



Northern Exposures

The part and parcel challenges of serving families in rural Michigan

Location, often thrice repeated, may be everything in the real estate business. But it also plays a critical role in the early childhood world. Some of Michigan's most scenic landscapes, known for proximity to Great Lakes and treed wilderness stretching for hundreds of miles, present unique challenges in reaching families. Throughout the Upper Peninsula, as well as the northern Lower Peninsula, that lush land is simply home to fewer people.

A combination of creative funding streams and dogged determinedness help programs like BHK Child Development in the U.P. and 5toONE, a Great Start initiative in Traverse Bay, extend outreach efforts. Although single stoplight hamlets are not exclusive to northern Michigan. Consider Cedar Springs, a lumber town just north of Grand Rapids.

U.P. with families

Cheryl Mills, BHK's executive director, drives 60 miles to work each morning. Never mind the extremes of lake-effect weather that dump nearly 20 feet of snow every year on commutes and frigid temperatures that make Houghton one of the coldest cities in the country. A registered nurse who started in public health, Mills has spent nearly two decades with Head Start, bringing a decidedly two-generational approach to the sprawling area made up of three counties — Baraga, Houghton, and Keweenaw (hence the name BHK).

With 220 employees working at 16 sites, which includes nine schools, BHK covers a large swath of land. "We have about 2,500 miles of service area," Mills says. "From our farthest site south to our northern sites, it's probably about 80 miles."

That coverage calls for some creativity when dealing with certain state and federal regulations, including switching children from school buses to BHK buses to

break up the limited hourlong ride. "They wouldn't be served otherwise because there's no way their parents could afford to drive them to programs," Mills says.

A collaborative center that serves about one third of the eligible families in the area, BHK looks to connect families to programs at all levels. "We're trying to be bigger than Head Start because so many more people could benefit from the services beyond just the eligible-income families," Mills says. "Our philosophy is to promote universal school readiness through an active learning approach."

Lisa Schmierer, the BHK systems' navigator, utilized a W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant built around open access to help eliminate barriers to service. "We used 'welcome baby bags' to enroll families at the hospitals, or families could call in to register for home visits and developmental screenings," she says.

Traverse City startup

In 2010, conversations around economic development spurred the beginnings of 5toONE, which now provides children and family services throughout the counties of Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Leelanau, and Kalaska. A tall order given the acreage. “We’re the biggest collaborative in the state land wise,” says Mary Manner, the Great Start coordinator. “It’s about the size of the state of Delaware, but we only have 175,000 people in a highly dispersed population.”

Manner, who came to early childhood as a trained zoologist and became the director of education at the Great Lakes Children’s Museum, has long seen early childhood through a holistic lens. “It’s thinking about things from a system’s perspective and taking a multigenerational approach,” she says. “The museum work was fun because it involved parents and children, not just a curriculum aimed on a certain goal. We created environments where kids, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and siblings all learned together.”

That system focus, beginning with buy-in from the business community alongside the solicitation of family ideas, was critical in developing a model not often addressed by federal grants. In what Manner refers to as “zero-dollar and knowledge-based startups,” the centers are built for sustainability through collaborations with existing organizations. The first center, established at a church in Lake Ann, opened as a playgroup in 2014. 5toONE now offers nine neighborhood hubs for family activities.

“We have geographical isolation, as well as social isolation, with a lot of poverty hidden by the grandeur of the beaches,” Manner says. “If you drive along the coastline or around Torch Lake it’s hard to imagine that people are living back in the woods in trailers patched up by duct tape. It’s important for us to develop universal programs that meet the needs of all people in our community.”

Kent County outskirts

When MaDonna Princer stepped into her new role as executive director of Head Start for Kent County a couple years ago, she learned about the rural Cedar Springs, sinking through the cracks of a system primarily focused on Grand Rapids. “During a sequestration, when all Head Start programs had to make blanket cuts across the board, they cut some of the out-county services because those are the most expensive to run,” Princer says. “Cedar Springs is our poorest per capita area in Kent County. Since our mission is to serve the neediest of the needy, I really didn’t feel good about not having services up there.”

With unique school partnerships, they revived the programs for 3- and 4-year-old children in Cedar Springs. Part of the solution came by redistributing some of the “oversaturated resources in the city. “We have to be responsive to the access needs of the community,” Princer says. “There were three programs in Grand Rapids and all of us were struggling to find enough kids. So we ask ourselves where else are we needed?”



67%

of Michigan counties are rural

Research Says

In general, rural families' economic and social characteristics differ from overall national and state averages. Poverty levels are often higher in rural areas while education levels are typically lower. Travel distances to employment opportunities, key mental, social, health, and educational services may be long. Sometimes these services are not available. Child care options and early childhood education opportunities are fewer and harder to access (Perroncel, 2000; Whitener, Weber & Duncan 2002). Yet, rural families possess such strengths as having the perception of neighborhood safety and

development of social competence through typical family interactions like eating meals together more often than urban families (Grace et al., 2011). Promoting the well-being of young children is particularly challenging in rural areas, and studying their unique characteristics is problematic for researchers, perhaps too far from isolated areas (Capizzano & Fiorillo, 2004). According to the 2010 Census, 56 out of 83 (67%) counties in Michigan are considered either mostly or completely rural. As such, many families are affected by rural environmental factors that should be considered by policymakers.