and connect educators, low-income students, and their caregivers outside the school day. By partnering, school districts and housing authorities can begin to identify and tackle barriers to learning that poor students may face, such as housing instability, truancy, and health problems. By combining their resources and leveraging their individual strengths—programmatic, financial, and social—educators and housing authorities are learning how they can have a greater impact on low-income students' lives. Those partnerships represent uncharted territory for many school districts and housing authorities.

The Council of Large Public Housing Authorities (CLPHA) is a membership association that represents 70 of the largest public housing authorities in the country. To support and expand its members' ambition and capacity to support educational outcomes, CLPHA kicked off an education initiative in 2013. As part of that initiative, CLPHA is providing technical assistance and field-building support to practitioners, conducting policy advocacy on Capitol Hill, and entering partnerships with other national organizations to advance meaningful and sustainable partnerships between the housing

and education sectors. In 2014, with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, CLPHA enlisted the Urban Institute to examine promising practices emerging from partnerships in three cities: Akron, Ohio; New Haven, Connecticut; and Vancouver, Washington. The overview of findings from case studies in three sites, “Developing Housing and Education Partnerships: Lessons from the Field,” documents some creative approaches and promising practices to inform local efforts to launch partnerships, as well as national-level policy and advocacy efforts. This brief focuses on one partnership site: Akron, Ohio.

Study Site and Partnership

Akron is Ohio’s fifth-largest city. The city has an estimated population of 198,100: 62 percent white, 32 percent African American, 2 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2 percent Latino. The median household income is \$33,909, and 28 percent of Akron residents live below the poverty level.¹

The Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority (AMHA) manages 9,900 assisted-housing units: 4,300 public housing units, 5,000 housing choice vouchers, and 600 other affordable units. AMHA is not a Moving to Work (MTW)² housing agency, but AMHA resident services staff members assist clients with supportive services that encourage independence, family stability, and lease compliance. In addition, AMHA has two initiatives that seek to close the achievement gap between children in AMHA developments and other children in the county. The Early Childhood Initiative (ECI) is an early childhood development initiative that offers programs and services across AMHA properties, and the Reach Opportunity Center is a community-based education resource center located in the Summit Lake community.

Based on 2012 data, Akron Public Schools (APS) is the fifth-largest school district in Ohio, enrolling approximately 22,000 students annually. Of its students, 46 percent are African American, 39 percent are white, 3 percent are Latino, and more than 4 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander. Eighty-six percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.³ APS includes 31 elementary schools, 9 middle schools, and 9 high schools. APS also boasts 29 community learning centers embedded in its schools, which provide students and city residents with venues for learning and community activities both during and after the school day.⁴

The relationship between AMHA and APS is bolstered by two collaborative, collective impact initiatives in Summit County. The first, the Summit Education Initiative (SEI), helps Summit County identify major educational challenges, track progress, facilitate collaborations to address educational challenges, and develop programs that address barriers to education.⁵ As a P-16 Cradle to Career Alliance, SEI engages education stakeholders from across all sectors of the community to align resources and efforts behind evidence-based solutions to improve student outcomes along the education pipeline from preschool through college or career. SEI lays a critical foundation for Akron’s housing and education partnership because it creates political will for collaboration, data to communicate about social conditions, and venues for AMHA and APS to connect and meet new partners.

The second initiative, Summit County First Things First, is a county-sponsored collective impact initiative focused exclusively on young children from birth to age 5. Initiated by AMHA and other key stakeholders and later adopted by the county executive in 2009, First Things First seeks to fill gaps and build capacity across early care and education, health, family supports, special needs and early intervention, behavioral health, and maternal depression. The initiative provides a set of key indicators by which outcomes in those areas can be tracked. SEI supports the early care and education efforts of First Things First and developed “16 for Success,” a set of 16 skills that children need to be successful in kindergarten. AMHA houses almost 10 percent of all children from birth to age 5 in Summit County.

Key Elements of Partnership

Akron’s housing and education partnership has been developing along two tracks. The first, AMHA’s Early Childhood Initiative (ECI), is a set of programs and supports offered to young children living in AMHA developments and their families. Programs include home visiting and maternal depression services and link families to community resources that provide a continuum of care and address children’s developmental needs. ECI’s main role is to connect with and empower families to ensure that they become their child’s first and most important teacher.

