Early Childhood Partners

Connecticut Early Childhood Comprehensive System

Community Focus Groups

December 2004 – June 2005

Community Voice

Communities need to be at the forefront of planning and designing programs for children and families. Early Childhood Partners (ECP) views the community voice as a key aspect in creating and sustaining a birth-to-five system. State agencies, town leaders, grassroots organizations and the community voice working together can make children and families a state priority and a successful comprehensive system.

A series of **statewide community forums** were held to listen to the community. ECP asked communities what they need to create and sustain a birth-to-five system. What is working? What needs improvement? What are the successes? What are the challenges?

Six communities, representing rural, urban, suburban and small and large cities, were invited to host forums to share local planning efforts and to dialogue about policies that need to be in the statewide plan to assist families in nurturing their children. Towns included Middletown, New Britain, Norwalk, Thompson, Waterbury and Windham.

More than 150 people attended including elected leaders, school officials, teachers, health professionals, School Readiness Council members, parents, representatives from non-profits, librarians, business leaders and representatives of Discovery Communities. Forums offered rich, deep reflections on the importance of the early years, shared excellent initiatives already in place and offered recommendations for policies and programs.

Community Observations

Leadership
School Readiness Councils and Discovery Communities play a major role in building strong collaborations to address children's issues in a comprehensive manner.

Parents are important to the success of a child, and parent leaders make a difference for children by bringing issues to the forefront.

Leadership coming from elected officials and school officials make a huge difference in creating and sustaining focus on children.

Local Collaboration
Communities are diverse, and each is key in the process of identifying unique needs and priorities for their communities.

Local agencies, including libraries, health agencies, schools, parks and recreation, need to collaborate to leverage resources and expand services.

Collaboration works when there is skilled facilitation and sustained coordination. It must be someone's job.

State/local collaboration can work, when embedded in practice in all domains.

Systems Barriers
Collection of data is difficult and there is no one system in place to track and monitor program outcomes.

Flexible funding from School Readiness grants is needed to provide a "glue person" on the local level to facilitate planning and organizing efforts.

Confusion over state regulations and guidelines for certain grants makes it difficult to engage parents and meet the needs of all parents.

Funding to bring successful programs up to scale is limited. State funding is the primary funding source for most child care, pre-K and health efforts.

Community Priorities

Health and Mental Health Services were two of the top priorities of communities. In Thompson, participants explained that approximately two-thirds of the community travel to Massachusetts to receive their medical care because there is a shortage of local affordable health care. Children's mental health needs are also a major issue in many of the school systems, and funding for mental health services is not adequate.

Participants in Waterbury believe that it is crucial that all parents should become better-informed "consumers" and set higher standards for health care from providers. Expectations need to be raised regarding medical providers and the medical community. In Norwalk, lack of services for children with serious emotional problems creates a difficult situation for teachers of pre-k and kindergarten students.

Pediatric and Mental Health Services are a top priority for Norwalk. Due to low reimbursement rates, there are not enough pediatricians who take Husky/Medicaid. Mental and behavioral health services are limited and DCF funding is restricted to local providers, limiting service to non-DCF children. "At this point new clients at the Child Guidance Clinic are closed," commented the director of the clinic. Shortage of Medicaid providers for all health services is a recurring problem voiced by all towns.

Medical Home is an approach to providing health care services in a high-quality and cost-effective manner. Children and families receive care from a professional that they know and trust. The pediatrician and parent work together to identify all the needs of family, as well as access all the services to help families achieve. Medical Home and its approach to health care delivery is increasingly popular in many communities, such as in Thompson, Norwalk and Windham. Access to health care is a top Discovery Initiative goal. To this end, the town has recently opened a pediatric satellite office in conjunction with Day Kimball Hospital in Putnam, Connecticut.

