

FIRST 10 IN EAST PROVIDENCE, RI

Building Systems that Work



Photo credit: Burt Granofsky/EDC

🔍 Introduction

With support from Education Development Center's (EDC's) [First 10 initiative](#), the community of East Providence, Rhode Island, has strengthened and aligned its early education and support structures, improving services for children and families.

📷 Community Snapshot

East Providence, Rhode Island, is a community of 48,000 people nestled in between the Seekonk River and the Massachusetts border. With a median family income of \$65,000 and a large immigrant population, the community has long sought to connect families with young children to available social services.

In 2018, East Providence participated in a Transition to Kindergarten program to smooth the kindergarten entry process. That initiative was funded by the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) and supported by EDC. In 2021, RIDE funded an opportunity for three communities, including East Providence, to continue to improve the delivery of early care, education, and related social services by participating in EDC's First 10 initiative.



What is First 10?

First 10 brings together school districts, elementary schools, early childhood programs, and community agencies to improve education and care for young children and their families.

First 10 partnerships implement three core strategies as a coherent package across the early childhood-elementary school continuum:

1. Collaborate to improve teaching and learning
2. Coordinate comprehensive services for children and families
3. Deepen partnerships with families in culturally responsive ways



Photo credit: Burt Granoisky/EDC

“The First 10 model shows that when communities collaborate to improve teaching and learning, coordinate comprehensive services, and partner with families, they make dramatic gains toward ensuring that all children learn and thrive.”

A Desire to Serve All Families

Before East Providence joined First 10, multiple organizations worked independently to support children and families. The East Providence Public Library, East Providence School Department (EPSD), and numerous community-based early childhood centers were important resources for families. So too was the East Bay Community Action Program (EBCAP), a nonprofit that provides integrated behavioral and medical health services, as well as extensive social service supports. EBCAP also operates Head Start and Early Head Start centers and manages the East Providence Health Equity Zone (HEZ), a state-funded cross-sector partnership that aims to eliminate health disparities by empowering residents with the skills needed to create community change.

Yet there was little coordination among agencies. As a result, many parents were unaware of services to which they were entitled. Some parents, frustrated by the complicated process of getting assistance, just stopped trying to get help.

“We weren’t connecting families to services the way we really should have been able to,” says Karen Rebello, a prekindergarten principal in East Providence. “The parents that need these services need somebody to really walk them through it. We tried to do that as a school department, but our social workers had so many other duties. They didn’t have the time to just sit with people and make a phone call or find a service.”

Building a Team

In early 2021, RIDE approached EPSD about a new effort to improve early childhood learning and teaching while coordinating comprehensive services for families. The initiative was called East Providence First 10, and it would hinge on a collaboration between EPSD and community organizations, including EBCAP, with EDC’s David Jacobson, director of First 10, providing technical support. Funding for the collaboration would come from the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) program.

“The First 10 model shows that when communities collaborate to improve teaching and learning, coordinate comprehensive services, and partner with families, they make dramatic gains toward ensuring that all children learn and thrive,” says Jacobson. “East Providence had a lot of the services already in place, but insufficient collaboration among agencies was hindering service delivery.”

Rebello was immediately interested in the partnership. Born and raised in East Providence, she had long wanted to create a community school: a place that could bring educational, health, and social services for families under one roof. She believed East Providence First 10 provided an opportunity to pilot some programs that would bring her closer to this goal.

"Our city already provides a lot of services, but there are some programs and services that we have to pilot to make the case that the district should write it into our budget," says Rebello. First 10 funding would pay for these pilot programs, while allowing her to "show the city, and show the school department, that this is important to our families."

With support from Jacobson, Rebello began to pull together a First 10 team, drawing heavily on people who had participated in RIDE's Transition to Kindergarten partnership with EDC. She also included an elementary school principal with prior experience running a community school, as well as some of her existing connections at EBCAP.

One of Rebello's earliest calls was to Alyssa Gleason, who became the director of the East Providence HEZ in spring 2021. Seeing the potential of connecting EBCAP, the HEZ, and the school department, Gleason was eager to partner.

"I knew that families with young kids wanted more services," she says. "This just seemed like a great way to go down that road. When Karen did that initial outreach, I thought, 'yes, of course we're going to take advantage of this and see what we can do.'"

Getting Down to Work

While the local partners would lead the day-to-day implementation of the work, Jacobson brought an established set of First 10 strategies and principles to help the team move quickly.

