Facilitating Organizational and Systems Change

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Responding to Needs in the Field Using Adaptive Leadership
This Issue and Why it Matters

The dynamic and growing early childhood field demands that individuals and agencies serving young children and families also grow and adapt to changing needs and resources. This issue of the ZERO TO THREE Journal highlights a variety of programs and individuals who are working as agents of change to provide the best possible supports and services to those in their care. We hope their stories will spur the inspiration, energy, and motivation necessary to tackle the changes needed for continuing to advance the field in an increasingly complex world.

In ZERO TO THREE’s efforts to be more responsive to the evolving needs of our community, we are pleased to share that the ZERO TO THREE Website now includes a Spanish portal, CERO A TRES (https://www.zerotothree.org/esp%C3%A1nol), that consolidates resources on a variety of topics into a single place. The Spanish-language page contains descriptive content and provides a single access point that allows Spanish-speaking visitors the full experience of searching in Spanish for culturally responsive Spanish-language resources as opposed to searching in English for translated English language resources. We are delighted to take this step forward in embracing cultural and linguistic diversity.

En español: En un esfuerzo por satisfacer las crecientes necesidades de nuestra comunidad, ZERO TO THREE se complace en poner a su disposición nuestro sitio web que ahora incluye el portal en español CERO A TRES (https://www.zerotothree.org/esp%C3%A1nol) y consolida recursos sobre una variedad de temas en un solo lugar. La página web en español incluye contenido descriptivo y proporciona un punto de acceso único que les permite una experiencia plena a los usuarios hispanohablantes para realizar búsquedas de recursos en español culturalmente apropiados a diferencia de búsquedas en inglés de materiales traducidos del inglés. Es una enorme satisfacción para nosotros dar un paso adelante para sumarnos a la diversidad cultural y lingüística.

Another recent innovation from ZERO TO THREE, designed to respond to the needs of the field for increased networking and educational opportunities, is our newly launched social media platform, Member Connect (https://memberconnect.zerotothree.org/home). This new online environment allows our Members to engage with us and each other, and share important information in real time. It also allows us to be more responsive to critical issues in the field and engage with Members on the issues they most care about. We look forward to seeing you there!

As always, the ZERO TO THREE Journal strives to be an accessible and meaningful resource for those who work with and care about infants, toddlers, and their families. Please take a moment and complete this short survey to share your feedback about how we are doing:

Click here if you are a Subscriber only: http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/3735189/ZERO-TO-THREE-Journal-Survey-2017

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Early Childhood Investment Zones
A Learning Approach for Authentic Community Partnership

Lois Vermilya
Dorothy Kerwin
University of New Mexico

Abstract
Many professionals in the early childhood field are inspired by community-driven initiatives that hold great promise for transforming outcomes for the youngest children and their families. However, most collective impact efforts are mobilized in large urban areas, where early childhood professionals and civic leaders take the lead. New Mexico has been experimenting with a community-based approach for Early Childhood Investment Zones in targeted rural, frontier, and tribal communities. This kind of authentic engagement of both formal and informal grassroots leaders for early childhood systems change carries important lessons learned for other states and communities.

New Mexico is committed to developing an early learning system that focuses on building high quality, community programs that create a continuum of service to effectively meet the needs of our youngest children and their families. We recognize, however, that we cannot achieve this goal alone. It is going to take a new kind of relationship with local communities and families. This is the reason why we are embarking on an innovative initiative called Early Childhood Investment Zones.

—Alejandra Rebolleda-Rea, Deputy Director, Office of Child Development, New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department

New Mexico is a large, sparsely populated state sprinkled with many small farming, ranching, tribal, and oil/gas communities that reach far beyond the Rio Grande corridor, where the larger cities of Las Cruces, Albuquerque, and Santa Fe are situated. These vast distances, along with serious issues of poverty, force New Mexico leaders to think creatively about how to get state resources and services to communities and families with the greatest need. Thanks to federal support from both the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge and the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Grant Program, New Mexico has developed a community-based learning model for mobilizing active early childhood coalitions in 12 targeted Early Childhood Investment Zones throughout the state. The University of New Mexico’s (UNM) Family Development Program was contracted with Coop Consulting, Inc., of Santa Fe to design an educational approach for this successful new state strategy, which holds real promise for long-term sustainability because it is led by community members themselves.

