

Friday, Jan 25, 2019

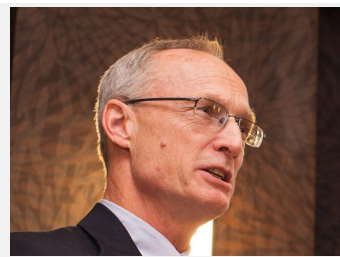
Children's Institute leader switching roles

Dirk Hightower to step down as executive director

By: Velvet Spicer | January 25, 2019

Dirk Hightower has missed about a week of work in his 37-year career at Children's Institute Inc. His nearly perfect attendance is less a reflection of the requirements of the job and more about a commitment and passion for his work that runs especially deep.

"I really like working here," Hightower said. "Honestly, most of the aspects of the job are fun."



Dirk Hightower

Hightower this spring will step down as executive director of the agency he has run for much of his adult life, a move that is bittersweet for him. But he is quick to clarify that he is not retiring.

"I plan on retiring someday, but I'm really changing roles from executive director to more of a senior staff (position)," Hightower said.

Children's Institute is a national nonprofit organization based in Rochester that works to strengthen children's social and emotional health. The agency uses research and evaluation to develop and promote effective prevention and early intervention programs and best practices for kids, families, schools and communities. Children's Institute is affiliated with

the University of Rochester and has served the local and national community for more than six decades.

Hightower said the organization has been a "good secret."

"It's a business-to-business not-for-profit. We equip and support those people that work with kids," he explained. "So we work with superintendents and we work with bus drivers. We work with janitors and we work with physicians. We work with teachers and we work with principals. We work with people who work with kids."

Children's Institute has 50 to 60 full-time and part-time staffers that include social workers, psychologists, sociologists, pediatricians, educators and others who interact with children. Working with a budget of roughly \$4 million—funded through government monies, foundations and fee-for-service programs—staffers serve some 600,000 children annually.

Children's Institute has two arms: programs and service, which develops, implements and trains on different types of programmatic approaches to children; and research and development, through which staffers conduct ongoing work in a continuous improvement forum, as well as basic research.

The organization was founded as Primary Mental Health Project in 1957 when a Rochester City School District psychologist and an RCSD social worker met with University of Rochester faculty member Emory Cowen to write a grant that would enable them to look at young children who were having difficulties in school.

Primary Project discovered that between 20 percent and one-third of young students had social and emotional issues that made their school files thicker; they were the problem children. But it was recognized that all of the schools' social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists wouldn't be enough to help every child who required attention. They needed an alternative way to work with the children.

"At the time there were housewives who were, in fact, educated women who had raised and were raising children successfully without necessarily advanced degrees in psychology or social work," Hightower said. "So they went out and interviewed and selected a number of them and then provided training and supervision, and lo and behold, they did an excellent job in working with children in helping them become less shy and withdrawn, helping them become less aggressive."

In 1970, Primary Project, as it was known, became a nonprofit with the goal of providing indirect services and



support to schools and to work with schools collaboratively and collectively. Cowen served as executive director of the agency until his retirement in 1991, when Hightower was named as his replacement.

Hightower had served as the agency's research director since arriving at Primary Project in 1982. The organization in 2000 changed its name to Children's Institute, and moved from its location on Mt. Hope Avenue to a larger facility at Village Gate where it resides today.

The agency has a number of notable efforts. Its Training, Resources and Coaching Center, or TRACC, focuses on children from birth to age 8 while looking at the whole child. TRACC is funded by the Greater Rochester Health Foundation as part of its Healthy Futures strategy, and is a partnership of 13 community organizations led by Children's Institute.

TRACC was designed to address the inadequate system of prevention and care that has led to a growing mental health crisis among children and adolescents.

"We've known this for the last 20 (years), that if you just focus on academics that's great, but you can only raise children so far, but not enough," Hightower said. "If you just focus on social and emotion you can only raise children so far, they're not really going to be successful. It's combining all of these that make the big difference."

