

# Communicating the Needs of Our Children

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To understand the needs of local children, planners can work with schools to track school readiness using tools such as the Early Development Instrument. By collaborating with schools to gather local data on families with young children, planners can build new partnerships to promote greater investment in neighborhoods.

## Putting Children First

The aging population has garnered the attention of planners and developers alike for good reason (Li 2013, Li and Long 2013). However, planners looking to maintain vibrant neighborhoods need to pay attention to the needs of children and their families, especially given their relevance to the economy (Warner and Baran-Rees 2012).

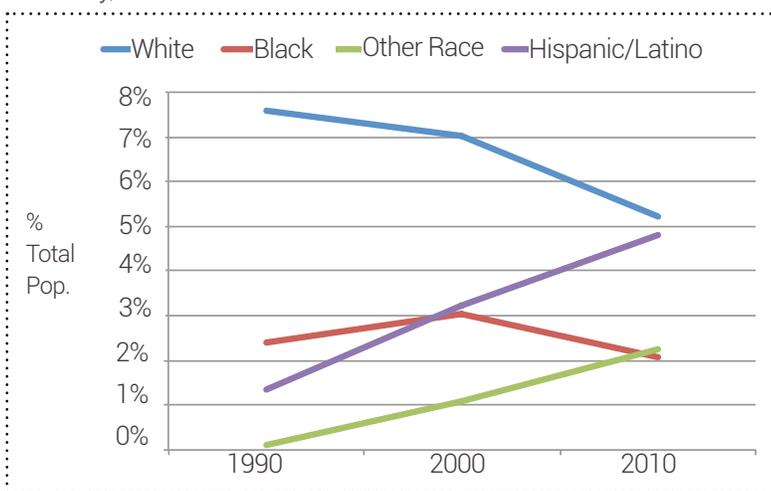
Despite being some of the most vulnerable and crucial members of society, children are often left unheard as they are neither voters or taxpayers. Children are dependent on their families, but also on the quality of their local environment's services (UNICEF 2004). Since children are only young for a short period of time, the time to invest in them is now. The American public school system is expecting the entry of more elementary students from prekindergarten to grade eight than ever before (NCES 2013). Communities must adapt quickly to population change and provide the services that will help children succeed.

## An Example of a Diverse Young Community: Village of Westbury, NY

The national cohort of young children beginning kindergarten is growing larger and more diverse with 24% reported as Hispanic, 13% Black, 4% Asian, 4% of mixed-race (Mulligan et al. 2012). Moreover, 25% of kindergartners come from households with incomes that fall below the federal poverty level (Mulligan et al. 2012).

The Village of Westbury in Long Island, NY is a suburban example of such trends. The community's increasing diversity given incoming immigrant families is evident in the changing racial and ethnic composition of its young population. Income disparity is also an issue: though the median household income is \$80,872, fifteen percent of households live on less than \$30,000 (ACS 2007-2011 estimates).

Changes in Reported Racial or Ethnic Background, Under 10 Population Westbury, NY



Source: Analysis of 1990, 2000, and 2010 U.S. Census Data

It is in this context that an early childhood advocacy group, The Early Years Institute (EYI), works to foster the public will to invest in young children. The EYI partnered with the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities, United Way Worldwide and a Westbury school to assess the extent to which young children were equipped to succeed in school.

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## A Case Study of The Early Years Institute's Mapping Initiative

A mapping exercise done in 2010 and 2012 by the EYI in collaboration with a Westbury elementary school reveals how assessments of local children's development can help highlight differences in neighborhood service levels. Planners could adopt similar joint studies of neighborhood youth to tailor their approaches to community development with a deeper understanding of the real needs of residents of all ages.

### Step 1: Choosing an appropriate data tool

The EYI searched for a reputable tool that would consider the whole child and not only children's academic performance. The EYI chose the Early Development Instrument (EDI), an evaluation tool developed by the Offord Centre for Child Studies in Canada.

### Step 2: Forming a working relationship with schools

The EYI searched for a local school district that catered to as many kindergarten children as possible in one school. This reduced the logistical difficulty of having to negotiate with several principals and conduct multiple teacher trainings. Criteria also included high needs and diverse demographics.

Getting the school on board was largely based on gaining the support of the superintendent. Knowing the community and its members well also helped the EYI gain teacher support.