We are narrating this statewide Early Childhood Investment Zone story as outreach educators from the Family Development Program, a UNM Center for Excellence in Early Learning. Founded in 1985, the Family Development Program is part of the College of Education and is one of UNM’s oldest research and public service centers. We provide direct, statewide professional development training in local communities throughout New Mexico.

We also are telling the story through the voices of community members who have become active participants in their local early childhood coalition. Coalition members wear multiple hats, both personally and professionally. Most members are parents. Many are grandparents. Despite the fact that health care and early learning services are often lacking, they share a commitment to make their community a better place for infants and young children. Their stories speak to the determination and passion that collectively drive them to beat the odds within a powerful new learning approach for changing outcomes for young children and families.
The New Mexico Office of Child Development has set a goal to ensure that every young child in our state has opportunity to reach his or her full potential. We appreciate the Family Development Program’s deep and respected relationships with early childhood educators throughout New Mexico. Partnering with local communities in ways that are trusted and authentic is a key ingredient for us to reach this goal for our state’s youngest children and their families.

—Katrina Montano White, Bureau Chief, New Mexico Office of Child Development

We carefully designed the Early Childhood Investment Zone model to strengthen local collaboration and leadership to sustain early childhood coalitions as essential new partners for New Mexico. Twelve communities and/or school districts were engaged as initial demonstration sites for the Office of Child Development Early Childhood Investment Zone initiative. They were selected based on a comprehensive state analysis of population-level data for birth, family, education, and economic risk factors. Family Development Program staff partnered with colleagues from Coop Consulting to develop a rigorous yet accessible model for co-learning and community engagement. Together, we built a comprehensive approach for building sustainable early childhood coalitions whose commitment is to actively take a stand for all babies, young children, and families in their local community.

Two key hypotheses guided our work in designing this new approach. First, we recognized that community coalitions are often organized around networking and do not give adequate attention to sustained actions that result in positive change. We knew that there was a risk of endless talk and not getting things done, which frequently leads to burnout and frustration. Our second hypothesis discerned that community-based collective impact can happen only by deliberately investing in grassroots leadership development and capacity building. Leadership practices that support transparent collaboration and effective, shared decision making cannot simply be taken for granted. Collaboration is hard and requires continuous co-learning with active involvement of both informal and formal leaders in the community, including parents. The educational model we developed focuses on nurturing a culture of collaboration that could cross boundaries for all who are engaged.

In all the communities, a diverse group of early childhood practitioners from health to early learning services joined with other community allies to form an early childhood coalition. The focus of each coalition is the well-being of children from before birth until time to enter school. Coalition members are committed to meet every month and to stay involved as stewards for their youngest children.

Coalitions developed long-term and short-term action plans based on a strong data-informed planning process. Comprehensive leadership training moved coalitions beyond networking to action. The Family Development Program’s innovative Early Childhood Leadership Tool Kit (see Figure 1) became the foundation for continuous learning and skill development in its support of active participation, meeting effectiveness, shared decision making, strategic planning, and broader community/family outreach.

In addition to leadership development and action planning, we also recognized the importance of providing a common language for quality early learning to bridge professional boundaries for all cross-sector and civic leaders involved. As a shared early childhood foundation, we offered trainings in

**Figure 1. Early Childhood Leadership Tool Kit**
Mind in the Making, based on the work of Ellen Galinsky (2010). A retired college chemistry professor from a coalition in the southeast corner of New Mexico marveled:

I learned that the very young child, the infant, learns much more than I suspected. The child is very sensitive to body and facial language. There is a lot of new research on early childhood learning.

A set of Mind in the Making children’s books with Mind in the Making Tip Sheets for promoting learning and life skills— together with other free Mind in the Making resources, including VROOM—mobilized early literacy efforts for collective action and initial small wins.

