



Bringing Knowledge and Strategy Together for Community-Wide Preschool Effort

How PRE4CLE became a national model and how ACS helped one community go from idea to action

Strategy, Communication, and Advocacy for Early Learning

Who:

Early childhood, K-12, corporate, and philanthropic leaders

What:

Strategy, communication, and advocacy for early learning

Where:

Cleveland, Ohio

When:

2014–present

How:

ACS provided strategy development, communication, and advocacy to develop and implement a plan for early learning.

Result:

PRE4CLE is a national model for high-quality early learning.

The research is clear: high-quality preschool is worth the investment for all kids. But it's another challenge altogether to define what that means and how it will happen. Building a system with the capacity to accommodate high-quality early education takes a unique blend of content knowledge, practical expertise, and cross-sector collaboration that results in an ambitious, yet achievable, plan with a realistic strategy for implementation.

Cleveland's Preschool Vision

In 2012, the City of Cleveland created *The Cleveland Plan for Transforming Schools*, an ambitious, cooperative effort between the Mayor's office and Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) to dramatically improve learning in the city; they recognized that dramatically improving learning meant starting at a child's foundation for academic success: early childhood education and preschool.

In 2013, more than half of the children entering kindergarten in CMSD were at high risk of not succeeding in school. Only 3,530 high-quality preschool openings existed city-wide to serve the city's 12,400 three- and four-year-olds; and only 2,800 of the city's 12,400 three- and four-year-olds were attending high-quality preschool. Creating a workable plan to bring high-quality preschool to all three- and four-year-olds wasn't just a good idea, it was an absolute "must" to ensuring Cleveland's kids were arriving to kindergarten ready to learn, and a key component of fulfilling the goals of The Cleveland Plan.

The Cleveland Foundation, The George Gund Foundation, the Mayor of Cleveland and CMSD leadership knew that no one entity in the city could achieve kindergarten readiness for all of Cleveland's children alone. A successful plan would only evolve through collaboration and partnership, while working within the existing early learning landscape and keeping the needs of children and families at the forefront. With institutional knowledge and national know-how, Marcia Egbert, Senior Program

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“We needed people who understood the campaign mindset,” adds Egbert. “Also people who were sensitive to group dynamics. There were lots of players and political sensitivities that we needed to navigate.”

Officer for Human Services of The George Gund Foundation and Eric Gordon, Chief Executive Officer of CMSD, partnered as co-chairs, and lead the city-wide preschool planning process that became known as PRE4CLE.

In March 2014, a group of more than 60 early childhood, K-12, corporate, and philanthropic leaders released PRE4CLE, a roadmap for providing access to voluntary, high-quality preschool to every three- and four-year-old in the City of Cleveland. They took on the ambitious vision of kindergarten readiness for all, and worked across sectors to build a plan that was not only best for the children in Cleveland, but also equitable, actionable, and effective in just a few short months. How did they do it?

Enter Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS).

Facilitation and Planning

Both Egbert and Gordon were familiar with ACS’ expertise in several issues areas including early childhood system and capacity building in Ohio and across the nation. They also knew ACS understood the complexities of cross sector partnerships and communication, and trusted the firm’s ability to work with a very diverse group of stakeholders—both of which are critical skills for a city-wide preschool effort. This intersection of ACS’ system building know-how; deep knowledge about early childhood issues, along with the firm’s technical expertise in communication, facilitation, strategy, and advocacy made ACS a clear choice.

“I worked with ACS in the past and had really positive experiences, so I was strongly supportive of bringing them on,” says Gordon. “We wanted someone who could help with our strategy, our brand, and early advocacy to help talk with local and state leaders.”

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With ACS’s help and guidance, Egbert and Gordon pulled together a community-wide steering committee of 60 stakeholders to explore what it would take to provide high-quality preschool to every three- and four-year-old in the city. The ACS team, led by President Lori McClung and Policy Associate Heather Lenz facilitated initial meetings to guide the group toward a shared vision, providing local and national research to inform the discussion and leading small team site visits to other cities with broad preschool efforts. Then, ACS leveraged the strengths, roles, and expertise of the steering committee through eight separate working groups to examine specific factors that would be critical to enacting a workable plan for Cleveland, from quality ratings, to teacher training, to family recruitment, and finance. ACS helped each working group deliver their findings and recommendations to the larger steering committee,

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facilitated discussions around each recommendation, and drafted, presented, and edited the complete plan.

Leading such a complex process required a keen ability to understand how partnerships thrive, to listen to and respect many different views and voices, and to have an unwavering focus on attention to detail; while at the same time pushing the process firmly forward in a timely way that brought all players together and maintained accountability.

“ACS gets deeply immersed in your community, and brings a set of values that transcend geographic boundaries, points of view, or politics,” says Egbert. “It’s a value of their organization to be respectful of multiple perspectives. You can tell when that’s genuine, and it is with them. They share your stake in the project. They are able to remain objective and aren’t shy about speaking their minds when there needs to be a course correction, but they really become part of your team.”

“ACS was extremely well organized, which is unbelievably valuable,” says Egbert. “A process like this one has a lot of moving parts and moving players, so this characteristic was indispensable. They kept a running memory of the process and ensured we stayed on track to achieve our vision. On the flip side, they were also very detail oriented—all the way through implementation planning, not just the warm and fuzzy vision part. I felt like they were there with me every step of the way.”

“This planning effort was ambitious from the very beginning, but it all went remarkably well and came together very nicely,” says Gordon. “Our community was highly engaged, and ACS paid attention to our leverage and our capacity to get all the right players there.”

Executing the Plan

When PRE4CLE was officially launched in the city in March 2014, ACS was there to guide and support the effort, calling on its deep experience in media relations, communication strategy, and advocacy to help advance the PRE4CLE plan implementation. ACS Policy Associate Cassie Batson was added to the project team to provide communication and advocacy expertise.

“ACS not only created our plan, they also handled the release and roll out for our launch,” says Egbert. “It was beautiful to have that process planning capacity and communication capacity all in one place. We didn’t need to do any explaining from one part to the next.”

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ACS was critical in helping PRE4CLE shape its communication and advocacy efforts, deploy an effective parent outreach strategy, and build critical relationships with other community leaders and the media. Serving as its media *arm*, in its first 18 months ACS has helped PRE4CLE host four press events, make more than 20 media pitches, and attain more than 40 earned media publications.

Cleveland's National Model for Preschool

In its first year, PRE4CLE has partnered with 92 high-quality early learning providers; helped 21 preschool programs become rated as high-quality resulting in 750 additional students in quality classrooms; added 1,232 new high-quality preschool seats; and increased the total enrollment in high-quality preschool by 10%. As a result of this massive community effort, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Secretary Julián Castro visited Cleveland on behalf of the White House and hailed PRE4CLE as "a national model for how a public and private partnership can work together to ensure our youngest learners have access to high-quality preschool and enter kindergarten ready to succeed."

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Egbert says that she's confident about the staying power of PRE4CLE because of the expertise that went into its creation. "ACS not only understood the substance, but also understood the complex dynamics that exist in the early childhood field. It's a messy universe, but they understood the players, roles; and interests, and where they might be competing with one another. That was extraordinarily helpful, because it means we now have a plan that everyone can embrace!"



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