

Grow Your Own ECE: Cultivating Community Partnerships

Thelma Wong and Susan Hibbard

The brief “[Grow Your Own ECE: An Introduction](#)” explores the transformative potential of Grow Your Own initiatives in strengthening and sustaining the early care and education (ECE) workforce. These community-driven, equity-centered strategies are designed to cultivate a diverse, well-qualified, and sustainable pipeline of ECE professionals by nurturing the talents and aspirations of individuals from within their own communities.

In this brief, we expand upon the design and sustainability essential elements of Grow Your Own approaches that are centered on solid community partnerships. The brief highlights the benefits of collaboration, including leveraging shared resources and expertise, expanding reach and impact, fostering innovation, and ensuring long-term sustainability. It emphasizes the importance of rooting Grow Your Own initiatives in the community, with local stakeholders guiding and leading the efforts.

We discuss strategies for building effective partnerships, such as adopting a partnership mindset; defining shared goals and values; establishing equitable decision-making structures; fostering open communication and trust; embracing co-creation and continuous learning, assessment, and course correction; and celebrating successes. The brief also showcases successful Grow Your Own partnerships in Philadelphia, New Mexico, and Austin, illustrating the potential for collaboration to create meaningful, sustained change in the ECE workforce.

By leveraging partnerships and adapting strategies to local contexts, Grow Your Own initiatives can build robust, effective support systems for aspiring and current ECE educators, ultimately leading to a more diverse, qualified, and stable workforce.

Why Community Partnerships Matter

Community partnerships are critical to the success of Grow Your Own initiatives. By bringing together diverse stakeholders around a shared vision for transforming the ECE workforce, these partnerships can share power and leverage resources, expertise, and influence to create lasting change. Some key benefits of community partnerships include:

- **Leveraging shared resources and expertise:** No single organization has all the resources and knowledge needed to address the complex challenges facing the ECE workforce. Partnerships allow organizations to pool their assets, skills, and networks to support Grow Your Own efforts more effectively. For example, a community college might bring expertise in curriculum development, while a local nonprofit might have deep connections to the communities the initiative aims to serve.
- **Expanding reach and impact:** Collaborative partnerships enable Grow Your Own initiatives to engage a broader range of partners and allies, recruit more diverse participants, and create more opportunities for aspiring and current ECE educators. By working together, partners can tap into new networks, communities, and funding streams that would be difficult to access alone.



- **Fostering innovation and problem-solving:** Bringing together partners with different perspectives, experiences, and approaches can spark creative solutions to the persistent challenges facing the ECE workforce. Collaborations create space for partners to learn from each other, challenge assumptions, and develop innovative strategies that no single organization could devise on its own.
- **Ensuring long-term sustainability:** Building a robust, resilient ecosystem of support is essential for the long-term success of Grow Your Own initiatives. Partnerships can help to diversify funding streams, build political will, and create a shared sense of ownership and investment in the initiative's goals. By cultivating deep, trusting relationships among partners, Grow Your Own efforts can weather funding, leadership, or community needs changes over time.

Successful Grow Your Own partnerships across the country illustrate the potential for shared power and collaboration. For example, in Minnesota, a partnership between the state's Child Care Aware agency, community colleges, and local child care programs has created a pathway for more than 300 early educators to earn degrees and credentials while continuing to work in the field. By combining resources and expertise, this partnership has helped to build a more diverse, qualified, stable ECE workforce across the state.

Using a Grow Your Own approach is an opportunity for communities to intentionally design and implement ECE workforce recruitment and retention strategies in a way that focuses directly on dismantling systemic barriers that lead to disadvantages. Part of this process examines the root causes of high turnover and low compensation and explores how exclusion, marginalization, and oppression shape the current realities of the ECE workforce, representing predominantly women of color. Grow Your Own initiatives center the experiences and leadership of the ECE workforce to establish appropriate and necessary solutions and support. Ultimately, Grow Your Own strategies have the potential to address barriers and boost resources and support for those who shoulder the responsibility of caring for, educating, and nurturing children during their formative years, one community at a time.

Rooted in Community

“Community” within Grow Your Own initiatives encompasses a spectrum of groups, each with its distinct assets, needs, and perspectives. These include local geographic communities, cultural or ethnic communities, tribal communities, and the ECE workforce itself. Grow Your Own initiatives emphasize community-driven change where power and initiative originate from within the community.¹ This model ensures that initiatives are informed, designed, and led by those who understand the local context best.²

However, the complexity of working with multiple communities and navigating power dynamics poses significant challenges. Shifting power dynamics is an ongoing process that requires dialogue, reflection, and adaptation, acknowledging the evolving needs and aspirations of communities.³ Authentic partnerships necessitate trust-building, navigating power imbalances, managing diverse priorities, and creating structures for shared decision making.⁴ In practice, initiatives may struggle to move beyond superficial engagement and develop truly equitable partnerships.