Key Strategies for Building a Sustainable Early Childhood Coalition

We recognized from the start that it was important to give adequate time to relationship building, both among coalition members and with us as community outsiders. As each local coalition matured, we supported them in having effective dialogue about community concerns and needs. Group reflection tied to action planning became an important strategy for strengthening coalitions for long-term sustainability. To help coalitions stay the course, the Family Development Program and Coop Consulting team developed a useful self-assessment tool (see Figure 2) which examined 12 areas of coalition development. The tool was intentionally crosswalked with the Leadership Tool Kit for continuous capacity building for the hard work of collaboration.

Based on their own self-assessments, coalition members are able to facilitate learning activities found in the Tool Kit to guide their growth as collaborative leaders. The following section explores this tool as a roadmap for successful coalition building. The coalitions’ collective story is captured in their own words, along with our shared observations about their successes as an approach that could be adapted by other states:

I value most that we have delved into building our community around children’s needs.
—Cuba Coalition member

I feel [n] awe of being trusted to participate and carry the knowledge out into our community.
—Administrator, Deming Coalition member

I volunteer with a lot of economic groups around the community; I realize that early childhood is where I need to put my focus because change starts with the little ones in our community.
—Grow Raton business representative, Raton Coalition member

1. Build a Cross-Sector Team of Committed Members

We volunteer and give our time to this coalition because we do it for the children.
—Retired nurse, Santa Rosa Coalition member

All Early Childhood Investment Zone coalitions make time to meet every month as volunteers. They engage as community leaders from different sectors of the early childhood workforce (e.g., early learning, Head Start, early intervention, home visiting, public health, schools) and also recruit other interested community members (e.g., representatives from the faith community, business, libraries, parks and recreation, housing).

Figure 2. Early Childhood Self-Assessment and Planning Tool

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of Development</th>
<th>Coalition-Building Strategies</th>
<th>Our coalition has not focused on this yet</th>
<th>Our coalition is starting to focus on this</th>
<th>Our coalition is focused but does not yet have consistency in our practice</th>
<th>Our coalition is focused and practicing it regularly</th>
<th>Our coalition has made this part of our leadership practice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 1</strong></td>
<td>1. Building a cross-sector team of committed members</td>
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<td>2. Developing strategies to recruit and welcome new members</td>
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<td>3. Creating a shared vision and agreed upon purpose for our coalition</td>
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<td>4. Developing collaborative leadership skills and practices</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Addressing collaborative decision-making and conflict resolution</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6. Understanding and using early childhood data for planning and decision-making</td>
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<td>7. Developing a long-term strategic plan with goals and objectives</td>
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<td></td>
<td>8. Creating short-term action plans to achieve results</td>
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<td></td>
<td>9. Contributing to quality results that make a difference for children and families</td>
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<td></td>
<td>10. Setting accountability systems in place for improving work together</td>
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<td></td>
<td>11. Ensuring community visibility and support from new champions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>12. Increasing funding and access to early childhood resources</td>
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They speak from their hearts as parents and grandparents from the community, expressing pride in where they come from, despite very tough odds that are being faced as they raise their children with limited resources.

2. Develop Strategies to Recruit and Welcome New Members

Continuing to learn is part of growing. Our community has so many needs and everyone has a part to play in addressing them.

—Head Start administrator, Estancia Coalition member

Coalition members regularly identify others to invite to join their work, recognizing that the commitment required is not something easy for people to make. Communication training, as part of ongoing leadership development, supports the group to identify their core message and speak in one voice using a message box. One coalition shared at a convening how they had used this tool to design a simple, informational brochure for recruitment. Now other coalitions are adapting the message box for brochures for their communities as well.

3. Create a Shared Vision and Agreed-Upon Purpose for the Coalition

The visioning activity makes me feel like we have hope and things are possible.

—Grants Coalition member

I learned about the broader context and vision for early childhood in the state, and about the tools that can help us go deeper in nurturing children, families, and our community.

—Nonprofit staff, Gallup Coalition member

Each of the coalitions created a shared vision as part of hands-on learning activities from the Leadership Tool Kit. As part of this process, time was made for community members to examine and reflect upon the state Office of Child Development’s Goals, Guiding Principles, and Vision. We asked: What do these statements mean for your families and children, and how can your coalition efforts add value to where the state wants to go? Periodically, coalitions revisit and refine their shared vision as a driver for their work.

