

BIDDEFORD READY!

by York County Community Action

Region 1 • Sanford, Maine
yccac.org

York County
**COMMUNITY
ACTION**
Corporation

Children • School Readiness

INITIATIVE OVERVIEW

Biddeford Ready!'s (BR!) goal is to ensure that all children in Biddeford, Maine enter school ready to succeed. Recognizing that no single organization can address this complex challenge, BR! was founded by York County Community Action (YCCAC), Biddeford Public Schools, the City of Biddeford, and United Way of York County. The Biddeford Ready! Network includes a wide variety of other partners, including parents, teachers, businesses, health care organizations, and community-based organizations.

LOCAL NEED ADDRESSED BY INITIATIVE

BR! is focused on community level change, or 'population results.' Our goal is to ensure that all children in Biddeford enter school ready to succeed, with an emphasis on supporting children from low-income families.

We are not focused on developing a single program or strategy, but instead on cultivating a mix of mutually reinforcing, data-driven, evidence-based strategies to achieve this result. BR! prefers to leverage and expand existing programs, policies, practices and approaches that are working – including better coordination of services for children and families – and developing new ones where there are important gaps.

BR! addresses school readiness. Like many communities in Maine, Biddeford struggles with ensuring that all of its children are ready for school. In 2018, only about one-third of incoming kindergartners in Biddeford's JFK Elementary School scored 'Meets Developmental Benchmark' using the DIAL-4 assessment tool:

- 32% of children scored Meets on Motor Skills



(skipping, jumping, cutting, writing),

- 36% scored Meets on Concepts (knowledge of colors, counting), and
- 40% scored Meets on Language (knowledge of letters and words, ability to solve problems).

ROLE OF CSBG FUNDS

At YCCAC, CSBG funds are used to support outreach workers: case-workers who work with individuals both to meet urgent needs and to achieve long term goals related to economic opportunity and well-being. Outreach workers support BR!'s innovative community-wide strategy to address Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). For example, they will undergo training in ACEs and resiliency, receive appropriate referrals from BR! partners conducting ACEs screenings (like Southern Maine Health Care), and make referrals to BR! partners such as mental health agencies.

TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT

Being "school-ready" is about more than letter and number recognition or physical health. Children's

social-emotional development is also a central pillar of school readiness. Trauma, chronic stress, and other ACEs impede a child's ability to succeed in school, work, and life. Research shows that ACEs have an intergenerational impact, meaning that parents who have experienced childhood trauma are more likely to engage in behaviors that generate ACEs for their own children. The effect of ACEs is intergenerational and cumulative.

The BR! Community Profile found that approximately 1 in 4 children in Maine has been affected by two or more ACEs, a rate that far exceeds all other New England states and the US overall. While disaggregated local data is not available for Biddeford, based on this figure about 950 Biddeford children and adolescents (ages 0-17) have two or more ACEs. Roughly 260 – 27 percent – are under age five.

Based on research described below, BR! is implementing a multi-sector, community-wide approach to address ACEs and support resiliency. This collaborative approach will include developing mutually-reinforcing, trauma-informed practices for use by parents, schools, police, fire department, health practitioners, City General Assistance, early care and education providers, child and family service providers, and others.

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In developing and implementing this strategy, BR! has learned from two community partners' existing strategies: Biddeford School District has responded to emergent mental health needs by investing in trauma-informed training and support for students and teachers, and Southern Maine Health Care Pediatrics has begun to implement an ACEs screening for its patients. BR!'s strategies will include:

- Education and skill-building opportunities for parents concerning young children's social-emotional development and trauma;
- Toolkits with recommended strategies for educators, childcare providers, police, fire

department, CBOs and other entities that interact with children and families;

- Trainings about children's mental health and trauma-informed care;
- Public education; and
- Improved coordination between early childhood providers, schools, and state systems providing mental health support to kids and families.

EVIDENCE-BASED OUTCOMES

Research by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation suggests that a community-level approach is an effective way to achieve lasting change. It engages parents and the general public to improve the community's knowledge and skills surrounding ACEs and trauma so that they, in turn, can more effectively support our children.

For example, communities across Cowlitz County in Washington state adopted a similar approach in the mid-1990s to address significant health and social problems, including high infant mortality, chronic underemployment, suicide attempts and more. Communities switched from solely adding or enhancing direct service programs to centering parents and area residents as agents of change. They offered education events about the science of adversity, coordinated and strengthened services across agencies, deployed special advocates in schools to ensure children involved with state systems received trauma-informed support, and actively involved parents in identifying problems and solutions. Within less than a decade of implementing this approach, Cowlitz County saw significant improvements across multiple social indicators compared to Washington state overall, including child injury hospitalizations, suicides & suicide attempts, infant mortality, and filings for juvenile offenses.

