

# Site Visit Report: Broward's Infrastructure Design to Guide and Sustain Permanency for Young Foster Children (BRIDGES)

**Award #:** 90CO1063

**Cluster:** Child Welfare /Early Education Partnerships to Expand Protective Factors for Children with Child Welfare Involvement

**Grantee:** [Family Central, Inc.](#)

**Contact:** Carolyn Smith, Project Manager, [MHernandez@familycentral.org](mailto:MHernandez@familycentral.org)

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## SUMMARY

Using a 17-month Children's Bureau (CB) grant, a group of human services agencies are working together to ensure Broward County Florida's early childhood education system is equipped to meet the complex needs of young children in foster care. The project, titled Broward's Infrastructure Design to Guide and Sustain Permanency for Young Foster Children (BRIDGES), is also focusing on increasing the number of children in foster care who are placed in high-quality child care or early learning facilities. The partnership consists of Family Central, Inc., of Broward County, FL, in partnership with Broward County's Early Learning Coalition, ChildNet<sup>1</sup>, the Early Steps Children's Diagnostic Treatment Center, Broward County Schools, United Way, and the Children's Services Council. The grant is part of CB's Child Welfare /Early Education Partnerships to Expand Protective Factors for Children with Child Welfare Involvement.

In December 2010, the State of Florida initiated the Everybody's a Teacher campaign to encourage individuals and communities to become involved in the education of children and youth in foster care. Based on research showing that children in foster care frequently underperform in school and have low high school graduation rates, the initiative focuses on the barriers that prevent children in foster care from achieving academic success. This initiative focuses on youth in high school; however, Broward County child-serving agencies realized that educational challenges for children in foster care can begin much earlier and need to be addressed with younger children. A task force was convened in January 2011 to address young children in foster care and their need for high-quality early learning and child care facilities. As a result of this task force, BRIDGES was born.

The primary goal of BRIDGES is to develop a comprehensive approach that links child welfare, the early learning system, child care programs, and community resources to create an infrastructure that identifies the needs of children in foster care who attend child care, and maximizes services and supports to promote their stability in child care and permanency at home. The objectives to reach this goal include the following:

- Create a system to identify child care programs that have the capacity to provide high-quality child care for children in foster care
- Provide child care programs with the resources and supports required to address the complex needs of children in foster care
- Establish and strengthen communication among key system players

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<sup>1</sup> ChildNet is the private agency that provides child welfare, family preservation, and foster care services in Broward County.



- Build direct relationships between the child welfare system and community-based early childhood programs serving children in care
- Build system capacity for child welfare child advocates<sup>2</sup>, parents, guardians, and foster parents to make informed choices in selecting child care programs that meet the needs of children

Children in foster care are automatically eligible for school readiness funding; however, prior to BRIDGES, the applications for school readiness funding did not indicate that a child was in foster care and children in foster care were not always provided services. As a result of the BRIDGES project, the referral/application process has been changed to clearly identify children in foster care. So far, 300 foster children between birth and 5 years of age in Broward County receive school readiness funds so they may be provided child care services.

In addition, BRIDGES created procedures for referring children for developmental assessments, as well as accountability measures should child advocates or foster parents not follow through in obtaining assessments.

Some of the actions taken by the project to achieve its goals include the following:

- **Foster parent school readiness handbook:** Prior to the inception of BRIDGES, many foster parents did not know how to apply for child care services for children in their care. The handbook explains the importance of early learning, highlights the benefits of choosing high-quality child care, and provides information on school readiness resources in Broward County, including how to apply.
- **Training and coaching offered to child care providers, court officers, child welfare staff, foster parents, and caregivers:** BRIDGES has designed or contracted for numerous trainings that will enhance early childhood service provision in Broward County. Training is focused on, but not limited to, identifying disabilities and delays, building the capacity for trauma-informed services for children served by child welfare agencies, and understanding the effects of trauma on young children and the needs of children in foster care in the child care setting.
- **BRIDGES quality child care certification:** Through their work on this project, BRIDGES has developed a certification program to identify child care centers that are qualified to meet the unique needs of children in foster care. To achieve certification, providers must complete training on specific strategies to teach children the social and emotional skills they will need to succeed in school. Each certified child care center must meet a set of criteria (BRIDGES Certification Standards Checklist) that will determine whether the child care provider can meet the unique needs of children in foster care. This is intended to ensure consistency among providers.

