

NCCP National Center for
Children *in Poverty*

Columbia University
MAILMAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**LEARNING FROM
STARTING POINTS**

*Findings from the
Starting Points Assessment Project*

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In 1994, the Carnegie Corporation of New York issued a report titled *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children*.¹ Calling its findings “a quiet crisis,” the report urged the federal government, states, community leaders, educators, health care decision-makers, service providers, business, leaders, parents, and the philanthropic community to actively work toward four broad goals: promoting responsible parenthood, guaranteeing child care choices, ensuring good health and protection, and mobilizing communities to support young children and their families.

Heeding its own call, in January 1996, the Carnegie Corporation made the first awards for the Starting Points States and Communities Partnership for Young Children Grants, a four-and-a-half year, \$7 million initiative. Focusing on program improvement, policy development, and public engagement and awareness, the aim was to serve as a catalyst to seed activities to spur both short and long-term systems change within selected states and communities.

In 1999, the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) was asked to undertake an assessment of Starting Points to document the variations in context, structure, activities, and accomplishments across the 11 sites that were funded throughout the initiative, including four city sites: Baltimore, Boston, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco; and seven states: Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Vermont, and West Virginia.

The cross-site assessment focused on the following questions:

- What were the variations in the structure, auspices, and leadership across the sites?
- How did the demographic, policy, economic, and political contexts vary across the sites?
- What was the range of activities and accomplishments across the sites?
- What were the most common positive and negative mediating factors across the sites?
- How did the sites perceive the strengths and limitations of the Starting Points initiative?
- What were the collective lessons and implications for future multisite early childhood systems change initiatives?

Findings from the assessment, based on reviews of written materials, interviews and debriefing of key informants, and analysis of the data, are highlighted

below. The full report is available on the Internet at www.nccp.org and in paper from the Publications Department of NCCP. Profiles of the individual Starting Points sites are also on NCCP’s Web site.

THE STARTING POINTS INITIATIVE

The View from the Carnegie Corporation

The initial request for proposals for a two-year award was quite broad. It asked applicants to provide a background/needs statement and to describe proposed work that would lead to demonstrated progress in:

- Mobilizing stakeholders.
- Strengthening public and private sector policies.
- Improving the quality of programs.
- Encouraging continuous learning and development.

In Phase II, the Carnegie Corporation defined more focused objectives, asking the sites to: “establish and meet measurable, concrete outcomes based on systematic strategic plans that concentrate on program and policy development, [and address] the evaluation and dissemination of model approaches on a city or state-wide basis.”

Consistent with the initial design, there were two other major components to the Starting Points initiative. The first involved the participation of a network of national intermediary organizations, while the second called for support for a series of national initiatives intended to keep the spotlight on the importance of investing in early childhood programs and policies.

Starting Points in Action: The View from the Sites

To provide a context for the findings, a very brief overview of each of the sites follows. More detailed descriptions may be found in the full report; profiles approved by the sites may be found at www.nccp.org.

BALTIMORE initially focused on program development aimed at integrating child health, family support, and child development in a service model. Later, its service-focused strategy became integrated into a citywide community mobilization strategy.

BOSTON crafted a two-tiered strategy: program development at a neighborhood level integrating a family support model for young children and a citywide policy/advocacy strategy addressing early care and education and child health.

Starting Points was the catalyst for concentrated networking and activities in 11 sites that had, by the end, largely changed the threshold level of expectation, communication, vision, policy, and/or practice regarding important aspects of the well-being of young children.

COLORADO developed, refined, and implemented a statewide program model to promote improved parenting and early language development for infants and toddlers.

FLORIDA focused primarily on improving the policy context for early care and education. The site emphasized innovative public education strategies about early brain development and connections to the business community. The effort was carried out through an informal collaboration among state-level child advocates.

HAWAII evolved into a two-tiered approach, fostering local community leadership and building state-level outcome-oriented public/private partnerships.

NORTH CAROLINA focused primarily on designing and implementing a strategic plan for enhancing technical assistance to local communities in order to accomplish the goals of Smart Start, a preexisting comprehensive statewide early childhood systems change and program enhancement initiative.

PITTSBURGH focused on building a series of broad coalitions and partnerships to promote a family support and prevention agenda.

RHODE ISLAND used two major strategies—policy development and public engagement—to address child care and health issues.

SAN FRANCISCO focused on building a neutral leadership forum for bringing together different stakeholders and then developing and implementing a policy agenda focused primarily on issues related to child care.

VERMONT focused on strengthening networks among stakeholders in the early childhood community, engaging the business community in child care, and developing new tools and policies to improve the quality of early care and educational settings.

WEST VIRGINIA crafted a two-tiered strategy, one focused on developing a network of Starting Points centers for families with young children at the local level, the other focused on policy development and public awareness at the state level.

THE FINDINGS IN BRIEF

The findings highlighted below address contextual, implementation, and mediating factors.