The second element, the Reach Opportunity Center at Summit Lake, is a community-based education resource center that is owned and operated by AMHA and APS. The Reach Opportunity Center provides programming and services along the cradle-to-career continuum. ECI activities are offered at the Reach Opportunity Center, along with Head Start, kindergarten, youth development programs, and workforce development programs. The center is located in Akron near Summit Lake, a community with 249 public housing units.

Shared Goals and Joint Strategies

ECI and the Reach Opportunity Center both seek to close the achievement gap between children in AMHA developments and other children in the county. ECI activities are offered to all families in the Summit Lake neighborhood at the Reach Opportunity Center.

EARLY CHILDHOOD INITIATIVE

AMHA’s ECI is an ambitious effort to boost the school readiness of young children in AMHA units by improving their health and well-being and by providing access to services for children and their parents. The initiative was developed based on the conviction by AMHA leadership that early childhood investments will yield long-term financial, health, and social-emotional benefits. The longer-term goals of ECI are to increase students’ third-grade reading accuracy and high school graduation rate. To that end, ECI offers three programs that are intended to inform, support, and empower parents to support their children as learners. Those programs include family outreach events; AMHA’s home visitation program, which uses the evidence-based Parents as Teachers curriculum; and maternal depression services. ECI also provides referrals for families to community partners for other needed services, such as assistance with basic needs and economic self-sufficiency.

ECI promotes most of the early care and education goals established at the county level by First Things First. About 10 percent of the county's children from birth to age 5 live in AMHA developments, so AMHA is an essential partner in the county's collective impact effort.

REACH OPPORTUNITY CENTER AT SUMMIT LAKE

In 2011, AMHA, APS, and other community leaders convened to discuss the possibility of opening a center in the Summit Lake neighborhood that would provide cradle-to-career education for neighborhood residents (Reach Opportunity Center 2014).⁶ As part of their strategic planning process, AMHA and its partners articulated a theory of change for the Reach Center.

The overarching goal is to enhance the quality of life for the residents of Summit Lake by increasing educational opportunities for all residents—young children, school-age children, and adults—through the collaboration of community partners. Program goals include (a) encouraging academic success in children, (b) encouraging academic achievement in adults, (c) preparing job-seeking adults for the job market, and (d) encouraging family self-sufficiency. Organization goals include (a) ensuring that the Reach Opportunity Center building is fully operational, (b) establishing a system for coordinated operation of multiple program providers in one facility, (c) establishing a system for coordinating the collaborative's finances, and (d) establishing a system for coordinating the collaborative's marketing and public relations efforts (B L Westbrook Consulting 2012).

SEI goals and strategies inform and inspire the Reach Opportunity Center's goals and strategies. Programming offered at the Reach Opportunity Center is aligned with SEI so that investments made by AMHA and its partners will affect established SEI outcomes.

Leadership

Leadership for ECI is provided by AMHA's Tony O'Leary, Chris Yuhasz, and Christina Hodgkinson. Together, Yuhasz and Hodgkinson set the direction of ECI, and all three actively support AMHA partnerships with service providers. As executive director, O'Leary oversees all aspects concerning AMHA and its role in Akron. As director of resident services, Hodgkinson oversees all services available to AMHA residents, including ECI. Yuhasz, as director of strategic engagement, works to engage partners with AMHA to enhance services available to AMHA residents.

Chris Yuhasz is the driving force behind ECI. She works on bringing in partners to provide services and on acquiring funding from philanthropists across Akron. Early in the development of ECI, Yuhasz discovered that US Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funding could not be allocated to early childhood services. To work around this challenge, AMHA created a 501(c)(3) nonprofit called Building for Tomorrow (BFT), which is largely funded by local foundations, individuals, and corporations.

APS senior staff members, including David W. James (superintendent) and Carla Sibley (director of community relations), help mobilize support for the initiative. James also serves as lead partner with O'Leary for the Reach Opportunity Center.

Staff

AMHA leadership works alongside the manager of ECI, Richelle Wardell, and the manager of Reach, Vanessa Drone. All five AMHA staff members sit on the Reach Center's steering committee.

Approximately 75 percent of Yuhasz's time is allocated to fundraising activities, and 25 percent is spent on partnership activities for ECI and Reach. Approximately 50 percent of Hodgkinson's time is dedicated to overseeing the ECI program and Reach, and the other 50 percent is dedicated to overseeing the rest of the Resident Services Department.