Jacobson facilitated the initial meeting of the East Providence First 10 partnership on May 13, 2021. The team included Rebello, EBCAP's Head Start education manager, EPSD pre-K and kindergarten teachers, and an administrator from a community-based preschool. The group identified the following specific goals for their partnership:

1. Improving kindergarten readiness
2. Developing smoother connections to comprehensive services and community resources
3. Deepening partnerships with families beginning in the early years and continuing throughout their children's education
4. Establishing a community school to create a hub of services for families and children

"A lot of cross-sector collaborations spend a year deciding what to do," says Jacobson. "Our partnerships get into the work quickly. We introduce the First 10 model, we assess work currently underway, facilitate planning meetings, and then we help them implement their plan."

Meeting every third week, the partnership completed an assets and needs assessment by the end of June. That summer, Jacobson



Meeting Programmatic Goals

A March 2023 survey of East Providence First 10 partnership members assessed progress made toward the overall aims of First 10.

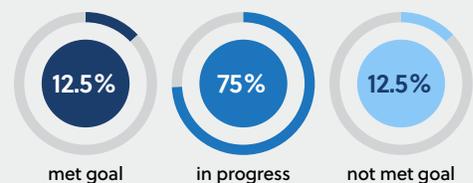
Establishing a strong, collaborative partnership among multiple agencies:



Improving coordination and alignment between prekindergarten and kindergarten:



Making stronger family-school partnerships:



Reaching More Families

In 2022-2023:

31 FAMILIES participated in the first three school-connected play and learn cohorts.

30 FAMILIES were connected to services through the efforts of the EBCAP family navigator at the K-5 Hennessey School.



What are The Basics?

Designed by Harvard Educator Ron Ferguson, The Basics is an evidence-based parenting campaign based on five simple, fun principles:

1. Maximize Love, Manage Stress
2. Talk, Sing, and Point
3. Count, Group, and Compare
4. Explore through Movement and Play
5. Read and Discuss Stories

introduced partners to two First 10 hallmarks: school-connected play and learns and The Basics, a set of five evidence-based principles to help guide healthy learning and development in the first five years of life. The partnership planned to implement these two initiatives in the fall while deepening and expanding Transition to Kindergarten activities.

In November, Rebello's goal of a First 10 community school in East Providence started to become a reality. Naomi Zeltzer, an HEZ family navigator who helps parents and caregivers access social services, began working out of the K-5 Hennessey School one day a week. Employed by EBCAP, Zeltzer was partially paid through PDG B-5 dollars.

In March, the partnership took another step forward with the launch of school-connected play and learns. In play and learns, families with children aged newborn to five meet each other and are guided through developmentally appropriate activities by a trained facilitator over six sessions.

By holding the play and learns at the Hennessey School, the partnership sought to foster a strong home-school connection before children were enrolled. Zeltzer was key to the process.

"Families walked in and looked around to see if Naomi was there," says Gleason. "When they saw her, you could see the tension kind of go out of them. It was as if they thought, 'Okay, I know someone here. This is a safe space. I'm going to get what I need from this.'"



Photo credit: Burt Granofsky/EDC

Building a Stronger Community

By spring 2023, East Providence First 10 efforts included the following:

- Four new school-connected play and learn series.
- A citywide campaign to promote The Basics, supported by EPSD, EBCAP, Bradley Hospital, and the Boys & Girls Club of East Providence
- Distribution of a new Transition to Kindergarten child information form to all early education settings
- Joint professional learning on social and emotional learning, early literacy, and early mathematics for Head Start, community-based preschool, and kindergarten educators
- Broader promotion of EPSD's Welcome to Kindergarten events to encourage enrollment

The First 10 partnership also helped facilitate a collaboration between the HEZ and the Hennessey School and the Boys & Girls Club of East Providence, who were already partnering to offer programming. The HEZ provided opportunities for children to learn about hydroponics and to plant vegetables in community gardens— two activities that were in line with the HEZ's goal of creating a healthier East Providence.

"It's a partnership that wouldn't have happened without First 10 and that initial connection," says Gleason.

Finally, drawing on multiple funding sources—including federal Community Mental Health Center and PDG B-5 grants, as well as from First 10—EBCAP and EPSD have been able to place family navigators in more of the district's schools. This is evidence that the partnership has been a success, according to Rebello.

"We had such great success with First 10 providing that service, that now our middle school, which is totally separate from First 10, is providing services," Rebello says. "We're starting to see all those jump-off components that you look for when you are thinking about sustainability."

"East Providence has made a tremendous amount of progress in only two years," says Jacobson. "They are a model for what can be achieved when dedicated partners work together to help all children learn and thrive."

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PARTNER WITH US

First 10 works with elementary schools, early childhood programs, community organizations, and health and social agencies to improve outcomes for children and families.

Contact us at first10@edc.org to discuss partnerships and opportunities to collaborate.