Reprinted from the *Children's Bureau Express* article "Site Visit: Broward's Infrastructure Design to Guide and Sustain Permanency" (<https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### Abstract

Using a 17-month Children's Bureau (CB) infrastructure building grant, a group of human services agencies is working to ensure Broward County, Florida's early child learning system is equipped to meet the complex needs of young children in foster care. The project, titled Broward's Infrastructure to Guide and Sustain Permanency for Young Foster Children (BRIDGES), also is

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<sup>2</sup> Child welfare caseworkers are referred to as child advocates in Broward County.

focusing on increasing the number of children in foster care who are placed in quality child care or early learning facilities. The partnership consists of Family Central, Inc., of Broward County, FL, in partnership with Broward County's Early Learning Coalition, ChildNet<sup>3</sup>, the Early Steps Children's Diagnostic Treatment Center, Broward County Schools, United Way, and the Children's Services Council. The grant is part of CB's Child Welfare Education/Early Education Partnership to Expand Protective Factors for Child Welfare Involvement cluster.

The primary goal of BRIDGES is to develop a comprehensive approach that links child welfare, the early learning system, child care programs, and community resources to create an infrastructure that identifies the needs of young children (ages birth through 5) in foster care who attend child care, and optimizes services and supports to promote their stability in child care and permanency at home. The objectives to reach this goal include the following:

- Create a system to identify child care programs that have the capacity to provide quality child care for children in foster care
- Provide child care programs with the resources and supports required to address the complex needs of children in foster care
- Establish and strengthen communication among key system players
- Build direct relationships between the child welfare system and community-based early childhood programs serving children in foster care
- Build system capacity for child welfare child advocates<sup>4</sup>, parents, guardians, and foster parents to make informed choices in selecting child care programs that meet the needs of children in foster care

### **Need For This Service**

In December 2010, the State of Florida initiated a campaign, titled Everybody's a Teacher, to encourage individuals and communities to become involved in the education of children and youth in foster care. Based on research showing that children in foster care frequently do not perform well in school and have low high school graduation rates, the initiative focuses on the barriers that prevent children in foster care from achieving academic success. This initiative focuses on youth in high school; however, Broward County child-serving agencies realized that educational challenges for children in foster care can begin much earlier and need to be addressed with children before they begin kindergarten. A task force was convened in January 2011 to address young children in foster care and their need for quality early learning and child care facilities. As a result of this task force, BRIDGES was born.

Children in foster care are automatically eligible for school readiness funding; however, prior to the inception of BRIDGES, the applications did not indicate that a child was in foster care and children in care were not always provided services. As a result of the BRIDGES project, the referral process changed to clearly identify those children in care. At the writing of this article, 300 children in foster care between birth and 5 years of age in Broward County receive school readiness funds so they may be provided child care services.

In addition, BRIDGES created procedures for referring children for developmental assessments, as well as accountability measures should child advocates or foster parents not follow through in obtaining assessments.

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<sup>3</sup> ChildNet is the private agency that provides child welfare, family preservation, and foster care services in Broward County.

<sup>4</sup> Child welfare caseworkers are referred to as child advocates in Broward County.