4. Develop Collaborative Skills and Practices

Through our Leadership Institute, I’ve learned to value the voice of my employees, family, clients, and my community.

—Deming Coalition member

Each coalition attended their own Early Childhood Collaborative Leadership Institute, which successfully grounded coalition members and their allies in the art of collaboration. Coalition members now volunteer to facilitate meetings and Tool Kit activities. Over time, members take on greater roles as collaborative leaders in their coalitions. Smaller action committees lead outreach efforts to plan and organize community-based projects. Revisiting their long- and short-term strategic plans keeps the collaborative efforts action oriented.

5. Address Collaborative Decision Making and Conflict Resolution

Positive messages can come out of negative situations.

—Cuba Coalition member

I feel better equipped to organize the community against the racist agenda being put forth.

—Korimi Parent Cooperative, Albuquerque South Valley Coalition member

Most coalitions worked well within their group, but some ran into conflict when addressing resistant school or community officials. By practicing collaborative skills, members were able to share information and strategies for dealing with these challenges. One community that experienced conflict within the coalition was able to use active listening skills to make sure each member was heard. Through an intentional conflict resolution process, the coalition was able to keep a member involved who was contemplating leaving the group. Supporting open, transparent discussion of leadership conflicts resolved issues for the whole coalition and furthered shared understanding of cooperative work.

Joint decision making also occurs as coalition members create the next month’s meeting agenda at the end of the current meeting. Over time, more members are taking on actions, including grant research, writing articles for local media, coalition recruitment of new members, and identifying speakers for priority projects underway.

6. Understand and Use Early Childhood Data for Planning and Decision Making

This workshop was an eye-opener and helped me to understand some of the needs that the parents and children may have that they don’t show up front. Being more compassionate and just having an ear can go a long way.

—Hobbs Coalition member
It is interesting to guide community members through data reports. Some members are familiar with using data to make informed decisions, and others seem a bit daunted by the task. We facilitated a data walk to support coalition members in looking at a few data snapshots while having dialogue about what they think the data mean. All have been appreciative as they examined the data to consider gaps in services that help them set long-term goals and develop annual action plans. One community realized that the data collected did not reflect their story, and the community members are considering a revision of the state data profile as an action plan priority.

7. Develop a Long-Term Strategic Plan With Goals and Objectives

It is comforting to know I am not alone in addressing all the challenges facing our little ones and their families with new immigration issues that have made our families scared.

—Early Head Start teacher, Gadsden Independent School District Coalition member

All communities participated in a planning process to set long-term priorities for their strategic plan using a gap analysis that examines local data and indicators for healthy births, supported families, and school readiness. These critical dialogues help coalitions to focus on their long-term goals as they put energy into short-term actions. As communities with veteran coalitions revisit their strategic plans, they also find reasons to celebrate accomplishments that sometimes get overlooked or minimized in the moment of taking action.

8. Create Short-Term Action Plans to Achieve Results

It's not just imagining it—it's doing it!

—Gallup Coalition member

A common theme heard from all coalitions is they have appreciated moving to action rather than just talking about local problems. All of the communities complete an annual Results-Based Accountability (RBA) process to set action priorities for the year. Because RBA has been used widely in New Mexico for statewide health and early learning planning, we realized it could easily be adapted as a practical process for use in local communities as well. RBA quickly moves groups from talk to action, facilitating dialogue and collaborative decision making based on a set of guiding questions. A one-page action plan summary is prepared from the work session that becomes a simple guide for staying focused on what was decided. Coalition members prioritize projects that they work on together and in smaller action teams. Regular reports of progress made are integrated into monthly coalition meetings.

9. Contribute to Quality Results That Make a Difference for Children and Families

Coalitions have accomplished outcomes that are innovative and designed specifically to meet local needs. Imagine driving 166 miles roundtrip for a prenatal visit. That is just one of the challenges of accessing prenatal care in New Mexico. The Quay County Early Childhood Coalition decided to make this issue a priority and were able to persuade key players within the local health organization and the regional hospital miles away to work together to provide weekly prenatal care directly in their community of Tucumcari.

