DENVER®
THE MILE HIGH CITY

Improving School Readiness and Strengthening Families

THE 5 BY 5 PROJECT

Introduction

What can a city or municipality do to strengthen its families and improve the school readiness of its children?

"If our nation is to make good on its declared goal of ensuring educational success for all students, we must mobilize the entire education capacity of our cities and towns.... Without strong connections between communities and schools our young people will likely fall short of their dreams for a brighter future. The tasks are too complex, and the gaps too large, and the promise too nearly realized for schools and educators to do it alone…. Mayors are in a unique position to mobilize a community's diverse stakeholders in support of public education." [1]

It is clear that high levels of unreadiness for school have negative economic and human impacts in a community. Naturally, then, improving the school readiness of children in the community has the potential for broad and far-ranging impact. Mayors and municipalities can play a valuable role in improving the school readiness of their young children and, at the same time, can strengthen families.

Research shows that readiness for school is not just about learning letters and numbers, but is also about engaging in activities.[2] Families play a key role in helping young children become ready for school success. Child development research indicates that enriching opportunities such as cultural experiences and active play stimulate creativity and learning in young children, and broaden their skills and knowledge. Therefore, one way a municipality can improve school readiness and strengthen families is to provide enhanced access to the arts and cultural experiences for families with young children in the community.

A critical component of improving school readiness in a community is to support parents in becoming more effective as "first teachers" of their children. Many parents of young children work long hours to provide for their family's basic survival, limiting available time and energy and hindering skill development for helping their children learn the necessary language, conceptual, social and emotional skills that make up school readiness. Parents need opportunities to help their young children learn and develop a love of learning—engaging their senses and their minds while having fun and talking about their experiences.

"Given the right mix of learning and cultural experiences, every child regardless of family income, has the potential to do great things in life. The City of Denver is committed to unleashing that potential through our creation of The 5 By 5 Project"

~ Mayor John Hickenlooper

Cities can help parents provide the important developmental opportunities for their young children. Whether discovering the wonders of the natural world at a museum or zoo, seeing great works of art, learning to read at a library or swim at a local pool, families visiting cultural attractions together set the stage for their children's educational success.

[1] Engaging Cities: How Municipal Leaders Can Mobilize Communities to Improve Public Schools, 2006, The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

[2] Seven Things Policy Makers Need to Know about School Readiness, Charles Bruner, with Sheri Floyd and Abby Copeman, State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network, Revised and Expanded Toolkit, 2005

Denver's 5 By 5 Project

Denver's 5 By 5 Project aims to provide Denver Head Start children and families with at least 5 cultural experiences by the age of 5, putting into action their belief that the municipality can and should play a role in improving the "school readiness" of the City's children. The 5 By 5 Project enhances learning for Denver's young children by offering free admission to the city's premier cultural institutions. A central purpose of Denver's 5 By 5 Project is to provide parents with enjoyable and fulfilling experiences as first teachers of their young children and increase family engagement.

The 5 By 5 Project opens doors to Denver's cultural organizations, making them much more accessible for low-income families with young children. Denver's family-friendly cultural facilities provide the perfect setting for learning adventures. As a result, Denver's low-income children are having valuable learning experiences – gaining knowledge, skills, perspective, vocabulary and enjoyment of learning.

More than 5,000 low-income families have participated in this program in its first two years, making more than 40,000 visits to the cultural venues. Participating families report an increased sense of belonging to, and ownership of, the community. Denver's cultural institutions learned more about members of the community formerly unfamiliar to them and are taking steps to improve their programs to better serve a more diverse community.

City of Denver
Denver is an energetic city located at the foot of the Rocky Mountains providing breathtaking views and 300 days of sunshine annually. The population of the municipality of Denver is 554,636, at the center of a metropolitan area with close to 3 million people. Latinos make up the largest and fastest-growing segment of the student population in the city and are among those with the greatest needs.