The United Way supports a member of Americorps' Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), who is focused on building connections between APS and AMHA. Deatra Hunt's role is to keep AMHA partners informed about APS by attending APS family engagement team meetings and inviting experts from APS to speak at AMHA. Later this year, she will begin home visits. Her work currently focuses on the Summit Lake housing development and its nearby elementary school, but AMHA is exploring whether to expand those activities in other housing developments.

Partners

ECI partners work to increase kindergarten readiness, reading skills, parent engagement, and early childhood education and development services and programs. In partnership with AMHA, partners seek to mitigate barriers young children in public housing face when preparing for and attending school.

AKRON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

APS operates the two kindergarten classrooms in the Reach Opportunity Center, which was co-funded by AMHA and APS, and shares information with AMHA through SEI. A VISTA member focuses on maintaining an ongoing relationship between APS and AMHA. As a member of the APS family engagement team, Hunt organizes events for APS staff to present on important APS issues to staff and residents at AMHA.

OTHER PARTNERS

AMHA works closely with Akron Summit County Public Library to provide adult computer classes and family literacy classes at the Reach Opportunity Center. Akron Summit County Public Library also participates in ECI family outreach events.

Child Guidance & Family Solutions (CG&FS) is a mental health agency that focuses on working with children, adults, and family units. The agency has been partnering with AMHA for more than 20 years and began partnering with the ECI partnership 5 years ago. CG&FS works with the youngest children in a family unit, with the desired outcome of affecting the trajectory of the whole family. The agency also works with the AMHA home visitation team. In addition, a professional from CG&FS facilitates Mom-ME-Time (maternal depression support) groups.

Greenleaf Family Center is a 501(c)(3) organization that provides services in 17 program areas, including traditional behavioral health, mental health, substance abuse, services for the deaf, teenage

parenting, and life link services for infant mortality. Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK) is Greenleaf's early childhood home visitation program that works closely with AMHA. Whereas AMHA offers Parents as Teachers services to families with children from birth to age 3, SPARK offers those services to families with children 3 to 5 years of age.

Akron Summit Community Action Head Start serves 70 children at the Reach Center: 8 infants, 8 toddlers, 34 preschoolers in part-day sessions, and 20 preschoolers in full-day sessions.

Funding Sources

AMHA established a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofit, Building for Tomorrow (BFT), to provide social and educational services and financial assistance to low-income individuals who apply for or reside in AMHA housing or who receive services at the Reach Opportunity Center. BFT seeks financial support for those programs and services from foundations and other philanthropic organizations and individuals. Resources from the BFT budget are allocated primarily to services components of ECI and the Reach Opportunity Center.

AMHA's ECI budget for 2015 is approximately \$460,000. Many local foundations provide ongoing support, with the largest grants coming from the Akron Community Foundation and the GAR Foundation.

AKRON COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

The Akron Community Foundation began funding services in housing developments and early childhood development in 2007. Currently, the foundation's largest grant is to AMHA for ECI and has awarded \$95,000 per year for the past 5 years.

GAR FOUNDATION

The GAR Foundation currently funds AMHA's ECI with yearly grants of \$70,000 to \$80,000.

UNITED WAY OF SUMMIT COUNTY

United Way of Summit County was involved in early childhood development early in the partnership. Its collaboration started with Born Learning and Bridges out of Poverty. It is also the fiscal agency supporting Cradle to Career. United Way contributes 14 percent of the budget, or approximately \$64,000. In addition, United Way is supporting a VISTA member who is focused on building connections between APS and AMHA.

ADDITIONAL FUNDING

The state of Ohio (Ohio Children's Trust Fund) covered 15 percent of ECI's budget, or approximately \$87,000. AMHA seeks to garner more individual and corporate contributions, particularly for the Reach Center.

The Reach Opportunity Center, an extension site for ECI, has an annual operating budget of \$247,000, with the costs being divided between AMHA, APS, and Akron Summit Community Action Head Start. Through fundraising efforts, AMHA expects 52 percent to come from individuals; 24

percent from foundations; 3 percent from corporations; 2 percent from special events; 8 percent from campaign leadership, board, and staff; and 11 percent from smaller individual gifts. Although the Reach Collaborative received a \$4 million grant from HUD's Capital Fund Education and Training Community Facilities Program for construction of the facility, raising funds for operating expenses has been challenging.

