

Better Beginnings North Waterloo: Baseline Evaluation Report

Julian Hasford, Kathleen Worton, Jessica Noble, Geoffrey Nelson, Salma Bangash
May 31, 2016

Better Beginnings Waterloo

Better Beginnings is a program to prevent problems and promote healthy development among children, families, and communities. The program emphasizes resident participation, community partnerships, universal, holistic prevention programs, and using schools as central locations for programs and supports.

Better Beginnings Waterloo was initially started in 2012 by a group of residents in North Waterloo who wanted to improve their community. The project will offer a variety of programs, resources and supports for children and families throughout North Waterloo, and has been developed in partnership with Life Change Adventures, and House of Friendship, with funding from the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation, and consultation with Waterloo Regional School Board, Cedarbrae Elementary School, and Winston Churchill Elementary School.

Why Do Research?

Doing research can make a big difference in the effectiveness of community programs. Some benefits of research include:

- Understanding what programs we actually need in the community
- Knowing whether our programs are working the way we expect them to
- Learning how we can improve programs
- Sharing what we learn with other communities
- Showing funders that we are achieving our goals

The Research Team

Dr. Geoffrey Nelson at Wilfrid Laurier University is leading this evaluation research with assistance from Dr. Julian Hasford (Postdoctoral Fellow at Laurier) and Kathleen Worton (PhD Student at Laurier). Salma Bangash is the community researcher and conducted all of the interviews with parents. Jessica Noble (MA Student at Laurier) completed the implementation evaluation.

The Research Process

The Better Beginnings Research in 2015-2016 included two types of evaluations, a baseline evaluation, and an implementation evaluation.

Baseline Evaluation

A baseline evaluation is a study that aims to capture how things are before a new program is introduced. The baseline evaluation for Better Beginnings in North Waterloo has been done to help to identify what parents feel the current strengths of the community are and

what children and families in the community need that is not currently available (e.g., parenting support groups, affordable after school programs). By understanding what is going well (and not going so well) for children and families now, we can better determine whether the program is making a difference when we do another evaluation in 2018.

The baseline evaluation involved three main research activities: (a) a teacher rating form completed by Grade 1 and 2 teachers at Cedarbrae School and Winston Churchill School; (b) interviews with parents with children in Grade 1 or Grade 2 at either school; and (c) a Community Conversations event.

Implementation Evaluation

An evaluation of the early, planning stages of the *Better Beginnings Waterloo* project was conducted. The aim of the evaluation was to assess participation of community members throughout the early stages of the project. Specifically, facilitators, barriers and outcomes of resident participation were examined as well as activities in which they participated.

Events that Impacted the Research Process and Research Findings

The research activities took place between April 2015 and May 2016. These activities overlapped with a number of events in the community that influenced children, families, and schools. A work-to-rule campaign involving elementary teachers and support staff took place between May and November as a part of job action and contract negotiations between the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario and the Waterloo Region District School Board. In addition, the Government of Ontario announced an update to the sexual education curriculum in June 2015. These events presented challenges to the research process, and may have delayed or limited resident participation in the research.

Research Findings

What Have We Learned From Teachers?