Child and Youth Friendly Cities
In April 2005 – less than two years into his first term – *TIME Magazine* named Denver's Mayor John Hickenlooper one of the top five "big-city" mayors in America. Mayor Hickenlooper has placed a high priority on children and education and, in 2005, Denver was named one of the 100 best communities for young people by America's Promise. Through the Child & Youth Friendly Cities Initiative, Denver is mobilizing the community to engage young people in developing strategies to create healthy, safe, and caring environments and become the nation's leading city in supporting children and youth.

Create a 5 By 5 Project in Your Community

This manual was created to provide helpful information and guidance to individuals and groups interested in establishing a 5 By 5 project in their communities. Other communities developing 5 By 5 projects may structure their programs in different ways to meet their goals or to fit within their resource constraints. For this reason, this document is designed to help outline some of the questions to be answered and steps to be taken to develop a successful 5 By 5 project. Descriptions of Denver's planning process, project structure and financing, are provided merely to contextualize the planning and implementation process for those working to create similar programs in their communities.

The Innovation, Purpose and Intention of Denver's 5 By 5 Project

This free program, made possible through in-kind and financial support from the city's cultural partners and corporate sponsors, is available to Denver Head Start families and other select early childhood programs with children under the age of five, with the aim of improving school readiness and strengthening families. School readiness – "what children know and can do" at the time they start school – is important to success in school and in all aspects of life during and following the school years.

Children who start school with limited language and thinking skills often exhibit social and emotional problems that further complicate learning. Research shows that providing children with extended learning through cultural stimuli and active play early in life improves school readiness, strengthens families, and develops the foundation for school success. Denver's 5 By 5 Project improves the school readiness of low-income children by providing opportunities to visit at least 5 of the city's arts and cultural institutions by the time they are 5 years old. A second primary purpose of this project is to strengthen families and to engage and support parents as "first teachers" of their young children.

Efforts to develop a program that would improve school readiness and family engagement of low-income children in Denver resulted in a partnership between the Mayor's Office for Education and Children (MOEC), Head Start (and other select preschool programs) and ten (10) of the City's arts and cultural organizations.[3] The 5 By 5 Project provides year-round free admission[4] to arts and cultural organizations (including the aquarium, botanic gardens, ballet, museums, parks and recreation aquatic centers, performing arts center, the public library, and the zoo) for Denver Head Start children and their family members.

The Mayor's Office for Education and Children administers the program and ensures communication and "barrier-busting" between The 5 By 5 Project partners. Learning activities and tools are provided through the Project, in preschool classrooms, at the cultural venues, and via home engagement materials designed to help children and their families gain the most benefit from the experience. Having the opportunity to visit these venues with their families allows for expanded learning that then provides for further discussion and learning opportunities at home and in the classroom.

The Mayor's Office for Education and Children is committed to helping Denver children, from infancy to young adulthood, grow up with the strengths, knowledge, and skills necessary to become confident and successful residents. Established in 1995, the Office advocates for children, youth, and families of Denver and serves as the City's liaison to Denver Public Schools. MOEC aids in the development of policies and initiatives to help every child in the City grow up confident, strong, smart and skillful. MOEC has concentrated its efforts outside school district delegation on: early childhood care and education, school readiness; literacy and student achievement, before and after-school programs, career preparation health, safety, and other child and youth services. For more information, see www.denvergov.org/education.

[3] Originally 10 cultural institutions participated, though the number expanded to 12 in the second year
[4] Unlimited to most venues, now only one time per year to the aquarium

Establishing A 5 By 5 Project In A Community

Listed below are recommended steps for creating a 5 By 5 Project. Each section lists questions for a community to answer in developing their project, and then describes some of the choices made in planning Denver's 5 By 5 Project, highlighting the implications of those choices. Descriptions of Denver's project are provided to make the process more vivid, and are not intended to hinder the creativity or individualization of program development in a different community.

1. Establish the Project Purpose

Any community planning to create a 5 By 5 project must develop clarity about the project's purpose.
A clearly stated purpose or intention will:

- guide key decisions
- help in partner engagement and sustainability – it is easier to make commitments of time and other resources on a project that makes sense
- be crucial in developing effective messages for program marketing

Communities will benefit from answering the following questions:

A. What is our primary purpose in establishing a 5 By 5 project?
B. How will we know that the project is successful?
C. What outcome(s) matter most to us?

