

**THE HARTFORD FOUNDATION FOR PUBLIC GIVING'S EDUCATION STRATEGY:  
PROGRESS IN PARTNERSHIP AND SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT – 2016 through mid-2017**

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**OVERVIEW**

The Foundation has adopted an ambitious goal through its education strategy - *ensure that the children in our region, especially those most vulnerable, are ready to learn when they enter kindergarten and are prepared to succeed when they leave high school.*

Pursuit of this goal requires an appropriate strategy, substantial investment and concentrated use of the Foundation's other tools and resources, a long time horizon for expectations about population-level change in educational outcomes, and flexibility in responding to opportunities and challenges in changing political, social, and economic conditions.

The Foundation's strategy for achieving its lofty goal for all children in the Hartford region is based on research and its own experience and analysis. Children's development and learning depends on supports and opportunities provided by their families, both directly and by connecting their children with resources in their neighborhoods, schools, and communities. Creating a web of supports and opportunities accessible and appropriate for all families and their children depends on partnerships among public agencies, community organizations, schools, and families. Broad-scale and sustainable improvements in the supports and opportunities children and families experience requires that the partnerships be focused on developing systems rather than unconnected discrete programs or services.

The Foundation's partnership and system development strategy builds on its own experience, data analysis, and learning from research and recognizes its limited ability to make large-scale change on its own. The Foundation maintains focus on the long-term strategic goal while supporting the capacities of neighborhoods, school districts, communities, and statewide institutions to work together to implement changes in structures, policies, and practices that will increase children's access to opportunities for learning, inside and outside the classroom. The Foundation's support to grantees and their partnerships goes well beyond funding, and includes technical assistance, data, access to research and national expertise, and opportunities to engage in peer exchange and learning.

While this evaluation has concentrated much of its indepth investigation on five example activity areas within the education strategy, there is strong evidence that this strategy is being implemented throughout this investment area, creating synergies and expanding capacities among grantees and stakeholders. In the areas of concentrated focus, through 2015 the evaluation documented the initiation and strengthening of partnerships, development and initial implementation of partnership action plans, and the creation of structures, policies, and models to support changes in practice necessary to improve children's and families' experiences and ultimately children's educational outcomes. By mid-2017, there have been demonstrable changes in programs and practices in the example activity areas. Even when external conditions—particularly the state fiscal and budgetary

climate—changed, the Foundation found opportunities to build on and continue its work as well as reinforce connections across its specific investments, grantees, and partners.

The Foundation's focused and sustained attention to partnership and system development in support of increased access to opportunities to learn - particularly for children who are vulnerable due to family poverty, immigration experience, language barriers, or developmental or learning challenges - is key to both the progress seen to date and to the strategy's long-term success. Over the next one to two years, the efforts in this area are expected to expand and deepen changes in available learning opportunities, incorporate strategies and infrastructure within institutional budgets, engage parents and community institutions as partners in even more effective ways, and explore how the Foundation can best leverage its position in the region and the state to foster and sustain significant change.

## **THE FOUNDATION'S EDUCATION GOAL AND STRATEGY**

At its September 2013 meeting, the Trustees of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving adopted the following as the goal for their education strategy:

***Ensure that the children in our region, especially those most vulnerable, are ready to learn when they enter kindergarten and are prepared to succeed when they leave high school.***

In setting this long-term goal, the Trustees recognized that many children and youth in the Hartford region are not currently achieving this level of educational success, particularly those living in more economically distressed communities, as evidenced by racial, ethnic, and economic disparities on many measures.

The Foundation's education strategy – encompassing its early childhood and K-12 investments – was built from lessons learned from previous long-term education investments as well as many smaller grants and projects and from extensive review of relevant data and the research literature. Throughout this work and in other areas to which it is committed, the Foundation has made use of the broad range of philanthropic tools at its disposal, which include both grant making and other tools, such as convening, network building, development and demonstration of effective models, research, and data compilation and dissemination. Based on this experience, the Foundation adopted a partnership and system development approach to achieving its strategic education goal, encompassed in the following description: “Developing partnerships and systems focused on equity and opportunity to promote learning opportunities for all children and youth.”