Programs and Services

ECI has focused exclusively on early learning and child care, based on "the belief that all children deserve to receive high quality early care, education and support services that ensure comprehensive healthy development."⁷ AMHA leadership contend that investments in early childhood will yield long-term financial, health, and social-emotional benefits. ECI offers programs that seek to inform, empower, support, and address the mental health needs of parents of young children. ECI also aspires to make the parents of young children aware of what they can do to improve their children's academic abilities.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD

Family outreach events provide dedicated time for families to convene and learn together and to focus on early childhood learning. The events are held in four family housing developments and seek to foster a sense of community with a focus on early childhood.

Home visitation services use the evidence-based Parents as Teachers curriculum for families with children younger than 3 years of age. This curriculum provides help to parents that is designed to help them be their child's first and most important teacher. In addition, annual screenings for children assess health, vision, hearing, and the five developmental domains: social and emotional development; approaches toward learning; language and literacy development; cognition and general knowledge; and physical well-being and motor development (Parents as Teachers 2014).

Home visitation services also include assistance to parents in meeting basic needs and promoting economic self-sufficiency through the assistance of AMHA service coordinators. Those services are offered to families with children, prenatal to kindergarten age. Parents are encouraged to work toward self-sufficiency by earning their GED high school equivalency certificate, by continuing their education in general, and by securing employment.

Maternal depression services support new mothers and any other mothers who display signs of depression. ECI Child and Family Partners and CG&FS staff members administer depression screenings to those women. On the basis of those assessments, mothers are referred to a mental health provider for further evaluation and treatment and have access to monthly on-site support groups in AMHA developments, which are facilitated by a professional from CG&FS.

THE REACH OPPORTUNITY CENTER AT SUMMIT LAKE

The Reach Opportunity Center is a community-based learning center that hosts two Head Start and two Early Head Start classrooms, two APS kindergarten classrooms, and adult education classes. Other service providers will begin to use the space for programs and classes currently in the planning stages.

The vision for the Reach Opportunity Center is for it to be a hub for early childhood and adult services, programming, and events.

Data for Decisionmaking

Data sharing between AMHA and APS is made possible by the Summit Education Initiative. SEI has data-sharing agreements with AMHA and each public school district in Summit County that allow SEI to track outcomes for all students (those who live in AMHA housing and those who do not). In November 2013, SEI provided AMHA and APS with data for youths living in AMHA housing and compared their school-readiness scores with those of all APS students. SEI will provide additional data to AMHA for its education initiatives. For the Reach initiative, AMHA will provide the names of participants to SEI, and SEI will create an indicator for those children that will allow SEI to extract APS data for those students. For ECI, AMHA will also provide the names of participants to SEI, and SEI will extract APS data for those students.

Before providing the data to AMHA, SEI will de-identify the data. AMHA will use the data to explore the relationships between ECI program participation and kindergarten readiness. AMHA will also use the data to confirm kindergarten registration and compare kindergarten readiness of AMHA and non-AMHA children. The first year that the cohort of ECI participants entering kindergarten will have received supports from birth until kindergarten entry is 2015.

To complement SEI and AMHA's capacity for research and evaluation, AMHA recently hired a consultant to evaluate outcomes of the Reach Opportunity Center and ECI. That individual will further the Reach Opportunity Center's collective impact and support database development and reporting for both ECI and Reach.

Systems and Protocols for Coordination

COMMUNICATION

The long history and strong relationships among the leaders and other representatives of partner organizations suggest that even with few formal systems and protocols, a constant conversation takes place about shared issues and concerns, particularly around education. Involved individuals pick up the phone or talk about work in social settings as a standard practice. ECI has an advisory board that meets quarterly to track and review the partnership's progress and to discuss and plan next steps. The board is composed of key stakeholder representatives from each partner organization, as well as funders. SEI and First Things First provide additional opportunities for partners to communicate.

COLOCATION

The Reach Opportunity Center is a multiuse space located next to the Summit Lake housing development. The center was constructed with funds raised by AMHA and APS, in addition to the grant from HUD.