A clearly stated purpose or intention will guide key decisions, including the target population, key partners, and outcome measures.

For example, in Denver, it was decided that improved school readiness was of primary importance. This decision led to subsequent planning discussions about how 5 By 5 administrators and Head Start staff could help students capitalize on their cultural experiences, maximizing the benefit in terms of school readiness. Keeping a focus on learning and school readiness resulted in ongoing brainstorming among partners about how to maximize the learning experiences and connect classroom learning to cultural visits and vice versa.

5 By 5 Project planners in Denver further realized that children would make the greatest advances in school readiness if they visited cultural institutions with their families and if their parents developed in their role as "first teachers" of their children. This realization resulted in a clear statement about family engagement as a second key purpose of the project, which had major implications for project implementation and, again, for outcomes evaluation. As an example, it was clear that the cultural experiences needed to be made accessible to families, not just to Head Start students through field trips.

2. Identify the Target Population

One of the first challenges in establishing a 5 By 5 project is to identify the target population to receive free access to cultural institutions. Consider the following questions:

A. Who in our community would benefit most from increased access to cultural institutions?
How can the target population be identified in terms of ages of children, neighborhoods, etc.?
B. What might be a natural way to access those children and families?
C. Is there an upper limit on the number of families to whom we can afford to offer free admissions?
D. Are there issues specific to this community that might lead to specific program requirements or adaptations?

Denver project planners decided to first target low-income families with preschool children for the 5 By 5 Project, recognizing that too many of Denver's poor children were entering school "unready." As such, Denver planners needed to consider target population issues related to age of the children, ethnicity, and income level, addressing questions such as those below:

- Which cultural institutions might be particularly beneficial for families with young children to visit?
- How might cultural institutions make their programming more engaging for young children and families?
- Will free admission adequately reduce barriers for low-income and ethnic minority families to visit the arts and cultural institutions?

As one Head Start teacher stated: "Preschool children are kinetic learners—they learn so much more, if they are moving at the same time. When they go to the zoo and see the elephants, it is much more compelling. All their senses are engaged—they comprehend the elephant's size in a way they couldn't from seeing it on television or in a book. They smell the elephants and see how they move in their environment."

Many low-income families with preschool children in Denver are Latino. Therefore, language and cultural issues needed to be addressed in order to make cultural and arts institutions in Denver more accessible to Latino families. Materials needed to be available in Spanish as much as possible.

With the target population clearly defined and issues identified, consideration turned to how to most effectively reach that target population with the program. In Denver, Head Start programs were identified as a natural way to access low-income children and their families, for several reasons, including: a) Head Start's target population is the same as targeted by The 5 By 5 Project; b) Head Start programs have a strong family outreach and family participation component, supporting the outcome of increasing family engagement; c) the City of Denver administers more than half of Denver's Head Start programs, facilitating easier linkages between administration of 5 By 5 and Head Start.

3. Select Partners & Establish Partnerships

Another task in establishing a 5 By 5 project is to identify the cultural partners to establish the foundation for the project. Some considerations might include:

A. Which cultural organizations would be especially important to include?
B. How many cultural organizations do we want to involve as partners?
C. Ultimately, which cultural organizations will be willing to invest in this partnership?
    - What will cultural organizations gain by engaging a part of the community they may have not reached out to?
    - What are their interests and challenges to participation?

Denver has a large number of arts and cultural organizations available, including 27 organizations under the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District, so the partnership-building phase involved identifying how many and which cultural venues to partner with initially. Discussions about cultural partners revolved around appeal to families with young children, location, and potential school readiness benefits associated with visiting the venue. As an example, the public library and the parks and recreation aquatic centers were identified early due to the importance of learning to read early in life and of learning water safety.

In Denver, the field of potential cultural partners was narrowed to a manageable number. The number of cultural partners was limited to 10 of Denver's top cultural attractions to start the project. This "anchor tenant" concept worked well, because 10 cultural institutions offered sufficient variety to families, without offering so much variety as to be confusing to families or too complex to administer. It was also a good number in another sense, in that it was enough cultural institutions that they were able to percolate and share good ideas for outreaching this population with each other. Many of the "anchor tenants" already had programming in-place for families with young children and were excited about improving or increasing such programming.