The Foundation's strategy to achieve its education goal rests on two principles:

- Children's development, learning, and educational success depend on a web of supports and opportunities provided first and foremost by their immediate family but also in their neighborhoods, schools, and communities, and
- Broad-scale and sustainable improvements in the supports and opportunities children and families experience will require that the focus be on developing new capacities within systems rather than discrete programs or services.

The pathway to educational success for all children in the region documented in research requires changing their and their families' experiences at home, in schools, and within the community in ways that development and learning are fostered. This, in turn, depends on changes in how the people

staffing programs, schools, and service agencies act. Specifically, does the way these staff interact with children and families on a daily basis make what they offer more accessible and more responsive to children and families from diverse backgrounds? Do they engage with parents as full partners in actively promoting children’s development and learning in multiple settings? Do they work effectively in full partnership with other community organizations and agencies to increase children’s opportunities for learning? To ensure that these ways of acting are consistently practiced across programs and institutions and are sustained beyond turnover in staff and leadership, appropriate conditions and capacities must be in place. As ample experience and research demonstrates, these include intra- and inter-organizational structures, public policies, interagency agreements, funding allocations, data systems, training schedules, regulations and administrative procedures, and leadership development and opportunities for managers, staff, and very importantly for parents.

Additionally, because no one institution or organization can develop the necessary conditions and capacities for broad-scale change in practices on its own, collaborative partnerships including parents and other community stakeholders are needed to share knowledge and resources and to build ongoing commitment. As the work evolves, and new opportunities, needs, challenges, and resources emerge, so will the partners involved, the depth and extent of partnership relationships, and the specifics of their action plans. The Education Strategy Evaluation is designed to document and assess progress and results in all components of the strategy as it continues to evolve over time.

## **THE EDUCATION STRATEGY EVALUATION FRAMEWORK**

The evaluation framework for the Foundation’s education strategy identifies two partnership development outcomes and three system development outcomes:

- Partnership Development Outcomes:
  - Partnership Capacities – “Key stakeholders, including families, share a common vision and develop the skills and commitment to working together.”
  - Partner Collaborative Actions – “Key stakeholders develop, commit to, and implement action plans.”
- System Development Outcomes:
  - Infrastructure and Policy – “Fundamental changes in organizational relationships, structures, policies, and resource allocation are made to promote and sustain progress.”
  - Improved Practices – “Key stakeholders consistently ensure that effective, high quality, culturally competent services and practices are available, accessible, and responsive to individual needs and interests.”
  - Improved Experiences for Children and Families – “All children and their families benefit from access to and use of services and supports to meet their needs and interests.”

In addition to assessment of progress on these outcomes, the Foundation intends to work with its partners to identify and track specific indicators of the strategic goal.

The Foundation’s education strategy is broad-reaching and includes a number of strategic investments and activities in both the early childhood and K-12 arenas. Foundation staff worked with the evaluation team to select five areas of work that serve as examples of the partnership and system development strategy. These areas represent the range of types of partnership and system development activities being supported and engaged in by the Foundation. The evaluation will examine these areas in depth to

understand and learn about the partnership and system development strategy as a whole. These areas will illustrate the contribution of the strategy to progress toward the strategic goal and generate lessons that can be applied in using this strategy in other areas of the Foundation’s education work.

The five areas of work that are the focus of intensive ongoing monitoring and assessment and contribute to the Foundation’s overall learning about its partnership and system development approach are:

- Use of data on children’s development to engage parents, residents, and community organizations in developing neighborhood- and community-level system innovations.
- Testing of models and approaches for utilizing public and private resources to fund facility and quality improvement among home-based child care providers.
- Development of a Hartford-based family support micro-system.
- Family and community engagement by the Manchester Public School District and its local partners to support children’s and youth’s optimal development and offer expanded learning opportunities.
- Collaboration among the Bloomfield Public School district, families, and community partners to offer increased learning opportunities during an extended school day.

In addition to looking intensively at these five examples, the evaluation includes evidence from other areas of work within the strategy – with other grantees and partnerships as well as those that are developing across the early childhood and K-12 fields – in assessing progress of the strategy as a whole.