## VIRTUAL SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The site visit occurred March 6 and 7, 2013. During the course of the site visit, interviews were conducted with members of the BRIDGES Governance Committee, including the following individuals:

- Maria Hernandez, Director of Family Support Services, Family Central, Inc., BRIDGES Lead Project Manager
- Pam Evans, BRIDGES Project Manager
- Mark Gross, PhD, Vice President of Program Research and Development, Family Central, Inc.
- Mary Kay Falconer, Senior Evaluator, Research, Evaluation and Systems Unit, The Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida, Project Evaluator
- Neiko Shea, Vice President of Network Development, ChildNet
- Monica Pujol-Nassif, Director of Early Care and Education, Family Central, Inc.
- Lee Tirpak, Chief Program Officer, Early Learning Coalition of Broward County, Inc.
- Ellie Schrot, Director, Early Steps Program, Children's Diagnostic & Treatment Center

Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour. Topics discussed included the following:

- The impetus to the development of the project
- The successes of the project
- The challenges of the project
- The early results of the project
- The evaluation process
- The sustainability of the project

During the visit, the site visitor also attended a quarterly BRIDGES Governance Committee meeting.

Additional information to inform the site visit report was obtained from the project's semiannual report for the reporting period of October 2011 through March 2012, as well as from evaluation documents provided by The Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Unique and Innovative Features

The Broward's Infrastructure to Guide and Sustain Permanency for Young Foster Children (BRIDGES) project ensured that members of its governance committee were senior representatives from the partner agencies who could make decisions on behalf of their agencies, as well as make decisions on final products and deliverables of the three BRIDGES subcommittees. The three subcommittees, (1) Training of Professionals and Parents, (2) Early Identification and Screening, and (3) Quality Child Care Settings, include senior agency representatives, as well as frontline staff from partner agencies. One of the frequently mentioned features of the project was the fact that all of the representatives from the partner agencies were committed to the project and to improving the quality of child care in Broward County. In addition, the following project actions may be considered innovative and unique:

- **Foster parent school readiness handbook:** Prior to the inception of BRIDGES, many foster parents did not know how to apply for child care services for children in their care. The handbook explains the importance of early learning, highlights the benefits of

choosing high-quality child care, and provides information on school readiness resources in Broward County, including how to apply. The handbook was printed and distributed to all Broward County foster parents with children ages birth to 3, as well as to the foster home agencies. The handbook, as well as a school readiness handout that summarizes the process, is provided as an attachment to this report.

- **Transdisciplinary staffings:** These staffings allow all providers involved with a child to develop and implement a plan to ensure a child's needs are addressed and developmental goals are established and achieved. They are conducted when a child in foster care needs additional support or access to community resources and services. The foster parents, the family, the child care staff, the child welfare child advocate<sup>5</sup>, and service providers are invited to attend. Post staffing interviews indicated that all participants thought the staffings were beneficial to the children.
- **Training and coaching offered to child care providers, court officers, child welfare staff, foster parents, and caregivers:** BRIDGES has designed or contracted for numerous trainings that will enhance early childhood service provision in Broward County, including, but not limited to, the following:
  - **Informed Choice Program.** This training is provided to foster parents, caregivers, parents, court officers, child advocates, and child advocate supervisors. It assists foster parents and other stakeholders in evaluating potential child care providers and in making an informed decision in determining the best learning environment for the child. The training also includes an introduction to the child care centers certified by BRIDGES. The Informed Choice Program power point is attached to this report.
  - **Early Steps.** Mandatory for child advocates and child advocate supervisors, this training provides information on identifying disabilities and delays, where to have children screened for disabilities and delays, and how to follow up to ensure the appropriate resources have been provided for the children. The Early Steps journey handout is attached to this report
  - **Becoming Trauma Informed.** Provided to child care providers, foster parents, caregivers, child welfare staff, court officers, and biological parents, this is a competency-based course aimed at building the capacity to provide trauma-informed services for children served by child welfare agencies.
  - **Social and Emotional Needs of Children.** This training is provided to child care providers and includes several workshops, such as trauma-informed care, the effects of trauma on young children, the effectiveness of transdisciplinary staffings in addressing children's needs, and the needs of children in foster care in the child care setting.

In addition, child care providers receive training on the foster care system and how it works, and child advocates are provided with training on the benefits of early learning for young children in foster care.