I value the relationship with this group of leaders and the impact this will have on community families and children.

—Quay County Coalition member

The coalitions are building new kinds of infrastructures as they exchange information and resources. An interesting example occurred as a community health care worker shared that she could now transport families and early childhood coalition members as part of her job because of her role as a member of the Magdalena-Alamo Early Childhood Coalition. This spirit of collaboration continues throughout Socorro County. When the coalition hosted a parent play event in Magdalena, the Socorro Head Start offered to transport families from another home visiting program to the event.

Trust comes first so that children can be comfortable and will have trust.

—Magdalena-Alamo Coalition member

All of the communities improved parent outreach by giving their support to family nights, special family learning events, farmers’ markets, and other existing community events. In addition to promoting community resources, coalition members share information and activities that support positive child development, play, and early literacy. Coalition members often integrate children’s books with Mind in the Making Tip Sheets and free Web-based resources such as VROOM at these local events. They also notice how promoting Mind in the Making’s life skills complements other state-sponsored training initiatives.
The Magdalena-Alamo Coalition established an early childhood Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between their school systems and the local early childhood program.

The Raton Coalition has transformed the way they view children’s activities for all community events:

*Why settle for a blow-up jumping cage when you can offer activities that will help parents and children play and learn together.*

—Raton Coalition member

*We have a family night at our church. For the first time, we had the parents and children do a literacy activity together. I had never thought of this before our coalition!*  
—Church Youth Organizer, Raton Coalition member

### 10. Put Accountability Systems in Place for Improving Work Together

What I found most helpful was having a way to formally keep track of ideas and action steps.

—Cuba Coalition member

Coalition members take on tasks to complete planned action assignments and sustain their coalition. They facilitate meetings, agree to lead learning activities, participate actively in project action teams, volunteer at meetings for tasks that need to get done, and consistently show up and do what they say they will do.

The Magdalena-Alamo Coalition established an early childhood Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between their school systems and the local early childhood program. Both the Gadsden and Grant coalitions helped their school systems fulfill federal grant requirements for collaboration with other early childhood programs.

### 11. Gain Community Visibility and Support From New Champions

*Coalition members are vocal in the community. This is the unseen work of the coalition.*

—Gallup Coalition member

Some coalitions have engaged their school boards, tribal officials, mayors, and state legislators. Other coalitions have regular articles in local newspapers or radio spots for local programming. One coalition created a float for the homecoming parade and passed out early childhood information that highlighted the coalition, along with home visiting opportunities and other family resources. The brochures that coalitions have created are brought to community events to gain more visibility for early childhood priorities and their work on behalf of babies.

### 12. Increase Funding and Access to Early Childhood Resources

What I valued most was looking at existing resources in the area.

—Cuba Coalition member

Having an established early childhood coalition is recognized as a successful strategy for state, federal, and private grants. Early Childhood Investment Zone coalitions will get added points for competitive state early childhood funding (e.g., state-funded home visiting or Pre-K services). Some coalitions are receiving private funding for children’s books and other early literacy initiatives.

The Santa Rosa Coalition is working on a plan for a state-supported early learning center after their faith-based center closed. They have engaged their mayor in the process, who is helping them secure public space for the new program. As trust was built among coalition members, they also came to understand the power of home visiting and have been able to help recruit families to fill their state-funded home visiting slots.

The Gallup Coalition is recognized as the official early childhood advisory group for the McKinley County Community Health Council. This cooperation supports mutual goals and funding opportunities for underserved families. This coalition was also named by the Navajo Nation as the early childhood advisory group for a successfully funded 5-year grant from the Tribal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program to serve home visiting in McKinley and San Juan Counties. Coalition members were instrumental in helping complete a comprehensive first-year community needs and readiness assessment, as required by the federal grant.