#### **FOUNDATION CONTRIBUTIONS TO PROGRESS ON PARTNERSHIP AND SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES THROUGH 2015**

While work in the areas selected for intensive assessment were at differing points in their implementation at the time of the initial evaluation report, there is solid evidence that, as of the end of 2015, the Foundation’s actions and investments had built and strengthened partnership capacity and supported collaborative actions to foster improved child development and increased learning opportunities. Stakeholders cited the Foundation’s convening of learning opportunities among diverse stakeholders; “backbone support” provided by consultants and Foundation staff; technical assistance; access to data tools, national experts and new research; and direct and leveraged funding to support development and implementation of partnership plans as critical to progress. The Foundation’s support for initial development of key infrastructure required for system change, its multi-year commitment, attention to community partnerships and parent engagement and leadership, and focus on linking all activities to learning outcomes were critical factors in laying the base for sustainability.

**As of the end of 2015, the Foundation’s actions and investments had built and strengthened partnership capacity and supported collaborative actions to develop effective systems that promote children’s development and learning.**

Based on findings through 2015, the evaluation concluded that:

- The Foundation had brought its considerable experience and expertise to bear in its education strategy and effectively used the full range of its tools and capacities, going well beyond substantial and long-term funding.
- The education strategy partnerships were at different stages in their formation and focus on system development. At the same time, all made progress, supported by the Foundation. Above and

beyond concrete supports the Foundation’s clear and consistent focus on ensuring that children’s success in learning drives the work of the partnerships and is the explicit goal of system development was critical in that progress.

- The Foundation’s attention to community partnerships and parent engagement and leadership as well as its multi-year commitment was encouraging attention to sustainability while giving urgency to the partnership and system development efforts.
- While a partnership and system development strategy has the greatest likelihood for equitably improving educational outcomes, the timeframe for realizing these benefits depends on a number of factors, some of which are outside the control of either the Foundation or its grantees and partners. Interim measures that would provide important evidence of continued progress would be widespread changes in practice that support broad and equitable access to quality learning opportunities and in the experiences of children and families indicating that they are benefitting from these opportunities as intended.

### **PROGRESS IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD AREA – 2016 THROUGH MID-2017**

The focus of the Foundation’s Early Childhood Investments strategy is equitable access by young children and their families to high quality early childhood services and supports that contribute to learning and preparation for school success. The strategy recognizes that this outcome is influenced by children’s health, parenting practices and family stability, and experiences outside the home, particularly those in child care and early education settings. The strategy also takes account of the fact that early childhood services and supports for young families are fragmented, across many organizations and agencies receiving program funding from various sources and with differing eligibility requirements. For this reason, the Foundation seeks out and initiates opportunities in many segment of the early childhood field in which to build partnerships and systems, improve practice, and increase benefits for children and families. These efforts use tools available to the Foundation beyond grantmaking to build and strengthen collaborative relationships focused on developing systems of services and supports for young children. The three example activity areas provide an opportunity to examine this approach in depth. They also illustrate the ways in which the work in one area is linked to other ECI investments as well as to the K-12 education strategy investments.

### **Using Data on Child Development and Learning to Engage Parents and Residents in Creating a Shared Vision and Action Plans for Local Early Childhood System Development**

Critical to understanding how children are developing in the early years, the Foundation has supported the collection, analysis, and mapping of data from the Early Development Instrument (EDI), a tool that collects information on children’s development at kindergarten entry. Also knowing that data analysis alone does not catalyze change, the Foundation has supported the community café model to promote genuine parent and community engagement to take action on the EDI results in neighborhoods.

BFI Family Centers, a long-standing Foundation initiative that serve as local hubs for innovation, have been the hosts and facilitators for community café meetings to examine EDI data and develop and implement local plans for addressing areas of vulnerability in children. The Family Centers continued work in this area, training additional parent facilitators and carrying out action projects developed through the community café meetings. A parent leader identified through work at the Family Centers assisted in setting up community café

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meetings around EDI data hosted by other entities (two branch libraries, a school-based family resource center, and a Hartford pre-K magnet school). The EDI data continues to be an important driver of individual and organizational action in Hartford, informing the focus and content of parent-child and parenting education programs as well as parent- and resident-led opportunities to strengthen specific identified areas of children’s development. At the same time, users are concerned that the data will decrease in utility as time passes and that repeated data collection would be valuable.

With Foundation support, the East Hartford and Windsor school districts collected EDI data in the 2016-17 school year and will use the community café model to engage parents in examining the results. The community café meetings around EDI data are seen as part of the school districts’ family, school, community engagement plans. Each district has developed an infrastructure (staffing and resources) specifically aimed at promoting and supporting family and community engagement.