Ten (10) of Denver's premier arts and cultural institutions were invited to join The 5 By 5 Project the first year (2005). Cultural partners were asked to commit to offering year-long memberships to all participating Head Start children (approximately 2,500 children) and their families.[5] 5 By 5 Project planners met with leaders of the cultural institutions to talk about the project, how the city would benefit, what contributions would be needed, and how the cultural partner would benefit. Cultural partners indicated that they were interested in better engaging visitation and participation from families with young children and families from low-income and ethnic minority communities. Many (if not all) had established programs and outreach efforts to reach families, but they tended to feel these efforts were not as successful as they would like. Cultural institution interests in reaching this community provided a foundation for partnership.

> One cultural partner stated "It's important that we serve children better by working better together, we don't duplicate, and we have more awareness of what each other is doing. It's also benefited us to partner more with the other cultural and community organizations… Seeing each other in all these settings reinforces that we are all part of serving the children and families of our community."

> One Head Start staff member stated "They get to have exposure and social experiences with more and different people than they would otherwise. Belonging to a social group is one of the most basic needs people have, and this opportunity gives children that feeling of belonging. These low-income children learn they can go anywhere in the city and fit in and be welcomed. I think it improved low-income families' feelings about the city and improved relations with the Mayor's Office—these families felt more like Denver is their city… and it leaves people with a good feeling about the Mayor and the city."

4. Plan Operations and Administration

A community developing a 5 By 5 project must plan for operations and administration, based on decisions about the purpose and scope of their project. Consider the following questions:

A. What kinds of administrative activities will be required to make the program successful?
B. What level of administrative staffing will be required for getting the new program started, and then what level will be required for sustaining it?
C. What are the requisite qualities of a staff person who can successfully administer the start-up and sustaining of a 5 By 5 project in our community?

[5] The Denver Aquarium, having just become a for-profit institution unlike the rest, needed to change to a one-time only free-admission after determining that the year-long free memberships was too expensive.

Denver's 5 By 5 Project thrives because the partners work effectively together. This could not have happened without a dedicated and effective individual and a central structure to facilitate communications, coordinate meetings, develop supporting materials, and problem-solve. The dedicated staff person may not need to be full-time, but she/he must be collaborative, responsive, a good listener and problem-solver. Considering how complicated large systems can be, each with its own communication structure, schedules, etc., a program without a central communication and coordination function will be seriously hampered. Families, program staff, and cultural partners need to have one number to call for trouble-shooting and, when they call with a problem, they need to reach a person with the authority to make a decision.

One cultural partner stated "The administration of the project is through the Mayor's office and is benefiting us—the communications, the planning, etc. – is getting these visitors in the museum."

5. Financing

A community planning a 5 By 5 project must identify the contributions of the partners and any costs that will need to be funded. Consider the following questions:

A. Will cultural institutions be willing to provide free admission to the target families?
B. What will be start-up expenses?
C. What will be ongoing expenses?
D. What are sources of revenue to cover the outstanding expenses?
E. What communication/program marketing materials must be developed, at what cost, and how will they be paid for?
F. How much administrative staffing will be required, at what cost, and how will that be paid for?

Denver's 5 By 5 Project is valued at over $4 million, primarily derived from the free admission for families to the cultural institutions. The cultural institutions in Denver have been willing to make this contribution because: a) it helps them fulfill their mission to serve the community and facilitates their outreach into parts of the community that have not been involved in their institutions and b) it is expected to expand community support and membership, ultimately having a positive effect on the organization's sustainability and bottom line. 5 By 5 partners are currently in discussion about how to extend ongoing participation by participating families. Program evaluation in Denver did suggest that a substantial number of 5 By 5 participants would be interested in becoming members of these institutions in the future.

One cultural partner stated "We learned more about this audience and how to better serve them."

Another cultural partner stated "We have always tried to reach out to our neighborhood and we feel The 5 By 5 Project has helped us reach a goal of diversity.