Although not exclusive to BRIDGES, Family Central also provides coaching and training to child care facilities as requested by the facility or as-needed based on the results of the Quality Counts<sup>6</sup> child care assessment process. When a child's behavior is deemed challenging to an early learning teacher, an Inclusion Specialist, at the request of the child care provider, will observe the interactions between the teacher and child and create a plan for how to best work with the child.

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<sup>5</sup> Child welfare caseworkers are referred to as child advocates in Broward County.

<sup>6</sup> Quality Counts is a voluntary continuous quality improvement program for early care and education providers. The program assesses early learning programs and makes recommendations for improvements.

- **BRIDGES quality child care certification:** This certification program categorizes child care centers by their level of qualification to meet the unique needs of children in foster care. To achieve certification, providers must complete training on specific strategies to teach children the social and emotional skills they will need to succeed in school. The BRIDGES quality certification system identifies providers by three levels of quality defined as follows:
  - **Level-one** - This foundation level requires that a child care center/licensed family child care home be accredited by an early education accreditation agency and/or possess a Quality Counts rating of three, four, or five stars, and have the following:
    - basic parent involvement;
    - staff trained to understand the unique needs of children in foster care and about the foster care system; and
    - a commitment to maintain this quality, as well as exchange information between the center and appropriate child serving agencies.
  - **Level-two** - This certification level builds on level one and requires intensive parent involvement; the implementation of a curriculum to meet the unique needs/goals of individual children; and participation in community collaboration such as Community for Quality Early Learning and Literacy, in order to develop partnerships. Ideally centers are implementing an evidence-based social-emotional approach such as the Positive Behavior Support and Classroom Assessment Scoring System.
  - **Level-three** – This certification level meets the qualifications of levels one and two and focuses on professional development of the staff on trauma/abandonment/attachment, behavioral issues, inclusion, and supervised visits; staff participate in transdisciplinary staffings; and the owners are committed to the process with a focus on building a solid leadership team and diminished staff turnover. (The certification application, standards, termination process, and certification pyramid are attached to this report)

## Challenges

**Delayed data system:** The project had planned to use the Early Learning Information System (ELIS) to share data among agency partners. However, the roll out of ELIS was delayed. At the time of the site visit, Family Central was discussing the creation of a BRIDGES data system with the Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida.

**Child care provider commitment to BRIDGES:** The commitment by providers seems to vary. Although most providers want to deliver quality services, some centers simply do not have the resources to attend multiple trainings required to obtain certifications.

## Successful Strategies and Keys to Success

The project improved the understanding of child welfare staff and other stakeholders of the benefits of early learning and of the need for high-quality child care for children in foster care. The project will continue to increase the capacity of child care providers to provide quality child care to children in foster care. It also has established a system for referring children for school readiness and a system to ensure accountability for referrals. In order to accomplish these milestones, project partners identified the following keys to success:

- **Having the support or inclusion of the partner agencies' leadership.** The leadership of each agency involved is supportive of the project and understands the benefits of high-quality early learning/child care for children in foster care.
- **Ensuring the right people and right agencies are part of the leadership team and on the subcommittees.** Including those people who can make decisions on behalf of their agency/organization, as well as those who can determine if the processes will work, is paramount to achieving project goals.

- **Having commitment and respect of all involved agencies.** All of the partner agencies are committed to the project and respect the knowledge and ideas that each person brings to the table.

## OUTCOMES

BRIDGES set out to develop a comprehensive approach that links child welfare, the early learning system, child care programs, and community resources to create an infrastructure that identifies the needs of children in foster care who attend child care. The processes also were intended to maximize services and supports to promote the children's stability in child care and permanency at home. The identification systems and referral processes outlined in the Abstract section of this report have helped achieve these goals and will continue to do so as the project moves forward. In fact, due to the change in the application process, at the writing of this article, 300 children in foster care between birth and 5 years of age in Broward County receive school readiness funds so they may be provided child care services.