*“From an academic lens, the EDI data will help drive our curricula, our instructional practices, and our professional development in the district. We are looking for areas of strength and need in young children through the EDI. We want to backmap these areas with families and community agencies to build skills before they come into preschool.”*

The Foundation has played a critical role in this area through its family support consultant’s assistance in building partnerships and in identifying, training, and supporting parent facilitators for the community café meetings. The Foundation recognizes the need for sustained “backbone” infrastructure, beyond its own staff, to support use of the community café model for parent and resident engagement and leadership. To that end, the Foundation is bringing on additional parent leaders to continue to support and expand the community café model in Hartford. The BFI Family Centers’ commitment to leadership development with its parent constituents is one ongoing source of individuals to take on this role. These opportunities for parents to develop leadership and facilitation skills are also expected to encourage exploration and success in other areas, including the pursuit of additional education and employment as well as civic activism.

The parent-led community café model is gaining wide acceptance as a valid way to engage community members in addressing local issues. The Foundation is recognized as taking leadership in bringing this model to the region and as a statewide resource for others looking to using this model on issues beyond early childhood. The Foundation is continuing promotion of the community café model with other groups and on other issues.

*“One of the highlights of the Foundation is its passion in encouraging us to always go back to the voice of the parents. We can be tempted based on our knowledge and experience to come up with our own solutions. The Foundation reminds us to ‘run with parents side-by-side’ in determining what is best together.”*

### **Strengthening High Quality Early Childhood Experiences for All Children through Home-Based Child Care Quality Improvement Activities**

In 2015, the Foundation took significant steps in the arena of home-based child care (HBCC) based upon: research showing how critical the very early years are to ensuring children are on a positive trajectory in school and life; data showing that many of the region’s youngest children are cared for in home-based child care (HBCC) settings while their parents work; and understanding that there is a significant lack of services and supports to this early childhood sector. As such, the Foundation convened a group of key

regional and state-level stakeholders to develop and conduct a pilot project called *Renovate to Educate*. This private/public partnership resulted in the design of a jointly funded model to assist HBCC providers in the Hartford region to make small facility improvements in the learning environment they provide to the young children they serve. While there was interest in expanding this model statewide, tax revenue shortfalls leading to cuts in state government spending forced these plans into abeyance. Continuing its commitment to this area for investment, the Foundation has pursued several other strategies to support quality improvement in home-based child care settings.

As a result of the strong relationships built during the *Renovate to Educate* pilot project, the Foundation has been able to move several critical components to support home-based child care forward. Seeing *Renovate to Educate* as a successful model, a member of the steering committee from the City of Hartford Department of Families, Children, Youth and Recreation (DFCYR) reached out

to the Foundation to replicate a modified version of the project with a cohort from the City’s Spanish-speaking family child care network. With a grant from the Foundation, the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance is developing strategies to focus attention on child care for infants and toddlers. Since many families chose home-based child care for their very young children, the Alliance will pay special attention to this sector in its efforts.

**As a result of the strong relationships built during this partnership work, the Foundation has been able to move several critical components to support home-based child care forward.**

To build capacity regionally to support Spanish-speaking home-based child care providers, the Foundation linked local bi-lingual consultants to statewide efforts to increase their knowledge and to receive national credentials for working with these providers. The Foundation also awarded a grant to All Our Kin to develop and deliver intensive “coach-the-coach” training and support to agencies operating family child care networks in the Hartford region, replicating its successful model for working with home-based child care providers on quality improvement. These efforts are all in early stages of implementation, but have the promise of models and policies with broad scale impact. As such, they all – along with *Renovate to Educate* -- address the need in the early childhood field for widespread and systematic attention to quality in home-based child care settings

A major challenge facing work with home-based child care providers, many of who rely on subsidy payments from the CARE4KIDS program, is the closing of applications for most new entries into that program. The Foundation has acted to ensure that family child care is a part of relevant policy discussions by state early childhood advocacy groups and is included in testimony submitted by the Foundation to the state legislature. As a valued thought partner, ECI staff have been invited to participate in the statewide Family Child Care Network group, sharing tools used by the *Renovate to Educate* project along with research commissioned by the Foundation to identify opportunities for providing more systematic support to home-based providers. This group is replicating parts of the Foundation’s research statewide, and those results will inform the statewide framework for family child care supports and networks, and will be used to lay the groundwork for new models and initiatives.