The Korimi Parent Coalition in the South Valley of Albuquerque has secured two private grants that fund their parent-to-parent professional development training series. They are also working to be officially recognized as a parent outreach service for the Albuquerque Public Schools.
Sustaining Community-Based Engagement as an Essential Investment

It takes a village—if everyone comes together and works together, this community can do so much.
—Head Start administrator, Hobbs Coalition member

We all want the same things for our kids and the community. I can see us working together to achieve the vision we all share.
—Grants Coalition member

All Early Childhood Investment Zones are committed to sustaining their coalitions as powerful networks, well equipped to change outcomes for young children and their families in their communities. They value increased collaboration among local programs as helping them offer easier access to families for needed services. Together, they are working to support families with common messages that they know build trust for larger community initiatives they have targeted. Their disciplined collaboration strengthens the sharing of information, resources, and funding opportunities across the system. Rather than working in isolation or even competitively, they describe how much they value joining their efforts for larger shared goals, which will benefit their community’s young children.

Our Family Development Program secured private funding to host a statewide convening for teams from all investment zones in November 2017. The 3-day meeting will facilitate dialogue and learning exchange to mutually showcase local coalition efforts that are working and could be adapted by others. Investment in earlier statewide convenings proved to be a successful, low-cost catalyst for mobilizing local coalition work. Developing grassroots networks of support for local coalition leaders expands partnership opportunities, breaks isolation, and serves as passionate motivation for their hard work going forward.

We are working closely with state leadership to continue to explore strategies for sustaining local community engagement as an essential investment for quality and aligned services. We recognize that long-term coalition viability requires resources to secure a paid local coordinator who can support collaboration for a wide circle of local partners. Some coalitions are already seeking grants to underwrite a coordinator for their efforts. Local early childhood coalitions are also developing collaborative structures to share coalition responsibilities and leadership for long-term success. The Family Development Program has New Mexico legislative support to stay in touch with all the coalitions to provide coaching when requested and some professional development training opportunities as we maintain our statewide services. We also recognize that there is power in taking on the role of storyteller: sharing community success stories across the state and beyond nurtures community change efforts for our babies.

Early Childhood Investment Zone Engagement With Families

I have never read to my children like this before. Practicing really helps. My mom never read to me.
—Parent

I learned that children start learning since birth. Every child needs one adult to be a positive role model.
—Grandparent

I learned the importance of relationship in child development, and how learning early can take place in everyday, real-life situations using the environment and setting you are in.
—Grandparent, retired teacher, concerned citizen

While our work began as a contract with accountability to the State of New Mexico’s Office of Child Development, it is the sustained commitment and untiring hard work of local coalition members that holds the real accountability to each other and to their community families who care for our state’s youngest children. Our work in the Early Childhood Investment Zone communities has been very rewarding. By partnering with a cross-sector of community leaders, honoring their knowledge and expertise, providing collaborative leadership tools, and nurturing a culture of reflection and action, communities are making successful changes and building positive engagement with families in their communities. A hidden yet powerful outcome of their efforts is the new
capacity to generate hope, which surely serves New Mexico’s children well.

What a wonderful experience to have the University of New Mexico send Raton such caring, positive and knowledgeable mentors for our Early Childhood Coalition. You have given us awesome materials and knowledge for us to use. I appreciate all you have done for Raton. “Hope is the companion of power and the mother of success; for who so hopes has within him or her the gift of miracles” (Samuel Smiles). You have given our Coalition hope.
—Raton Coalition member

Lois Vermilya, MA, is the director of the University of New Mexico’s Family Development Program and co-author of the Early Childhood Leadership Tool Kit. She has a master’s degree in symbolic anthropology from the University of New Mexico, and she has been a nonprofit executive for more than 35 years, leading and consulting with family-centered programs of education and community development both in the United States and in Latin America. She serves on various state early childhood leadership groups, was named a ZERO TO THREE Leaders for the 21st Century Fellow (2007–2009), and currently participates in the ZERO TO THREE Fellows Academy. She regularly presents at state and national conferences and has co-authored training materials on dialogue, community education, collaborative leadership, parent engagement, and volunteer program development.

Dorothy Kerwin, who has a bachelor’s degree in education from DePaul University, is a training and development consultant working throughout New Mexico as part of the University of New Mexico’s Family Development Program statewide training team. She has been an active community organizer for the past 30 years while raising her four children. She has served as a teacher, coordinator, home visitor, board member, and/or volunteer in an array of educational and community programs. In addition to providing statewide training in early childhood education, she has presented at local, state, and national conferences.

Reference


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