Recent research programs coming out of Children's Institute include the Healthy Weight Initiative for the Greater Rochester Health Foundation, after-school and summer enrichment programs for the United Way of Greater Rochester Inc. and the Teen Empowerment program. Notable publications include the 2018 "Rochester Early Childhood Assessment Partnership 2017-2018 Twenty-First Annual Report," as well as articles in several educational journals.

In 2008, Children's Institute with SophiTEC Inc. formed Comet Informatics LLC, which works with educators to collect and report data through the Comet software. In 2010, Children's Institute designed its Same Sky Sharing program, which is designed to help kids from military families cope with a family member's deployment.

Children's Institute in 2016 initiated its GROW-Rochester program, which offers comprehensive, whole-child screening to 3-year-old children in the City of Rochester. The program was designed to identify needs in hearing, vision, dental health, language and speech, cognitive and social-emotional development at an early age. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services continues to monitor the project as a model for possible implementation nationally

In 2017, Children's Institute formed the Social and Emotional Learning Center, which is a collaborative effort to provide training and support across multiple settings that serve children to achieve systemic change in social and emotional skills.

"There was a whole period of time where schools focused on academics, testing and things like that," Hightower recalled. "And the interest in social, emotional and physical development waned to almost nothing. And now it's coming back."

Although Children's Institute is nationally known, its service area remains primarily in the Rochester and Monroe County area, Hightower said, but the agency also has programs in Canada, Israel, Germany and Sweden.

"One of the things we started with and have focused on since day one, or since I've been here, is outcomes. What are the outcomes that we're looking for and are we making real, significant changes in those outcomes?" Hightower said. "The second is of working collaboratively or collectively with other people, not trying to assume that you have all the skills needed to address a different issue, what's now called collective impact."

Outside of Children's Institute, outcomes and collective impact are only recently getting the attention Hightower said they should have had all along.

"For the first 30 years of me working here almost no one was interested in outcomes," he chides. "They were interested in the number of service units. They didn't care if it made a difference or not. It is now changing. So that's been a real change for the positive."

Patricia Leo, who serves as executive director of the Florence M. Muller Foundation, has known Hightower for two decades, primarily from her previous role as director of community impact at United Way. It was Hightower who convinced her to try the Comet program to measure results.

"The only way to know what really works is to measure it," Leo said of how Hightower and Children's Institute helped her. "I'm a rat to his Pied Piper."

Leo said one of the things she admires most about Hightower is his "utter and complete faith."



"He sees promise and possibility in everything and everyone," she added.

And unlike other leaders who may hold knowledge close to the vest to maintain their power or strength, Hightower is not like that, Leo said.

"Dirk really believes the community will be better when we all are on the same page, reading the same chapter," she said. "He's always sharing information and sharing credit."

Jeffrey Kaczorowski M.D., who serves as vice chair for pediatrics for government and community relations at UR and as senior adviser to the Rochester nonprofit Children's Agenda, said that during the 20 years he has known Hightower and his work at Children's Institute, one thing stands out to him.

"His leadership style is characterized by true partnership and integrity and always putting the needs of kids and families first," Kaczorowski said.

Hightower's replacement has not yet been found, said Terry Hartmann, director of finance and operations for Children's Institute. The search is both local and nationwide, and a successor is expected to be named in April.

The ideal candidate, Kaczorowski said, would need three things to maintain Children's Institute's value to the community.

"One is partnering with the community; two is putting what's effective for kids and families first and really focusing in on the data and science; and three is the building of trust and authority for kids," he explained. "The success of Children's Institute is not only Dirk's. The leadership and the board, certainly under the direction of Dirk, have made Children's Institute an incredibly valuable community asset."

Hightower said Children's Institute's future is bright.

"We have some very talented people. I think there's lots of opportunity. Think collective impact, at looking at whole community ways of addressing issues. And we have strength there," Hightower noted. "I think managing large projects, we have strength there. I think doing basic research in child areas, we have strength there. So I think many of our strengths coincide with what the community is starting to look for, which is kind of cool."

vspicer@bridgetowermedia.com/585-653-4021/@Velvet_Spicer

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE



Walmart boosts truck drivers' pay to attract new hires

o January 25, 2019



Ibero's Rosario-Escher wins ATHENA Award

o January 25, 2019



RIT physicist wins national award

o January 25, 2019