*“The Foundation has been the leader in identifying who is providing consulting support to family child care providers and in helping figure out how to bring these resources together into a support network.”*

### **Building a Hartford Area Family Support Network as a Platform to Expand Effective Practices in Engaging and Supporting the Families of Young Children**

The early childhood field does not have a consistent or standardized approach to professional development for family support workers, who may be operating within different sectors, including

health, education, and social services. Knowing the importance of service and program alignment and quality in effective work with families, by the end of 2015 the Foundation, in partnership with the state-sponsored Help Me Grow network in the region, had identified opportunities to expand and coordinate efforts to provide information and training on best practices in family support. In early 2016 the state Office of Early Childhood (OEC) Help Me Grow regional network leader and the Foundation's family support consultant convened a steering committee of organizations and agencies that provide services to families and established CRAFTSE – Capital Region Alliance for Family Support and Empowerment.

A major success of CRAFTSE's first year in the eyes of the steering committee was the formalization of the relationships among the agencies, organizations, and programs whose staff had been participating in the learning community. Bringing together leaders and managers from these entities on a regular basis created an environment in which relationships were formed and solidified at that level, resulting in steps to break down organizational barriers and disciplinary silos. As a result, membership in CRAFTSE has more than doubled since its inception. In addition, as a partnership formed with participation from both state government (the Office of Early Childhood) and community agencies and organizations, CRAFTSE is a model with state-wide implications and a vehicle for sharing experiences and observations across the state.

*"We all mean well in our work and are passionate about the families we serve, but there is a moment when you get so caught up in the work you subconsciously forget about connecting with others. The Foundation is looking at it with a different lens – reinforcing that connecting with others is very important, helping us recognize that none of us can do it alone – help us stay the course."*

Beyond strengthening connections and collaboration, in its first year the CRAFTSE Steering Committee collected and used data to identify network-wide issues and develop network responses. Bringing together the diverse expertise and experience among the CRAFTSE member organizations allowed it to offer training to front-line staff across the whole network on a variety of topics around a common agenda. The network uses a framework focusing on strengthening families' "protective factors" – the conditions and capacities that promote strong family resiliency and child development – that has been adopted and is being promoted by major community institutions and agencies, including those within the City of Hartford and the Connecticut Children's Medical Center. As this framework and best practices in strengthening families is increasingly implemented, the quality and effectiveness of family support services are expected to improve.

CRAFTSE has continued to collect data about the implementation of family support practices as well as about challenges to putting them into place within its member organizations. These data have been used to identify needed changes in practice. With an orientation to the Plan-Do-Study-Act approach, members began practice change projects in May 2017. CRAFTSE also used these data to identify priority goals for its 2018 agenda.

The CRAFTSE Steering Committee acknowledged the critical role of the Foundation in convening and sustaining the network. The value of the Foundation was acknowledged beyond concrete support, convening, and facilitation. Its focus on building partnerships reinforces its value of CRAFTSE. At the same time, CRAFTSE members acknowledged that more formalized commitments by their organizations would be helpful in increasing both CRAFTSE's effectiveness and its sustainability

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and suggested that the Foundation could also play a role in encouraging more explicit institutional commitment from the leadership of member organizations.

## Summary

In the early childhood area, the Foundation is helping families exercise their role in nurturing and guiding their children during their early years and encouraging families to build social networks, establish positive connections with community resources, and exercise leadership in their communities. At the same time, the Foundation is working with local and state public agencies, service organizations, and community and statewide leaders to encourage stronger collaboration based on the recognition of shared goals, implementation of coordinated strategies, and leveraging of resources and expertise across the partners.

In each of the example areas examined intensively, the Foundation built on earlier investments and relationships, supporting partnerships and developing models of practice that promote young children's development and learning. These partnerships and models recognize the impact of young children's interactions with their parents and other caregivers and focus on strengthening the parent-child relationship, improving the quality of experiences that children have when not in parental care, and strengthening families' capacities to nurture, guide, and advocate for their children. At this point, activities in these example areas have been underway for only one or two years and have reached only a fraction of the young children and families in the region. However, their strength and potential is in the commitment of partners to expand evidence-based practices and build the infrastructure necessary to sustain those practices long-term.