To measure our program's impact, we use the performance measures laid out in the Results Based Accountability framework. This includes three types of metrics: How Much (quantity of effort), How Well (quality of effort) and Difference Made (is anyone better off?).

Our early work has focused on coalition building, understanding barriers to school readiness in Biddeford, and developing and implementing

strategies in three areas: increasing access to high quality early care and education, increasing awareness of the importance of school readiness, and reducing the frequency of adverse childhood experiences and increasing resiliency.

Coalition & Strategy Development

Partner Engagement

- Membership (size): Approximately 40 individuals representing 20+ organizations. (How Much)
- Membership (breadth): Broad coalition with school, city, medical provider, mental health, social service and early care and education providers. (How Well)
- 25 monthly meetings since May 2018. (How Much)

Strategy Development

- Comprehensive Biddeford Community Profile was developed in 2018. (How Much)
- Profile used to identify priority Biddeford Ready! Strategies. (How Well)
- Profile used by both the city and the school department to secure funding for lead paint remediation and summer bridge programming for incoming kindergarteners. (Difference Made)

Increase Access to High Quality Early Care and Education

- Four early care and education programs participated in strategy to increase quality. (How Much)
- Two participating programs increased one step on Maine's quality rating system: one provider from step 1 to 2, and another from step 2 to 3. The other two programs are still in process. (Difference Made)

Increase Pre-K Enrollment

- In 2018, 2019 and 2020, school district's Pre-K program enrollment was at full capacity. Program launched in 2018 at less than full capacity prior to Biddeford Ready!'s involvement. (How Much)

Increase Stability of Early Care and Education Programs

- Eight early care and education programs received grants totaling \$6,000 to support stability during COVID-19. (How Much)

Increased Awareness of the Importance of School

Readiness

- Community awareness plan developed March 2021 (How Much)
- Web site, Twitter presence and Facebook presence publicly launched March 2021. (How Much)
- As of March 2021, we recorded 291 web site visits, 2,100 impressions on Twitter, and 77 individuals reached by Facebook. (How Much)

Reduce Frequency of Adverse Childhood Experiences and Increase Resiliency

- The BR! Network Coordinator trained as ACEs Master Trainer in September 2020. (How Well)
- Two Interface community ACEs trainings conducted by Coordinator in 2021 to Biddeford Ready! partners with 30 participants. (How Much)

EQUITY LENS

School readiness is a critical benchmark for long term success. However, children from low-income families are less likely to be school ready than their higher income peers and less likely to meet other benchmarks, such as third grade reading and high school graduation.

Roughly one-third of Biddeford children under the age of five live in poverty, which significantly exceeds rates in York County (13%) and Maine (20%). Nearly one-half of children under 6 live in a single parent household. Transiency rates in Biddeford are higher than in surrounding towns; in the 2017-18 school year, approximately 8% of children enrolled in Head Start, Pre-K and Kindergarten programs in Biddeford moved in and out of the programs within a single year. Ensuring that these children are ready for school is a critical first step in addressing disparities in educational outcomes and graduation rates.

Biddeford Ready! is initially focused on advancing equity for several populations: refugees and immigrants and people experiencing inequity because of income.

The City of Biddeford has a diverse population. In fact, Biddeford schools serve more refugees and immigrants than all other York County schools

Biddeford Ready! advances equity in two ways. First, we focus on barriers to school readiness experienced by children and families experiencing inequity. For example, as described above, we have identified reducing the frequency of ACEs and increasing resiliency as a priority strategy. This strategy is supported by RPIC funding. While ACEs are common across all economic populations, children living in poverty or near poverty are twice as likely as their more affluent peers to have 3 or more ACEs, according to The National Survey of Children's Health. In fact, economic hardship, including housing and food insecurity, is considered an ACE. Focusing on this issue will help reduce or eliminate this disparity based on income. Future strategies will be similarly developed using an equity lens.

Second, we can advance equity by focusing on systems-level change. Laws, policies or practices that create systemic barriers to opportunity are a key driver of inequity. Biddeford Ready! has identified policy change as an important strategy, and focuses on enacting policies that build equity and changing or eliminating policies that build inequity. At its April 2021 meeting, the York County Community Action Leadership Team engaged in initial discussions about how to implement an advocacy strategy.

CUSTOMER VOICE

Parents and families were engaged in the creation of BR!'s Community Profile, which identified children's mental health and ACEs as critical barriers to school readiness. They will also be involved in the implementation of this strategy, both in shaping tactics for parent and family engagement and as participants in the multi-sector approach.

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This publication was created by the National Association of Community Action Agencies – Community Action Partnership, in the performance of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Community Services Grant Number, 90ETO469. Any opinion, findings, and conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.