To address these challenges, it is important for communities to:

1. Clearly define the communities they serve and engage, recognizing the diversity within and across communities⁵
2. Establish transparent and inclusive decision-making processes that ensure all stakeholders have a meaningful voice⁶
3. Continuously assess and address power imbalances, ensuring that the initiative remains community-driven and responsive to evolving needs⁷



By acknowledging the complexity of community work and actively addressing power dynamics, Grow Your Own initiatives can more effectively foster community-driven change and strengthen the diversity and cultural competence of the ECE workforce.

Strategies for Building Effective Partnerships

Cultivating strong, productive partnerships takes time, effort, and intentionality. To build partnerships that embody shared power and co-creation, Grow Your Own initiatives should consider the following strategies:

- **Adopt a partnership mindset:** Shift from a transactional to a transformational approach to partnership, embodying mindsets of asset-based thinking, learning, cultural humility, and power-sharing. Regularly assess where your partnerships fall on the "Partnership Continuum⁸" and strive to move towards more profound levels of collaboration and community empowerment.
- **Define shared goals and values:** From the outset, partners should articulate their common purpose, desired outcomes, and guiding principles for their work together. This should be a co-creative process that engages all partners, including community members and ECE educators, in shaping the vision and priorities. Consider developing a shared vision statement, memorandum of understanding, or set of core values that all partners can commit to upholding.
- **Establish equitable decision-making structures:** Create governance and decision-making structures that give all partners a meaningful say in the direction and priorities of the Grow Your Own initiative. This might involve creating a steering committee or advisory board with representation from all partner organizations and communities and establishing clear processes for shared decision making and conflict resolution. Regularly assess and adjust these structures to ensure they promote equitable participation and power-sharing.
- **Foster open communication and trust:** Regular, honest communication is the foundation of any successful partnership. Grow Your Own initiatives should create structured opportunities for partners to share updates, challenges, and feedback, such as monthly meetings, quarterly reports, or annual retreats. Equally important are the informal spaces for partners to build relationships and trust over time, such as shared meals, social events, or site visits. Prioritize creating a culture of transparency, vulnerability, and mutual accountability among partners.
- **Embrace co-creation and continuous learning:** Approach all aspects of the Grow Your Own initiative, from program design to implementation to evaluation, as opportunities for co-creation and continuous learning. Engage partners in iterative planning, action, reflection, and adjustment cycles, including community members and ECE educators. Create spaces for partners to learn from each other's successes and challenges and innovate and adapt to emerging needs and opportunities.
- **Celebrate successes and build momentum:** Sustaining momentum and motivation is crucial for long-term partnerships. Grow Your Own initiatives should regularly acknowledge and celebrate the partnership's achievements through public events, media coverage, or internal communications. Build opportunities to reflect on progress, reconnect with the partnership's vision and values, and re-energize for the work ahead.

By embracing these strategies, Grow Your Own partnerships can establish the infrastructure necessary to achieve their goals and create lasting, equitable change in the ECE workforce. This requires a commitment to ongoing learning and adaptation and a willingness to challenge traditional power dynamics and working methods.



Partnership in Action

Across the country, Grow Your Own partnerships demonstrate collaboration's power to transform the ECE workforce. Here are a few examples:

- In Philadelphia, a partnership between the school district, community college, and local ECE providers created a pathway for high school students to earn college credits and gain hands-on experience in early childhood classrooms. Participants receive mentorship, financial support, and job placement assistance, with many going on to work in the city's public pre-K program. To date, the partnership has supported more than 100 students entering the ECE workforce, focusing on recruiting young men of color into the field.⁹
- In New Mexico, a collaboration between a Tribal Head Start program, community-based organizations, and a local university provides culturally and linguistically responsive training and support for Grow Your Own participants. The partnership focuses on recruiting and retaining Native American early educators to work in the Tribe's early childhood programs. Participants receive scholarships, academic advising, job placement support, and opportunities to learn from elders and traditional teachers in the community.¹⁰
- In Austin, a citywide initiative brings together partners to create a comprehensive support system for aspiring and current ECE educators. The partnership includes the school district, community college, workforce development board, child care resource and referral agency, and local funders. Together, these partners align resources and services to provide seamless pathways for participants to enter and advance in the ECE field, from high school through college. The initiative also focuses on supporting the ECE workforce's mental health and well-being, recognizing the high levels of stress and burnout in the field.¹¹

These examples illustrate how communities leverage partnerships with the potential to create meaningful, sustained change in the ECE workforce. By learning from these examples and adapting strategies to local contexts, Grow Your Own initiatives nationwide can build solid and effective partnerships supporting all participants' success.

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