### Step 3: Creating a data agreement with schools

The EYI obtained a license to administer the EDI and was bound to the strict rules set out by the instrument's creators, the primary rule being that no information would be looked at on an individual basis. Being licensed under such conditions allowed the EYI to establish trust with the school district and by extension, with teachers and parents.

The school administering the EDI was given a report of key findings, which may assist school staff in preparing to meet the needs of children entering the school system for the first time.

### Step 4: Collecting the data in and around schools

The Early Years Institute spent time in the community locating assets such as health care centers, libraries, basic needs providers and early childhood centers. In doing so, the EYI was able to connect with a broad range of local actors whose services have an impact on children and their families.

Meanwhile in the school, teachers were trained to answer the EDI questionnaire assessing all kindergartners on five developmental domains (see adjacent box on the EDI).

The data revealed that children's lack of school readiness, determined by children's vulnerability on two or more developmental domains, was concentrated in certain neighborhoods and in particular, in the industrial area of Westbury where many low-income children lived.

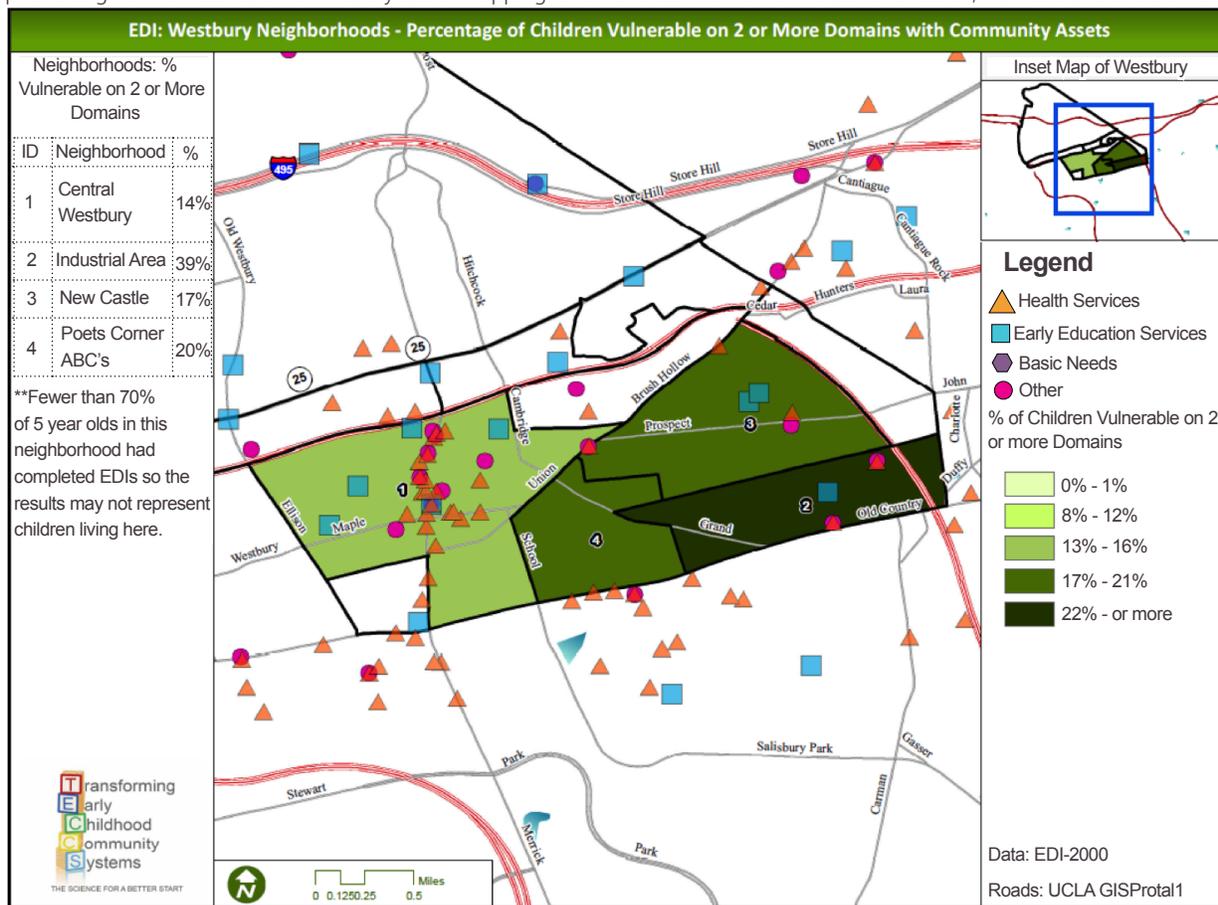
### Step 5: Mapping local childhood development and local assets

The EYI and UCLA Center created a map overlaying the collected EDI data with the local community assets. The resulting map depicted how neighborhoods with the highest levels of childhood development were also the neighborhoods with the most services for children and families.