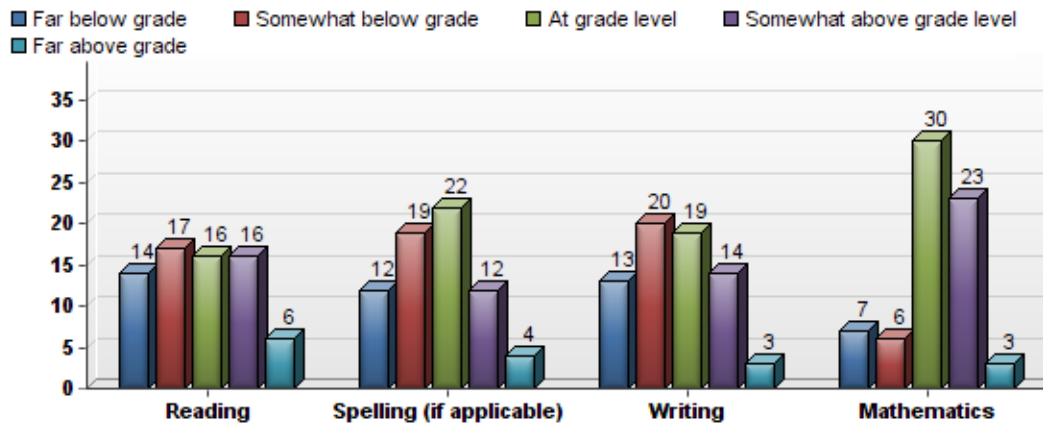
Grade 1 and 2 teachers at Cedarbrae and Winston Churchill Schools completed the teacher rating form for 68 students whose parents provided consent. 72% of these rating forms were for students at Winston Churchill, while 28% were for students at Cedarbrae.

On the rating form, teachers commented on each child's academic progress, social skills, and behaviour in the classroom. Much of the information gathered from the rating form will be used to compare children in Grade 1 and 2 in 2015 (who haven't yet had access to Better Beginnings) with Children in Grades 1 and 2 in 2018 (who will have had Better Beginnings programs available in their community for two to three years).

Students' Academic Performance

Teachers were asked to rate each student regarding their school performance for each subject. Results are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. School Performance by Subject



Many students are performing at grade level or above in their classroom subjects. However, there are a substantial number that are performing below grade level, particularly on language skills such as reading, spelling, and writing (Table 1).

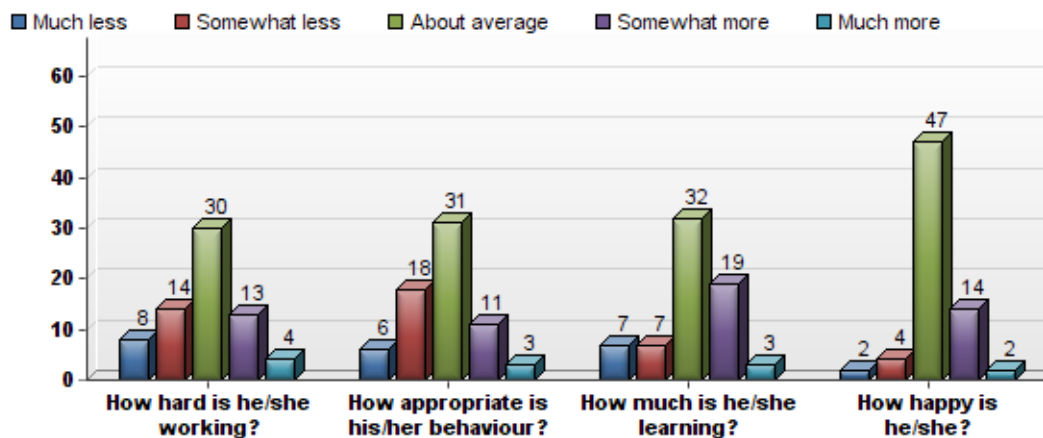
Table 1. Performance Below Grade Level

Subject	Students performing below grade level
Reading	31(46%)
Spelling	31(46%)
Writing	33 (49%)
Mathematics	13 (19%)

Students' Behaviour at School

Teachers were asked to compare each student to other students of the same age on a number of behaviour related questions. Results are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Student Behaviour Compared with Students of the Same Age



Most students are at the level of their peers in terms of their work effort, learning, and happiness. However, some students are below average, with 22 students (32%) working

less than their peers, 24 students (35%) behaving less appropriately than their peers, 14 students (20%) learning less than their peers, and 6 students (9%) appearing to be less happy than their peers.

What Have We Learned From Parents?

Interviews with parents focused on family functioning (e.g., stressful life events, sources of social support), children's social skills and behaviour, and ratings of their children's school and their neighbourhood. Like the teacher rating form, many of the questions asked are for the purposes of comparison in three years, so are not reported at this time.