There's no doubt that this relationship with the Mayor's Office is expanding who we're reaching. So that's where I just think it's a tremendous benefit – broadening our audience."

In establishing the value of the project, it is also important to recognize the in-kind contributions of staff time that also occur at the cultural institutions and at Head Start centers.

There are other project expenses that may require funding. These include:

- Passcards and marketing materials distributed to all participating families and to centers
- Staff expenses – project coordinator
- Events – kick-off events and celebratory events publicizing the program and welcoming participating families
- Program evaluation
- Communications and meetings for planning and feedback

6. Launch the Program

The 5 By 5 Project is ready to launch when the following questions can be answered affirmatively:

A. Is the project purpose clearly identified?
B. Do partners have a clear understanding of their responsibilities?
C. Are all partners committed to the success of the project?
D. Does everyone know who to call when glitches arise?
E. Is there a dedicated and collaborative staff person available and adequately accessible to field questions and resolve problems that arise?
F. Are passcards (or other instruments of free admission) ready for distribution to families and is the distribution method established and ready for implementation?
G. Are cultural partners ready to welcome families?
H. Are marketing and promotional materials ready for helping to outreach and engage families?
I. Are tracking methods in place to track visits and other key outcomes?

7. Engaging Families

Communities establishing a 5 By 5 project need to consider how to best engage the families from the target population in the project, in other words, how to help them take on the challenge of visiting the cultural institutions. Consider the following questions:

A. How will the target families know about the program and its benefits?
B. What barriers do target families face in visiting our community's arts and cultural institutions?
C. What steps can be taken to reduce barriers and to make arts and cultural institutions more accessible and welcoming to the target population?

The intention of 5 By 5 was to get families who weren't currently visiting the community's arts and cultural institutions to begin visiting them and to learn what benefit they might gain by visiting these sites as a family. What would facilitate this change? Was it simply a matter of free admission?

Experience with The 5 By 5 Project in Denver reveals that, beyond admission costs, there were additional barriers to cultural participation for low-income families. Many families expressed uncertainty about visiting unfamiliar arts and cultural institutions. How would they get there? What would it be like? Would grandparents raising their grandchildren be allowed in the free admission? Would they know how to act once they were there? Would their young children find it interesting? Would they feel welcomed at these institutions or out of place? Would it be a fun outing or would it become a tedious and exhausting child-management situation for the parents?

One parent stated her concerns: "Everything will be in English when you get there, or you worry that you won't know how to ask questions or what to do. I'm afraid to ask questions in English, that I won't understand what they say."

Many low-income families needed information and exposure to reduce their anxieties about visiting unfamiliar places. Ultimately, anxieties were reduced as families began visiting the cultural locations and experiencing them as fun, interesting, and even welcoming. As the program became more familiar, Head Start families often encouraged each other to make use of the opportunity, reassuring each other about the fun and interest, even for preschool age children. Denver created a video and calendar that showed families each venue so they would know what to expect when they arrived.

> One Head Start staff member stated: "Families are learning where these sites are and what they're like and they get out of their four-block radius and go more and more to cultural places. They learn they can go to their recreation center, many of them would just go past the recreation center and not think it was a place they could go into—now they know otherwise!"

5 By 5 administrators and partners brainstormed ways to help low-income families step out of their comfort zone and try visiting these unfamiliar locations. Any community that implements a 5 By 5 project would be wise to establish an ongoing communication process that supports brainstorming and learning what works and what doesn't.

Some of the strategies used in Denver included:

- Developed and distributed (to Head Start Centers) a video tape showing Head Start families visiting each cultural venue, including how and where people enter the location, and what they would be able to see and do.
- Head Start teachers and family service workers explained the program and its benefits to families.
- All participating families were given a calendar showing pictures of the cultural organizations, with information on hours, location, parking, etc., and highlighting some of the family-friendly events at the different sites.
- 5 By 5 materials were available in English and Spanish, clearly communicating to Spanish speaking families in their own language.
- Cultural partners expanded their efforts to engage low-income families of young children and Spanish speaking families. The 5 By 5 Project brought out great creativity in staff of cultural institutions who discovered and created a variety of approaches to welcome and engage members of the community they had not engaged as effectively in the past. A snowball effect developed, as cultural institutions learned how to better engage low-income families with young children, and these families showed up and starting

participating, and the cultural institutions staff gained more exposure to this part of the community and were able to refine their programs to better engage these families, and so on.