Service Coordination Understanding the system can be difficult; accessing all the available programs and services can be even more difficult. Without a central locality in which to learn about the appropriate services and program, families often get overwhelmed or "lost" trying to navigate and receive the help they need. Coordination among the available programs and services is crucial in assisting families. Connecting the dots between services will ease the transition, but a "glue person" is needed to bring it all together and to understand the layout and what is available in that community. Community coordination is a tremendous need for al communities.

> *"I once met a family that was dealing with four different case workers from four different agencies. This seems like such duplication, especially when there are so many families that don't have even one case worker."*
>
> New Britain community forum participant

Community Leadership School Readiness Councils provide a strong governance structure to discuss broad issues concerning early childhood. Chaired by the Superintendent of Schools and the Mayor/First Selectman, municipal and school district personnel are planning

together and sharing resources. Recently Thompson residents overwhelmingly approved a major bond authorization to build a new early childhood center to expand school readiness and day care services.

> *" This is the first time in recent memory that the town passed something of this magnitude on the first try,"*
> First Selectman Doug Williams.

While it is extremely important that elected officials and other key leaders of the community are active and on-board with an early childhood plan, the school itself can play a central role in creating a sense of community, and be a central location for families seeking help. In Waterbury, the community is working towards making schools the focal point of neighborhoods.

Parent Leadership Parents need to understand their role as the child's first teacher and how critical it is to form a supportive nurturing bond. When parents are involved, it helps children learn. Parent involvement is evident in many communities, participating and leading in local collaboratives.

Parent involvement also helps schools and communities by improving teacher morale, offering teachers higher ratings by parents, developing better instructional strategies for use in classroom lessons, and insuring that there will be higher student achievement. Parents need to feel empowered to lobby and advocate on behalf of their child and their child's needs. Graduates from local Parent Leadership Training classes play a critical role in making children's issues a top priority on the local level.

Home Visitation Communities value home visitation programs for parent's especially first time parents. National and state evaluations demonstrate home visitation programs increase parenting skills, reduce child abuse and promote positive child development. Home Visitation programs also connect parents to the broader community to reduce isolation.

Funding is limited and successful programs like Start Right, Healthy Start and Nurturing Families need to be fully funded to meet the needs of all parents.

> *"Healthy Start covers the costs for home visitation only for low income families. This creates a dilemma for the families stuck in the middle; their income is not low enough to qualify, but not high enough to easily afford the services."*
> Windham participant

Thompson is considering universal home visitation.

> *"Home visitation provides the biggest bang for the buck. Nurses are ideal for the visitation program. It needs to be universal in order to eliminate any stigma that could be attached to it."* Participant

Early Care and Education Establishing more affordable quality early care and education programs remains a challenge. Systems are stretched at the local level and without significant increases in funding; many children remain in the care of babysitters who have little training or knowledge of child development. Public/private partnerships are needed to adequately fund early care and education programs. Communities are forging strong partnerships with local school boards to expand opportunities for quality early care and education.

Community Highlights

In **New Britain**, the **Oral Health Collaborative** helps families access care and a case coordinator assists families in removing barriers to access, such as transportation.

In **Norwalk**, the **Kids Start Smart Initiative**, an outgrowth of the Discovery Initiative is successfully setting priorities for children and coordinating efforts in the city.

Norwalk, New Britain, Thompson, Waterbury, Windham and **Middletown**, are **Discovery Communities**. Discovery Communities are an initiative of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, to improve early school success for young

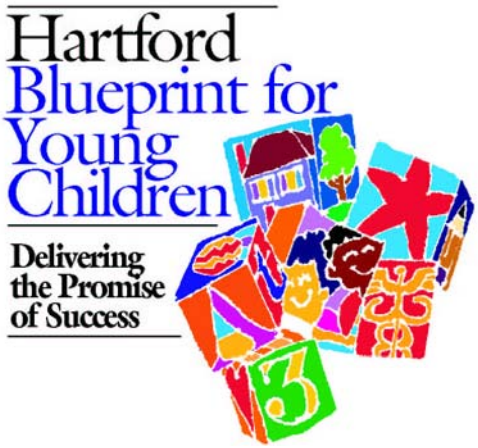
children, from birth to age eight. Discovery Communities work to expand the supply of high quality early childhood education; to increase the quality of existing early childhood education; to build strong connections between early care and elementary education, and to improve students' social, emotional and academic performance.