In addition, BRIDGES created procedures for referring children for developmental assessments, as well as accountability measures should child advocates or foster parents not follow through in obtaining assessments.

### Evaluation

An external evaluation of Broward's Infrastructure Design to Guide and Sustain Permanency for Young Foster Children (BRIDGES is being conducted by Mary Kay Falconer, Ph.D., and Caitlin Murphy, M.S.W., M.P.A., with The Ounce of Prevention Fund of Florida. The evaluation process was completed in three phases:

- **Phase 1, Planning** – This phase consisted of meetings with the BRIDGES governance committee and partner agencies, as well as reviewing data and documents relevant to the project.
- **Phase 2, Initial Implementation** – This phase consisted of the development and implementation of procedures to accomplish the goals and objectives of the project, in addition to online surveys and interviews with partner agency staff, child care providers, parents, foster parents, and other relevant project participants.
- **Phase 3, Advanced Implementation** – The final phase consists of additional surveys and interviews with the aforementioned stakeholders, as well the assessment of pre- and post-training questionnaires that are distributed at trainings offered by BRIDGES.
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As part of the evaluation process, the evaluators have completed the following:

- Tracked governance committee and subcommittee meeting attendance
- Tracked the frequency of the meetings and the number of agencies in attendance
- Conducted online surveys and telephone interviews with members of the BRIDGES collaboration in order to measure the level of satisfaction with progress on the BRIDGES objectives
- Created and assessed the results of pre- and post-training questionnaires to determine significant changes in attitudes and knowledge with the implementation of the Informed Choices training
- Interviewed foster parents and child care providers for their opinions about the BRIDGES quality child care certification process
- Interviewed participants of the pilot transdisciplinary staffings
- Administered the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory to members of the BRIDGES collaboration once during Phase 1 and again in Phase 3 to determine their level of agreement on the success of BRIDGES and compared the responses across phases

Results from the evaluation included, but were not limited to the following:

- Online surveys with members of the collaboration indicated that the objectives of BRIDGES have been clear and that for the most part, members were satisfied with the progress on each of the objectives for BRIDGES
- Results from the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory conducted during phase 3 revealed that the members of the collaboration thought that BRIDGES had a unique purpose, skilled leadership, a clear understanding of goals, a sense that program goals were reasonable, a shared vision, and a stake in both the process and the outcome
- Results of the post-transdisciplinary staffing interviews revealed that participants believed the staffings were beneficial for the children; goals for the child were discussed; and everyone's input was heard and valued. Participants also indicated that they were interested in having additional staffings on the child.

(The evaluation logic model and Phase 3 findings are attached to this report)

### **Sustainability**

The BRIDGES project received a no cost extension through June 30, 2013 and plans to continue its efforts after the grant period ends. All partner agencies have indicated a desire for all aspects of the project to continue past the end of the grant period. To date, project staff have confirmed that the referral process, the accountability system, and the interaction and collaboration among the partner agencies will continue. The governance committee has met, and will continue to meet, to determine how each component of BRIDGES can be institutionalized. For example, the Early Learning Coalition has agreed to oversee the BRIDGES certification process, and ChildNet has applied for a grant to fund a transdisciplinary staffing coordinator. In addition, funding is being sought to hire a mental health consultant to work with and support child care situations where there are mental health concerns.

### **ATTACHMENTS**

#### **Child care programs:**

- [BRIDGES Early Steps journey handout](#)
- [BRIDGES Foster Parent Handbook](#)
- [BRIDGES foster parent school readiness handout](#)
- [Informed Choices training power point](#)

#### **Certification process:**

- [BRIDGES certification application](#)
- [BRIDGES certification standards checklist](#)
- [BRIDGES certification termination process](#)
- [BRIDGES certification pyramid](#)

#### **Project evaluation:**

- [BRIDGES evaluation logic model \(visual\)](#)
- [BRIDGES findings phase three March 2013](#)