34 interviews were conducted with parents who have children in Grade 1 or Grade 2 at Cedarbrae Elementary School or Winston Churchill Elementary School. Most parents participating were women (94%) and were a biological parent of the child.

Primary Language

The majority of parents (85%) indicated that English was a language they spoke at home, but parents also indicated other languages at were spoken at home as well. These languages include Arabic (18%), Farsi (9%), Urdu (6%), Pashto (6%), Chinese (3%), Spanish (3%), Rohingya (3%), Tojik (3%), and Serbian (3%).

Parent Birthplace

Many parents (41%) indicated they were born in Canada, and many of these parents were born in Ontario (38%). However, the majority of parents (59%) were born outside of Canada in countries such as Pakistan, China, Somalia, Afghanistan, Guyana, Syria, Iraq, Croatia, Egypt, Bangladesh, Libya, Taiwan, Liberia, and Nepal.

Perceptions Of Their Child's Behaviour

12% of parents felt that their child had behaviour problems, while 86% believed their child did not.

Perceptions Of Their Child's Health

71% of parents rated their children's health as being excellent or very good compared to other children of the same age. 24% indicated their child's health was good and 6% indicated their child's health was only fair.

Level Of Community Participation

Most parents participate in a number of community activities, but the most common activities are getting together with friends and getting together with families in the community. Many parents indicated that their families do not participate in any organized activities in the community such as sports, clubs, meetings or spiritual services (Table 2).

Table 2. Participation in Community Activities

Type of activity	Average number of times participating per month	% of parents who indicated they never do this activity (times per month = 0)
Getting together with friends	7	15%
Getting together with other families in the community	4	21%
Organized recreation (e.g., bowling, softball, fitness classes)	2	63%
Giving time to help in the community (e.g., club leader, hockey coach, committee)	3	71%
Attending a meeting of a club or organization	1	64%
Attending spiritual services at a church, mosque, synagogue or temple	1	70%

Parents' Experiences Of Stressful Life Events

We asked parents what common stresses have experienced during the 12 months before the interview. Listed below are some of the most common stressful events that families in the community have experienced (Table 3).

Table 3. Stressful Life Events

Event	% of families experiencing this stressful event
Death of someone dear	35%
Bad financial problems	30%
Serious illness of someone dear	24%
Job loss/unemployment	15%
Started working or changed jobs	15%

Parents' Experiences Of Financial Stressors

At some point up to three months before the interview, 35% of parents said their families didn't have enough money for food and daily living expenses, 36% of families had to go to a food bank, and 12% of families have not been able to pay their bills.

Neighbourhood Satisfaction

We asked parents to rate their satisfaction with the community as a place to live. On a scale of 1 (completely dissatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied), the average rating was 7/10, with most parents (82%) indicating moderate or high level of neighbourhood satisfaction (Table 4).

Table 4. Neighbourhood Satisfaction

Level of satisfaction (on 10 point scale)	% of parents choosing this rating
High (8, 9, or 10)	41%
Moderate (5, 6, or 7)	41%
Low (1, 2, 3, or 4)	18%

Common Concerns About The Neighbourhood

Most parents indicated that many aspects of the neighbourhood are acceptable although there is room for improvement. The majority of parents were most dissatisfied with the number of parks and playgrounds in the neighbourhood (Table 5).

Table 5. Ratings of Aspects of the Neighbourhood

Aspect	% Rating low (poor/fair)	% Rating moderate (good)	% Rating high (very good/excellent)
Condition of streets and roads	35%	44%	21%
Condition of houses and buildings	21%	47%	32%
Number of parks and playgrounds	65%	18%	18%
Noise from traffic, airplanes, etc.	32%	44%	24%
Neighbours	18%	50%	32%
Shopping facilities	35%	44%	21%
Safety from crime	15%	47%	38%
Safety walking on the street at night	26%	50%	24%
Safety for children when out to play	12%	56%	32%

Changes Parents Would Like To See For Children and Families In The Neighbourhood

Parents have told us that they have concerns about their children’s health issues, behaviour issues, bullying, and their future opportunities. Some parents were also concerned about their own parenting skills and abilities in terms of meeting their child’s unique needs.