Contextual Factors

Contextual factors important to the Starting Points initiative included national, state, and site-specific factors. The national context was marked by new federal initiatives, the enactment of welfare reform legislation and the state Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP), a doubling of the funding for the Child Care Development Fund, and the rapid implementation of Early Head Start programs. It was also marked by activities seeded by the Carnegie Corporation² to promote attention to young children. In most states, investments of state dollars in child development and family support programs also expanded.³

From a site-specific perspective, there was considerable variation in the larger state demographic and policy context. For instance, the population of children under age six in the state sites ranged from a low of 49,000 in Vermont to 1.1 million in Florida, while the percentage of young children living in families with incomes at or under 200 percent of the poverty level ranged from 37 percent in Colorado to 50 percent in Florida.

The ways in which the sites used the Starting Points grants also varied. In states, for example, the grant leadership came from officials within government, advocates, a statewide public-private partnership, and a private organization created in response to the initiative. In cities, leadership came from within a university, a community service agency, a mayor's office, and a newly created nonprofit entity.

Almost all of the sites used Carnegie Corporation funds to support staff and activities that could not typically tap public funds, but that were key to building momentum for change. For example, funds were used to design and publish compelling materials and to hold a retreat for state legislators on early childhood.

Implementation Factors

There was enormous variation across sites with respect to emphases and strategies. Some sites focused almost exclusively on program and service delivery improvement, while others combined these with policy and public engagement strategies. While most sites considered child care and early education a central focus, several concentrated primarily on family support, and a few included some attention to child health. Some sites were located in jurisdictions that already had a vision of how to improve services and informal supports for families with young children, while others, particularly the city-level sites, used the Starting Points grant to develop a vision. In most sites, the approach that evolved seemed to fit with the local political and service culture in interesting and sometimes unexpected ways. For example, in a state that had many formal interagency and community-based forums, the energy to implement Starting Points came from an informal set of partnerships. In contrast, a city that had been described as “service-rich” but with no focal point for policy agenda-setting created a formal leadership mechanism.

Notwithstanding these variations, the sites primarily adopted five core strategies, sometimes separately, sometimes in combination with others, to achieve their goals. These strategies involved efforts to: (1) influence policies and increase resources; (2) design, expand, and improve services; (3) build new alliances and leadership among early childhood leaders, parents, and others; (4) promote public awareness and engagement; and (5) improve data and promote outcome-oriented policies.

Mediating Factors

The sites reported three clusters of mediating factors: site-specific factors, rooted in the political and leadership context at the site; initiative-specific factors, rooted in the decisions of the Carnegie Corporation about how to implement the grant; and the impact of the national context in a particular site.

- **Site-Specific Facilitating Factors.** Nearly half of the state sites reported that the timing of the initiative was essential because it enabled them to move their already-established early childhood agendas to new levels. Several sites with strong gubernatorial or mayoral support said this proved to be a crucial supportive factor. Almost half of the sites viewed the strong national economy as a facilitating factor. It added money to the state coffers, which, in turn, increased the government’s willingness to bolster resources targeting young children. Even so, the

Examples of Activities to Implement the Core Strategies

Influence Policy

- Increase public and private resources
- Enact comprehensive state legislation
- Use federal programs to improve basic state policies
- Conduct/staff strategic policy analysis and planning
- Mobilize advocacy coalitions explicitly to support policy initiatives
- Implement and monitor policy initiatives

Improve Programs

- Expand and improve existing programs by making them more comprehensive or extending the age range
- Design, pilot, and expand program models within a city or across a state
- Create tools to improve quality through program assessments, best practice manuals, and cross-setting standards
- Create state or citywide mechanisms, such as child care funds, to support quality improvement initiatives
- Implement technical assistance and strategies for program providers and managers at the state and city levels
- Create networks of early childhood providers to facilitate advocacy, peer support, and professional development
- Expand the early childhood agenda to incorporate a richer array of strategies

Reach Out to New Stakeholders and Build New Leadership

- Outreach to the business community
- Build parent leadership
- Engage new professional partners
- Create new foci for broad-based community leadership

Promote Public Awareness and Engagement

- Build closer ties with the media and developing substantive stories on early development
- Produce easily accessible information targeted to policymakers through media events, issue briefs, and briefings

Improve Outcome and Other Data

- Build support for database infrastructure
- Develop meaningful indicators

added resources comprised only a small proportion of what was needed, and some sites expressed concern about the difficulty of reaching their goals. Several sites noted that the existence of a stable leadership group and solid working relationships helped jump-start this initiative. However, working together on a common agenda moved both long-standing and newer relationships to new levels of collaboration.

- **Initiative-Specific Facilitating Factors.** Virtually all the sites reported that being involved with the Carnegie Corporation through a Starting Points grant was a highly facilitating factor. It not only en-

hanced the image of those receiving the grant, but it opened both policy and funding doors in unexpected ways. The sites also appreciated the fact that not only were the funds flexible, but the corporation permitted the sites to change course when things were not working. (Sometimes these midcourse corrections were relatively small, but in two or three instances they marked a very significant regrouping that was beneficial in the end.) There was also appreciation for the continuous learning culture that the Carnegie Corporation established, particularly the emphasis on peer-to-peer learning. The external buzz about early childhood development as a policy issue—and particularly the focus on early brain development that the corporation helped build—provided a context of unexpected opportunity that was then seized upon and used strategically by all the sites.

