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Trying Together in Allegheny County: Our Journey to Real-Time Data

By Cara Ciminillo

As the Executive Director of [Trying Together](#), a Pittsburgh-based nonprofit focused on supporting the early childhood sector that also serves as the quality partner for [Early Learning Resource Center \(ELRC\)](#) Region 5 in Pennsylvania's Allegheny County, I lead a team of staff keenly focused on ensuring that children and families can access high-quality early care and education options. Achieving that goal has never been easy, but this year—when the COVID-19 pandemic required many early learning programs to close abruptly or drastically adjust their operations—was especially daunting. We needed information on available slots, by age of child, location and price, and given that program supply was changing almost daily, we needed that data in what technologist's

call “real-time”.

At the onset of the pandemic, we had an on-line search engine, but we didn't have the information, or the systems needed, to efficiently track enrollment or monitor supply in real-time. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed us to change. With the support of our local philanthropic community and Child Care Aware of America, Trying Together was connected to a technology firm called [Bridgecare](#) that was able to help us craft a data and community management platform to collect and share information.

Thanks to skilled leadership from Bridgecare and funding from The Heinz Endowments, The Hillman Foundation, and the Eden Hall Foundation, we were able to launch and scale a new search platform in a matter of months. Attendance data was kept up to date through the use of artificial intelligence text messaging at the same time as the Bridgecare team worked on crafting data links and a provider portal. Now, more than one year later, Bridgecare continues to add updated filters and features weekly to the Allegheny Child Care finder tool that supports both families and child care providers. The learning curve was steep, however Bridgecare lead numerous large format presentations for providers and families, and was also available via phone, email, or video chat to answer questions or troubleshoot challenges.

Trying Together now has a bold, new vision for what is possible. The Allegheny Child Care finder tool has expanded to include all early learning, after school, summer camp, and virtual program offerings for children from birth through age 18. In addition to identifying available spaces ready to serve their children, families can filter their search to learn more about the curriculum, meals, and support services each provider offers. Families can also message early learning programs directly through the tool to ask questions or initiate enrollment. Child care programs can customize their profiles, include photos, videos, and other important details, highlighting what makes them special. The Allegheny Child Care finder has played a critical role in helping early learning programs once again reach full enrollment.

Our step into modern technology has also opened new doors for Trying Together. We now have access to powerful data on the early care and education sector, data that can help us lead more strategically and effectively. Our staff is better able to coach providers, and engage families, by harnessing the power of real-time, site-based data. We can help the sector navigate the tricky waters of recovery, using data to reflect, change and grow.

[CLICK HERE to see the Allegheny Child Care Finder](#)



The banner features the Opportunities Exchange logo on the left, which consists of two overlapping circles (one blue, one orange) above the text "Opportunities Exchange". To the right, the text "2021 NATIONAL SHARED SERVICES Technical Conference" is displayed in white and yellow. Further right is a graphic of a lightbulb with rays emanating from it, with the words "THINK BIG" written in white and yellow. Below this, the dates "September 29—October 1, 2021 | Austin, TX" are shown in white, and the phrase "Save the Date!" is written in large, bold, blue letters on an orange background.



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