- The first year, participation incentives were offered—any participating family that documented visiting 5 sites received a free book and backpack. It turned out incentives were unnecessary—visiting the sites was self-rewarding—so this strategy was discontinued.

One parent stated: "We were treated very well. The people at the cultural places were very friendly and nice, and they paid attention to the children."

8. Sustain Partnerships

In planning a 5 By 5 project, the first step in establishing successful ongoing partnerships is to engage the right partners at the beginning. However, many projects get off to a good start only to fail a few years later due to neglect. It is important to sustain their engagement over time. Consider the following questions:

A. What are the interests of our partners in this project?
B. What challenges will our partners confront in sustaining their commitments to this partnership?
C. What can we do to meet partners' interests and to help address any challenges they might face in sustaining the partnership?
D. What feedback will be important to our partners, and how frequently will they need feedback? How can we plan to capture and distribute feedback to partners?
E. How would partners who are contributing so much like to receive recognition and appreciation for their contributions?

In Denver, several lessons have been learned about sustaining partnerships with cultural partners, including:

- Cultural institutions are like all businesses in the community in that they need to sustain their organizations, and they do this primarily through community goodwill and sustained membership and visitation. A 5 By 5 project should plan to provide cultural partners with feedback that shows that they are indeed reaching members of the community they weren't reaching before.
- Cultural partners need feedback demonstrating that their contributions are making a difference, and data will need to be collected in order to fulfill this.
- Public recognition is valuable. In Denver, a cultural partner celebration was held and the Mayor issued mayoral proclamations to each cultural organization to recognize the substantial contributions being put into the program.

Lessons have also been learned about sustaining partnerships with Head Start: 5 By 5 administrators considered how to support Head Start staff who were already stretched thin in making efforts to promote this new program. Some strategies for engaging and sustaining the efforts of Head Start staff included:

- The 5 By 5 Project coordinator visited centers to explain and promote the program.
- Staff passes were provided to be shared within each Head Start center enabling staff to visit cultural venues with their own families at no cost.
- 5 By 5 Project staff also developed a curriculum guide for Head Start staff, with activities to make connections between classroom lessons and students' cultural visits.

9. Measure Impact

It is important to design the project with purpose and integrity and then to plan to measure impact of a 5 By 5 project. Measuring impact will help planners, administrators, and partners learn if the program is having the desired impact, and will help with sustaining funding and other types of support. Consider the following questions:

A. What is the intended impact of this program?
B. How will we know if the program is reaching the target population? What indicators will we look at?
C. How will we determine whether the project is having the intended effect?
D. What results are important to various stakeholders?
E. What is our budget for program evaluation and how can we design an evaluation that will answer questions about the program's impact and fit within our budget?

Denver's 5 By 5 Project was able to secure funding for project evaluation conducted by an external evaluator. This evaluation included:

- interviews of cultural partners to understand their interests, experiences, and lessons learned and to problem-solve and make program refinements
- surveys and focus groups with Head Start staff to learn about the experience of this key stakeholder group, what benefits they observed, particularly in school readiness and family engagement, what program improvements they might suggest, and what supports they needed in order to effectively fulfill their roles in the partnership
- surveys and focus groups with parents to learn their experience and perspective— whether they were visiting institutions they had not visited before, what their experience was like, what barriers they faced in making this change, what made it work for them, and what benefits they experienced associated with visiting cultural institutions

Denver's 5 By 5 Project evaluation results provided a wealth of information that was useful for sustaining partner engagement and funding, visit www.denvergov.org/education. It has also provided very valuable direction for project improvements. Examples include:

- shift from a big, glossy passbook to a more convenient, small passcard for admission
- refinement of promotional materials to provide helpful information to families and to reduce confusion and to help Head Start teachers make connections between classroom and cultural visits

- increased communication— more opportunities for cultural partners to share lessons learned about effectively engaging low-income families with young children, more reminders to Head Start centers to promote cultural visits
- offered to families with natural connections through their Head Start centers and neighborhoods (allowing word-of-mouth and positive peer influence to facilitate experimentation with something new)

One Head Start staff person said: "It is amazing how much parents use the card! I thought transportation would be an issue but they are finding a way to make visits."