- **Site-Specific Factors Posing Challenges.** The sites also reported a number of shared challenges, primarily related to the difficulties of envisioning, implementing, and sustaining change. These challenges, a few of which were initiative-specific, included: the difficulty of garnering support for legislation, sustaining legislative interest in an area once major legislation has been enacted, keeping the early childhood agenda in the forefront, and ensuring the agenda is broadly bipartisan. Sites also spoke of the challenges of keeping multiple early childhood initiatives (often with multiple funders) “aligned” in a way consistent with the core state or city vision and of developing the capacity to track impacts and outcomes.

IMPACTS AND OUTCOMES

Learning from Starting Points examines two types of accomplishments: observable changes and process changes.

Observable changes include:

- Substantial legislative and policy gains.
- Significantly increased public and private resources, especially for child care.
- Expanded networks of services and new service models.
- Expanded advocacy for young children at both the city and state level in some sites.
- Strengthened state (and now national) capacity for training and technical assistance on the implemen-

tation of comprehensive early childhood initiatives.

- New partnership with the business community in selected sites.
- Expanded family support programs and deepened attention to child care quality issues.
- More focused leadership development strategies for parents.
- New models for media and public awareness campaigns and the use of strategic communication approaches on behalf of the early childhood agenda.
- Dissemination of tools to track and promote quality improvement in early childhood settings.
- New forums—coalitions, councils, and organizations—to drive the next set of activities across the sites.
- Deepened leadership capacity for early childhood issues across the sites.

Process changes include:

- New relationships among leaders.
- Conceptual reorganization.
- New ways of working together.
- New respect for the importance of technical assistance and networking to sustain a vision and to promote effective implementation of new policies and practice approaches.

These changes hold, if sustained, the promise of setting the stage for the development of a much more coherent advocacy and policy agenda on behalf of young children and families.

KEY LESSONS FOR FUNDERS AND POLICYMAKERS

Based primarily on the insights of the Starting Points site directors, 10 lessons have significant implications for the next generation of multisite early childhood systems change efforts. These lessons center on the culture of foundation initiatives regarding resources, relationships, and expectations.

- 1) Relatively limited foundation dollars, used strategically, can be a catalyst for large-scale system change.
- 2) Flexible funding, when coupled with clear and “big goals,” enables grantees to be strategically opportunistic, to take smart risks, and to respond to unexpected challenges.

Strengthening of leadership may have the most powerful, if not measurable, impact of the Starting Points initiative.

- 3) The Starting Points experience suggests that using the foundation grant deliberately to leverage access to new resources or to facilitate the better use of existing resources is a powerful way to influence a local context.
- 4) Using foundation resources to help change the larger policy context within which sites work, or at least situating the expectations in the larger policy context while giving support to sites, can provide a kind of “cover” and legitimacy to the sites that can enhance their success.
- 5) Allowing grantees to invest in relationships, especially at the beginning of a grant period, without expecting immediate and concrete results can have a long term pay-off.
- 6) Promoting cross-site knowledge transfer, leadership development, and a learning culture throughout the course of a multisite initiative can help to sustain the gains of the initiative.
- 7) Having mechanisms in place to link grantees with timely, flexible peer and expert technical assistance can make a difference, particularly in emerging strategic areas such as communication and outcome design and management.
- 8) Planned, periodic opportunities for strategic reflection and testing of assumptions, goals, and pathways can strengthen the impact of the foundation’s support at the local level and achievements at all sites.
- 9) Funders should be willing to help the sites use their money both to meet the foundation purposes but also to craft or further a vision for sustained change at the site. Such a philanthropic devolution approach is highly valued by grantees.
- 10) Setting clear expectations early on (or at least a process for arriving at them and how the efforts will be evaluated) and defining success are both important to grantees. The time frame for initiatives should be commensurate with the size of the goals and with the level of change that is contemplated.

CONCLUSION

Systems change is a complex, iterative process. Leadership is key, relationships count, and data, increasingly, are central. Starting Points was the catalyst for concentrated networking and activities in 11 sites that had, by the end, largely changed the threshold level of expectation, communication, vision, policy, and/or practice regarding important aspects of the well-being of young children. In the process, the initiative deepened the capacity of a cadre of leaders who, in turn, now view themselves as conscious and deliberate change agents. This strengthening of leadership may have the most powerful, if not measurable, impact.

The “quiet crisis” described in the original Starting Points report is far from over. But the Starting Points initiative has provided many lessons for the future about how to continue the momentum that it and other recent efforts have generated on behalf of the youngest children and families. It is hoped that these lessons will powerfully inform the next generation of efforts to improve outcomes on its behalf.

For a profile of each Starting Points site, see the NCCP Web site at www.nccp.org. For more information about the Starting Points initiative, selected state demographic and policy indicators, and research citations, please refer to *Learning from Starting Points: Findings from the Starting Points Assessment Project*, © 2001 by the National Center for Children in Poverty.

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