In the schools, parents said they would like to see more programs (e.g., after school programs, lunch activities, physical activities, music, reading, and chess) as well as academic supports for strong students and more communication between parents and teachers. Many parents want to be more involved in their children’s school and would like more activities for parents and families at the schools (e.g., movie nights, dinners, multi-cultural programs).

In the community, parents would like more social events where they can meet with neighbours, and more play spaces in the neighbourhood for younger and older children. Parents believe that more programs are needed and that these programs must be affordable and easy to access. Parents are interested in music programs, programs about cultural inclusion, and after school programs. Increasing social activities for families in the neighbourhood, such as barbeques, picnics, is a change parents feel will help parents

get to know one another and will promote inclusion and connection among families of different cultures.

What Have We Learned From The Community?

The Community Conversation event took place the evening of May 13th, 2016 at the Albert McCormick community centre. At this event, members of the Better Beginnings Steering Team and the Research Committee (along with some of our community partners) presented information about Better Beginnings and some early findings from the parent interviews. Families attending the event took part in table discussions where they talked about what they wanted to see for children and families in the neighbourhood. A summary of key suggestions for programs, events, and resources and supports is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Summary of Feedback from Community Conversation Event

Suggestions for children	Suggestions for families
<i>Programs</i>	<i>Programs</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breakfast programs • Before-school programs • After-school programs (focus on literacy and physical activity) • Weekend and summer programs • March Break camp • PD day camp • Arts & crafts programs • Educational programs (math, science) • Communication/problem-solving skills programs • Kids in the kitchen program (multi-cultural) • Chicken-raising • Small group meetings for kids and mentors • Programs available to all community members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family and Schools Together (FAST) • Community-building programs • ESL programs in the community centre • Neighbourhood Association interest classes • Food programs for parents
<i>Events</i>	<i>Events</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field trips • Activities that strengthen family identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food events (BBQ, multi-cultural potluck) • Community clean-up • Garage and bake sale • Fair / Carnival • Talent shows / Coffee house • Movie nights (outdoor in summers) • Games nights • Scavenger hunt • Family field trips • Porch parties
<i>Resources and Supports</i>	<i>Resources and Supports</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occasional/flexible childcare • Parent and child playtimes • Children's teaching garden 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community space for informal socializing • More use of McCormick Community Centre • Accommodations for families with children • Family counselor • Family get-togethers to discuss community problems and solutions • Closer partnership with the library

What Have Been Some Successes and Challenges in Planning and Implementing Better Beginnings?

The implementation evaluation consisted of two stages. The Exploration Stage involved engaging in community events and completing business-related tasks, such as grant applications, in order to acquire funding. During this first stage, the driving force for participation was the goal of creating a positive change within their community. However, difficult business-related tasks and lack of available time posed challenges. Once funding was acquired in December 2014, the Installation Stage began, which involved more concrete planning of the implementation of *Better Beginnings Waterloo*. During this stage, residents participated in project support, such as sitting on committees and volunteering at events. Despite the unexpected project timeline and lack of available time, community members found the learning opportunities and social support they received as motivators to continue participating in the project. Finally, throughout this project community members were able to improve their skills and social connections. Additionally, the project acquired funding and strong community partners, while the community has become more engaged in the *Better Beginnings Waterloo* project as well.

What is planned next?

Over the next two years, new programs will be offered in the community through *Better Beginnings Waterloo*. Our team will continue to observe how the programs are being implemented in order to identify any challenges so that they can be addressed early on. In 2018, our research team will repeat the collection of data about children in Grades 1 and 2, their families, and the community, and then compare it with the data we collected in 2015. This will help us to understand how *Better Beginnings Waterloo* has improved the lives of children and families, and the community as a whole. Findings from the research will be shared again with the community through local events and a brief report.

For further information contact Julian Hasford, jhasford@hotmail.com