Summary and Next Steps

AMHA's Early Childhood Initiative seeks to improve the health and well-being of young children and their parents, as well as their access to services. ECI furthers the goals of First Things First, the Summit county initiative to invest in children from birth to age five.

AMHA and APS jointly own the Reach Opportunity Center and host an array of programming there, including ECI programming, Head Start, Early Head Start, kindergarten, and adult education classes. Reach efforts are aligned with the Summit Education Initiative, a collective impact initiative to improve Cradle to Career education in Summit County. SEI, in turn, creates opportunities for AMHA and APS to meet with one another, meet other partners, and obtain data on their shared clientele. Despite AMHA not being an MTW agency, the site has successfully identified resources to launch its work, including funding from HUD's Capital Fund Education and Training Community Facilities Program and APS to construct the Reach Opportunity Center.

Among the next steps for AMHA is to gain more funding for operations and programs. AMHA's nonprofit, Building for Tomorrow, is launching a sustainability campaign to raise \$1.5 million for the Reach Opportunity Center (\$1 million for endowment and \$500,000 for operations). BFT, with the assistance of key community leaders, will approach foundations, corporations, and individuals for donations and will offer name recognition rights for rooms in the Reach Opportunity Center. In the coming months, AMHA will continue to work with partners to review and improve programming and service delivery to ensure and maximize use of the Reach Opportunity Center for community events, as well as early childhood and adult education opportunities.

Notes

1. US Census Bureau, "State & County QuickFacts: Akron (city), Ohio," accessed December 30, 2014, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/39/3901000.html>.
2. MTW is a US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) demonstration program that provides designated public housing authorities (PHAs) greater flexibility to make administrative and programmatic reforms. As of October 2014, HUD had conferred MTW status to 39 PHAs. MTW authorizes the use of HUD funding otherwise earmarked for voucher, public housing, or capital funds to invest in programs and services to promote employment and self-sufficiency for households in the public housing and voucher programs. Thus, although MTW status is not a requirement for PHAs interested in educational partnerships, it does provide advantages for funding educational services and implementing policies to promote academic success.
3. Akron Public Schools, "Akron Public Schools: About," accessed December 30, 2014, <http://www.akronschools.com/about>.
4. Akron Public Schools, "APS Facts and Statistics: 2012-2013," accessed December 30, 2014 http://www.akronschools.com/index.php?do=/attachment/download/id_125/.
5. Summit Education Initiative, accessed January 20, 2015, <http://www.seisummit.org/>; Summit Education Initiative, "Our Role," accessed January 9, 2015, <http://www.seisummit.org/mission-vision>.
6. Reach Opportunity Center at Summit Lake, "About the Reach Opportunity Center Collaborative," accessed December 30, 2014, <http://www.reachsummitlake.org/about-the-collaborative>.

7. Early Childhood Initiative, "Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority (AMHA)," accessed February 14, 2015, <http://www.amhaeci.org/>.

References

B L Westbrook Consulting, LLC. 2012. *The Summit Lake Family Opportunity Center Collaborative: Strategic Plan 2012-2015*. OH: B L Westbrook Consulting, LLC.

Parents as Teachers. 2014. *Child Development and Family Engagement Alignment: A Resource Handbook*. St. Louis, MO: Parents as Teachers. http://www.parentsasteachers.org/images/stories/PAT_Alignment.pdf.

About the Authors

Erwin de Leon is a research associate at the Urban Institute's Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where he has authored or coauthored reports and articles on community-based organizations, immigrant nonprofits, government contracting and grants, public education organizations, and stimulus funding of government programs.

Priya D. Saxena is a research associate with the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute. Since joining Urban in 2012, her work has focused on place-based initiatives in Washington, DC, and other US metropolitan areas. Her research interests include neighborhood and youth development, race, ethnicity and gender, social determinants of health, and two-generation initiatives.



2100 M Street NW
Washington, DC 20037

www.urban.org

ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is dedicated to elevating the debate on social and economic policy. For nearly five decades, Urban scholars have conducted research and offered evidence-based solutions that improve lives and strengthen communities across a rapidly urbanizing world. Their objective research helps expand opportunities for all, reduce hardship among the most vulnerable, and strengthen the effectiveness of the public sector.

This brief was funded by the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities. We are grateful to our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission. It is important to note that funders do not determine our research findings or the insights and recommendations of our experts.

Copyright © March 2015. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.