After School Program a success
The superintendent of Thompson Schools reports that the after school program is working very well and that the Board of Education is committed to supporting it. Thompson received a grant from the newly established State After School Grant program. The grant enables Thompson to form a collaboration with other city departments and non-profits to establish a new after school program for middle school students.

> *"It is especially helpful in providing a mechanism for remedial work with the students, which is increasingly important in order to keep up with the requirements of "No Child Left Behind."*
>
> Superintendent of Schools Bob Siminski

Parents and teachers are very supportive of the after school program and children love it. There are waiting lists for most of the sessions.

In **Hartford**, Mayor Eddie Perez recently created the **Hartford Blueprint for Young Children**, outlining six building blocks that create a comprehensive continuum of support services for families.



1. Newborn and Home Visiting for Families
2. Neighborhood-Based Family Support and Development
3. Childcare and Early Childhood Education
4. Transition From Pre-School to Kindergarten
5. Educational Excellence and School Success in the Early Grades
6. Universal Access and Use of Primary Health Care

A unique Early Childhood Cabinet, chaired by the mayor and superintendent of schools will oversee the implementation of the plan and monitor progress. In a bold move, all children's services are now under the Cabinet to ensure better coordination and efficiency.

> *"The 'Mayor Perez model' would work here. New Britain would benefit from a council to put everything together and to look at the current services and identify the missing links."*
>
> New Britain community forum participant

Windham has a significant behavioral health program that is in its 12th year. The program offers early intervention services and conducts playgroups for families with small children.

Waterbury developed a comprehensive strategic plan with the Mayors office and Board of Education led by the Discovery Initiative and the School Readiness Council, outlining goals for the whole city. Next steps include marketing the plan and winning support for implementation from key leaders. Waterbury has produced a new PSA commercial appearing on local cable TV to promote school readiness.

Middletown developed a comprehensive issues agenda and advocates on the state and local level to implement policy decisions. Participants noted the progress that their collaborative made in health care, mental health and early care and school readiness.

Next Steps

The State Early Childhood Comprehensive Plan for children aims to create an integrated service system that incorporates comprehensive health services, early care and education, and family support and parent education to ensure the sound health and full development of all children. Informed by strong community involvement, and community voice, the plan seeks to build on the many successful state and local collaborative efforts. The State will need to organize itself around the needs of families and children; set specific outcomes and work to create results oriented system to accomplish our goals.

Depending on resources and needs, communities expressed ideas and actions steps to carry out their specific community goals, including:

- Strengthening specific community plans for School Readiness and Discovery efforts;
- Establish a single point of entry in the town for information and referrals;
- Establish ways to measure improvements and monitor success;
- Address policies that "segregate" students in pre-k classes by income instead of having all children in quality programs together. Make eligibility requirements flexible and more standardized;
- Enhance outreach programs for families by partnering with neighborhood organizations including Head Start, churches and non-profits; and
- Promote and market early childhood and win local funding and support for children's issues.
- Strengthen state/local collaboration and shared decision-making to set budget and policy decisions.
- Include local representatives on the State Cabinet.

> *"Early Childhood Partners can become not just another planning process, but rather a chance to galvanize community support for a broad range of actions by many partners to improve the well-being of young children and their families . . ."*
>
> *Marjory Ruderman, MHS and Holly Gryason,*
> *Nat'l Center for Infant & Early Childhood Health Policy*
> *UCLA Center for Healthier Chilldren*

This UPDATE may be downloaded from the Commission on Children website, www.cga.state.ct.us/coc/, or call Liz Brown, 860-240-0042.

For more information about the planning process, contact the State Department of Public Health, 860-509-8066.

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