Lessons Learned Keys For 5 By 5 Success

In this section, we summarize some of the lessons learned from the start-up and first two years implementation of Denver's 5 By 5 Project.

LESSON 1: If you build it, they will come.

Notably, while 5 By 5 planners in Denver felt low-income families would benefit from visiting arts and cultural institutions, there was some question whether low-income families would indeed visit cultural sites, even if offered the opportunity. Would families from poor neighborhoods visit the botanic gardens, museums, or the ballet? Besides, all these arts and cultural institutions already offered free days, so weren't these institutions already accessible?

Evaluation results indicate that The 5 By 5 Project made these organizations much more accessible to low-income families than they had been previously. A majority of families offered this opportunity did indeed visit these cultural institutions. The majority further indicated that they never had and never would have visited many of these institutions. One visit tended to lead to more visits and trying even less familiar venues. It became clear that this program made the city's cultural institution more inviting and accessible in real and meaningful ways, due to:

- free annual passes (families could use them when it fit their schedule)
- through direct outreach and promotion to the target population

LESSON 2: It is important to maintain a focus on the purpose of the project.

Various considerations arise in planning and implementation— practical, economic, sociopolitical – that may suggest a shift in direction for the project. When these arise, it is important to reflect back on the central purpose and intentions for the project. For example, as mentioned above, a natural suggestion was put forth in Denver that it would be simpler and less costly to take low-income children to cultural institutions through class field trips. However, considering the central purpose of increasing family engagement and supporting parents as first teachers resulted in the conclusion that this was not the right approach for Denver's 5 By 5 Project.

LESSON 3: Allocate adequate time and the right staff for communication, partner support, and barrier busting, especially in the first year.

It is not possible to anticipate every possible program glitch or barrier before implementation, and some of the barriers that arise could lead to hard feelings, eroded partnerships, bad publicity, and the failure of the project. To be successful, a 5 By 5 project needs to allocate a collaborative staff person who is accessible for communication and coordination, available to recognize and resolve problems that arise. Lessons 4 and 5 below provide specific examples illustrating this general point about allocating adequate time for communication and barrier busting.

LESSON 4: Clearly define what constitutes a family for the free admission.

A central objective of Denver's 5 By 5 Project was to increase family engagement, engaging parents more in the education of their children, showing them that learning can be fun and engaging and that they can play a key role as "first teachers" of their children. It became important to recognize various family constellations, including inter-generational parenting (i.e. grandparents raising grandchildren). If a family of 5 set out on an unfamiliar adventure across town to a cultural institution, maybe packing everyone on a city bus and arriving without money to spare, and then some of them weren't allowed in on the admission, that became a very upsetting experience for that family and negatively impacted the reputation of The 5 By 5 Project. A key lesson learned was that The 5 By 5 Project must carefully establish a uniform agreement of the maximum number of people who may be admitted on the family pass as well as an understanding about how many different types of people may be considered "family." (In Denver, two adults and all children living within the household are eligible for free admission.)

LESSON 5: Plan to document program impact.

5 By 5 project partners and funders will want to know if the expense of time and money is worthwhile. Vague reassurances by project planners or administrative staff will be insufficient when budget cuts loom or problems arise. It will be worthwhile to work through the problems and sustain the investment if it is having the intended impact. It is much easier to demonstrate that impact if a) you are clear what outcomes you expect and b) you plan at the outset for measuring those outcomes.

A caution as you plan for program evaluation—identify outcomes that will be proximal in terms of time and not outcomes that are too distant from the intervention or that are too multi-determined to isolate the cause. For example, it wouldn't be prudent to try to demonstrate that this one program offered to preschool age children had a big impact on high school graduation rates 14 years later.

