

INNOVATION GRANT IMPACT REPORT

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Extension

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

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Youth Forward Wisconsin: Multi-institute Extension team brings research on Universal Child Savings Accounts to communities

Situation

Research shows that children with small-dollar accounts for higher education do better academically than those without college savings. Students with Children's Savings Accounts (CSAs) do better in school and are three times more likely to attend higher education, and four times more likely to graduate¹. Community supported Child Savings Accounts are associated with promising outcomes for children and their caregivers across the life course, including improved early child socioemotional development, child health, maternal mental health, educational expectations, and academic performance².

In response to this research, multiple other states and geographies have implemented Universal CSA programs. Today, more than 129 Children's Savings Account programs cover over 1.2 million children nationwide. Other states with programs include: Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, Michigan, Minnesota, Indiana, and Maine (2). Wisconsin has one successful CSA program, Fund My Future Milwaukee, and Extension was engaged in initial research on feasibility for CSA programs in rural communities in Richland County, WI. With educational disparities, workforce readiness, and need for local economic development as persistent problems in Wisconsin, Extension is well positioned to provide research-based strategies to impact educational attainment, asset accumulation, and promote equity. In 2020, Innovation Grant funding enabled the creation of "Youth Forward Wisconsin," a community of practice of Extension Educators interested in furthering their understanding of Universal CSA programs and bringing this information to their communities.

Objectives

Create a formal network of Extension Educators to support each other in the work of community engagement around Universal Child Savings Accounts

Establish a framework for local communities to create and sustain Universal CSA programs in their geographies with an appropriate role for Extension in incubation and ongoing family engagement & education.

Actions

Created a community of practice of 21 Extension professionals working together to bring research on the benefits of Universal Child Savings Accounts to their communities. We named this initiative [Youth Forward Wisconsin](#) and brought this commitment into plans of work and the public facing Extension website.

Engaged in a mentee relationship with Indiana Youth Institute, funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and participated in the Midwest CSA Consortium to gain insights from other states that have launched successful CSA programs.

Organized Q&A panels to raise internal Extension awareness of the unique considerations of different communities in Wisconsin regarding their access to higher education, including African American, Native American, Hmong/Hmoob, Latinx, Rural, Students with disabilities, and Immigrant families.

Educated community partners on the research base, best practices, examples from other states, and opportunities to establish local Universal CSA programs. Extension collated research to create a toolkit that summarizes the essential roles that must be filled by authoring fact sheets for potential [Funder](#), [Outreach](#), and [Coordinator](#) partners.

Conducted two focus groups to gain insights from parents—the potential end-users of these accounts—on their preferences and thoughts about their children’s future opportunities.

Outcomes

New community partnerships were built, and the information that Extension brought forward regarding Universal Children’s Savings Accounts was relevant and valued. Examples of these partnerships are Dunn County Community Foundation, Wauzeka School District, Head Start Association, Financial Empowerment Center Racine, and Community Foundation of the Fox Valleys. In the initial community assessments Extension Educators across the state found that community partners were interested in the synergistic possibilities of establishing Universal CSA programs, but had little to no prior knowledge of the research base or process. Upon hearing a presentation from the Extension Educator, 80% of community partners self-reported being “very interested and ready for the next step” to move toward a CSA program in their community.

Quotes from community needs assessments:

- **Chippewa:** “really like that it is for all youth, not only those who excel at sports or academically”
- **Clark:** “children need to have hope and a road to a brighter future to help them grow”
- **Eau Claire:** “we have students where this might be the only trigger or opportunity”
- **Racine:** “In order for a Children Savings Account to be impactful, I think the community would have to trust the system”
- **Richland** “the earlier a program starts, the more the investment will grow”
- **Washburn:** “I do think it sounds like a promising idea if every child in the county is eligible”
- **Washington:** “We would love to see every student have the opportunity to advance their future opportunities”

Through the presentation of information to a Wisconsin state [legislative committee hearing](#), Extension is now recognized as a subject-matter expert in Universal CSA research and Wisconsin community engagement. Additional [statewide press](#) brought further attention to CSAs through a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel report on the opportunity for Wisconsin CSA programs, featuring a quote from Extension Educator, Chelsea Wunnicke.

Extension Educators improved their knowledge of the unique considerations of different communities in Wisconsin regarding their access to higher education, which impacts programming in the institutes of Human Development and Relationships, Positive Youth Development, Health and Wellbeing, and Community Development.

Next Steps

Engage in additional community readiness assessments using formal tools to assess geographies of greatest potential for CSA programs.

Work with a team of graduate students from La Follette School on cost-benefit analysis of statewide policy proposals for universal savings options. Help them center equity by requesting a heat-map of Wisconsin that shows geographies of potential greatest impact with intersecting variables that impact educational attainment and asset accumulation.

Update outreach materials to provide YFW community of practice members with a robust outreach kit with up-to-date research information and best practices for engagement.

Document best-practices for parent focus groups and work with Extension Educators to host additional focus groups, with planned locations in Dunn County, Fox Valley, and Southwest Wisconsin.

Continue engagement with the Midwest CSA Consortium mentorship program, partnered with Indiana Youth Institute, for continued access to new research and best practices as Youth Forward Wisconsin contributes to the field of CSAs with Extension incubating these programs in Wisconsin in a way that is unique nationwide.

Youth Forward WI Team: Todd Wenzel, Mary Ann Schilling, Luisa Gerasimo, Anna DeMers, Lissa Radke, Jeanne Walsh, Mary Campbell Wood, Yia Lor, Amanda Griswold, Chelsea Wunnicke, Sarah Hawks, Erin Conway, Fabiola Diaz, MaryBeth Wohlrabe, Katie Gellings, Carol Bralich, Nancy Vance, Sarah Thompson. **Extension Leadership:** Jenny Abel, Brandon Hofstedt, Jenna Klink, Danielle Hairston-Green, JulieAnn Stawicki. **Stakeholders & Partners:** UW-Madison Center for Financial Security and La Follette School of Public Affairs (J. Michael Collins & Morgan Edwards), Indiana Youth Institute (Clint Kugler & Phil Maurizi), Upper Midwest Children's Savings Account Consortium, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Edvest & WI Department of Financial Institutions (Linda Lambert & Jessica Wentzel), WI Head Start Assn.

Sources

1. Assets and Education Initiative (AEDI). (2013). Building Expectations, Delivering Results: Asset-Based Financial Aid and the Future of Higher Education. In W. Elliott (Ed.), *Biannual report on the assets and education field*. Lawrence, KS.
2. Children's Savings Accounts: A core part of the equity agenda. Report from Asset Funders Network. <https://assetfunders.org/resource/childrens-savings-accounts-a-core-part-of-the-equity-agenda/>

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