The map also identified the neighborhoods with the greatest needs, among which are needs emerging from an area traditionally designated as industrial, but home to many vulnerable young families as a result of demographic changes. Were it not for such mapping, critical needs in these neighborhoods may have remained invisible to planners and community leaders.

#### *What is the Early Development Instrument?*

- The EDI is a tool that captures information on children's school readiness.
- The tool looks at five developmental domains: academic performance, approach to learning, physical health, language and cognitive skills, and social and emotional development.
- The instrument is a questionnaire completed by teachers for every child in their kindergarten class. The instrument is not a clinical test. It is not completed by children themselves and data are depersonalized.
- The data are reported by neighborhood.
- For more information, visit: <http://www.offordcentre.com/readiness/index.html>



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## Mapping Results

The map became a powerful communication tool on local needs. The EYI presented the map to local officials and to bodies such as the New York State Education Reform Commission. By painting a picture of the effects of local asset deprivation on children's development, the map illustrated how policy makers could direct investment to where it is most needed. Having consistently raised awareness on immediate needs, the map became the EYI's most eloquent tool to highlight the link between access to local services and children's well-being.

## Linking Children and the Community

To raise awareness of local children's needs and to assist in building coalitions for change the EYI sought opportunities for dialogue with local parents and community members.

In order to effectively listen to community voices, the EYI helped organize local community cafés. Organized by local groups whose members include parents, community cafés are held in different neighborhood spaces such as libraries or shops set up to look like cafés. Their only purpose is to provide a comfortable space for conversations

among parents about their concerns and ideas on neighborhood services or local issues impacting their children. The EYI did not present at such events but merely listened to parents who informed the agency about concerns or issues linked to childhood development.

Equipped with this nuanced understanding of local needs and concerns, the EYI developed bottom-up and top-down interest in local children's education and development. As part of the community asset mapping exercise, the EYI located the places where families "pay, play and pray" such as grocery stores, parks, businesses, health providers or churches. The EYI approached those who ran such establishments for opportunities to share the EDI findings. By presenting the map and key EDI findings to such groups as a parent teacher association, a local church and health providers, the EYI gained active local support to address child vulnerability.

Successes include funding for children's reading areas in several community venues, college students volunteering to read to children in local schools, and building outdoor nature classrooms in parks.

## Local School Readiness: A New Motivation for Planners

While the education sector and early childhood development may not fall within the planner's typical realm of focus, information on the status of children's development can inform planners about the specific needs of families and improve long-term planning.

### *Why should planners and schools work together?*

- Schools are at the forefront of identifying and understanding demographic changes in their communities: children entering kindergarten reflect the diversity of families in the neighborhood.
- Schools cannot rely on census data that does not adequately capture the diversity of incoming kindergartners and as such, may have a vested interest in instruments like the EDI in order to recognize and respond to changing needs.
- Broadening the range of planning partners increases the relevance and quality of planning in the local community.

Instruments like the EDI could unearth the impacts the larger environment has on children's readiness for school. From a planning perspective, the value of such measures is that they allow planners to meaningfully link community features to residents' well-being.

Data captured by the EDI provide insights not captured by census data. The American Community Survey is a five year rolling average and can miss important shifts if a community's population of young children is undergoing rapid change. By working with schools, planners have the opportunity to connect to parents with young children who may otherwise be overlooked.

As professionals who work closely with communities, planners can adopt or facilitate initiatives such as the ones spearheaded by The Early Years Institute to identify neighborhoods with the greatest needs. In doing so, planners can build convincing arguments that link investment in parks, public spaces and community services to the betterment of local children. This can be a powerful motivator for local investment that simultaneously improves children's school readiness and strengthens community ties.

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