It may be worthwhile to utilize qualitative evaluation methods that allow for richer description of the benefits of the project. In Denver, focus groups and interviews afforded the opportunity to learn about many unintended benefits and broader effects than those anticipated. It seemed that The 5 By 5 Project was so rewarding on so many levels that it began to take on a life of its own.

> One Head Start staff member stated "It promoted self-sufficiency and mutual support among Head Start families. Some families went together. They got to know each other more than they would have. One of those situations led to a couple of families babysitting for each other, giving each other breaks."

Examples of snowball effects of The 5 By 5 Project included:

- After a few families from a Head Start Center began visiting cultural venues, they told staff and other parents in the center and in their neighborhood about their experiences, which reduced barriers for other families who became more likely to visit as they heard people they knew and people like them had positive experiences with their visits. Visits to cultural organizations from any particular low-income neighborhood grew exponentially in this way.

- As the cultural organizations engaged in The 5 By 5 Project, they gained more experience with low-income families with young children. As they gained experience with this population, they refined their programs to better attract and serve this population. They developed materials that are more appropriate for young children and added Spanish language materials. They became more creative and shared ideas with each other. There have been and continue to be many examples of this improved accessibility to cultural institutions in Denver.
- Research indicates that parents who become engaged in their children's learning early on are more likely to stay involved in their children's schooling over time. As low-income parents of young children visited cultural venues with the intent of helping their children's school readiness, they became more engaged in their role as first teachers of their children. It became an understandable role that they could feel efficacious about fulfilling.
- As low-income families expanded their recreational activities farther into the city through visiting cultural institutions, they became more aware of the city's organizations and felt more engaged in the broader community. Some expressed a turnaround in their feelings about the city—from negative to positive valence—and some said it increased various types of civic and community engagement.

One Head Start staff member stated "Being treated really well by the cultural partners made people feel good about the city and knowing this was provided by the Mayor's Office made people feel really good about the city which fostered good relationships and good feelings. I even think people became more likely to vote because of it!"

What's Next In Denver?

Two years into the 5 By 5 Project implementation, the most common responses to questions about how we could improve the program are:

- Continue it
- Expand it
  - make it available to more children and families
  - make free admission available beyond preschool years

Project partners are discussing strategies for expanding the project and helping families take the next step to becoming members of their favorite cultural institutions. One cultural organization is developing a strategy to offer free admission to Kindergarten students.

Some partners are also discussing how to strengthen neighborhood linkages. For example, many of Denver's low-income families have libraries and parks and recreation centers available in their own neighborhoods, but do not utilize these resources as fully as they could for the benefit of their children's school readiness or strengthening their families. How could the neighborhood libraries and recreation centers better outreach the families in their own neighborhoods? The Children's Museum of Denver is working more successfully to outreach low-income families living near the organization, having traditionally drawn most of its visitors from suburban communities.

After two years of implementation, The 5 By 5 Project in Denver is a resounding success, with all partners reporting the value in family engagement, improved school readiness, and improved engagement of low-income families in the broader community.

Thank you to the cultural partners and sponsors who make The 5 By 5 Project possible:

Children's Museum of Denver
Colorado Ballet
Denver Art Museum
Denver Botanic Gardens
Denver Center Theatre Academy
Denver Museum of Nature & Science
Denver Parks and Recreation
Denver Public Library
Denver Zoo
Downtown Aquarium
Four Mile Historic Park
The Wildlife Experience Museum

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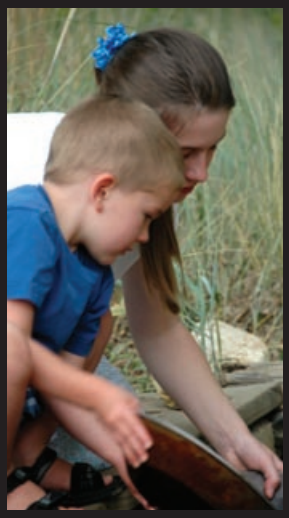
For more information about The 5 By 5 Project,
contact the Mayor's Office for Education and Children.

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