In addition to progress in the three example areas, the Foundation also seeks out and initiates other opportunities in the early childhood arena in which to build partnerships and systems, improve practice, and increase benefits to young children and their families. Examples of these efforts include the Foundation's work with its peers through the Early Childhood Funder Collaborative, which helped guide the formation of the state's Office of Early Childhood; the Foundation's continued role as thought partner with the Office and with other statewide institutions such as the Connecticut Children's Medical Center; and participation in and support for the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance. During 2017 Foundation staff have hosted several convenings of grantees and partners with the explicit goals of building relationships and fostering collaboration in the often fragmented early childhood field. Within the Foundation, opportunities for building stronger links between the ECI and K-12 Beyond the region and the state, the Foundation's Early Childhood Investment staff have been asked to share their approach in numerous national forums, including on the use of data to improve childhood outcomes.

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The Early Childhood Investment (ECI) team has made use of the range of tools available to it beyond grantmaking – supporting data collection and analysis to inform partnership decisions and actions, convening grantees and other organizations to promote new relationships and to encourage collaboration, offering access to national expertise and models, and providing staff and logistical

support. Across the areas of early childhood work, the ECI team has promoted and sustained its focus on building a system to support equity in children's learning outcomes. At the same time, it has maintained flexibility in the face of challenges and opportunities arising in the political and economic environment. This has enabled the Foundation to continue its leadership role in the region's and state's early childhood arena while fostering collaboration among a broad range of stakeholders toward shared system development objectives.

There are significant challenges facing the early childhood field in Connecticut in several key areas: public finances, system fragmentation, data and evaluation, and changing demographics. At the same time, based on feedback from stakeholders, there are also opportunities for the Foundation to have a role in partnership with its grantees and others in responding to these challenges.

### **PROGRESS IN THE K-12 AREA – 2016 THROUGH MID-2017**

The focus of the Foundation's K-12 investments strategy is to improve students' academic and developmental outcomes by increasing their equitable access to high quality learning opportunities beyond the traditional classroom. The key unifying factor in these efforts is family, school and community partnership building that is intentionally and explicitly focused on supporting student learning.

The Foundation's investment strategy builds on its decades-long investment and experience in supporting improvements in the academic outcomes of the region's children at greatest academic risk. The strategy focuses on leveraging community partnerships and engagement of families in the academic success of children as cornerstones of its expectations for districts. In implementing the education strategy in the K-12 arena, the Foundation has:

- Provided direct financial support and access to national resources/experts for the districts and community partners involved in developing a viable plan for family, school, and community partnerships directed toward student success.
- Offered close guidance for planning teams to develop approaches that were transformative in the ways the district engaged community partners to coordinate programs and resources, redefined the role of parents in education, and steadfastly retained attention on student learning as the ultimate objective.
- Released implementation grants to individual districts as their plans were determined to be viable and aligned with Foundation guidelines.
- Engaged experienced local and national technical assistance organizations to help districts address issues of sustainability and budget realignment; practices and policies promoting authentic family and community engagement; and the policy and leadership implications of decisions regarding partnership and program development.
- Promoted the development of a learning community across the districts and communities by regularly convening – together and in separate cohorts - superintendents, the new district-level directors of family and community engagement funded by the Foundation, and superintendents' broader leadership teams.

## Manchester

The focus of efforts in Manchester has qualitatively changed over the past year, from macro-level tasks in defining and forming partnerships and setting in place structures and positions within the district, municipality and schools to implementing increasingly fine-grained efforts to engage families and community partners in children’s education. The design and creation of partnerships and establishing an infrastructure to leverage such partnerships effectively were not easy tasks and involved substantial effort, including convincing the local board of education to adopt new policies and agree to shifts in district resources. Over the past year, the focus of partnership work has shifted towards deepening the focus on children’s educational success through engagement of parents and community stakeholders as full-partners in children’s learning. District and community leaders acknowledge that a new level of “hard” work is beginning as both front line staff (such as principals, teachers, family resource center staff, and staff from other community agencies and organizations) and parents explore and learn how to engage and rely on each other as co-equal educators of Manchester children.

**As the focus of partnership work has shifted towards deepening student learning through engagement of parents as full-partners in their children’s learning, district and community leaders acknowledge that a new level of “hard” work is beginning as both front line staff (principals, teachers, family resource center staff) and parents explore and learn how to engage and rely on each other as co-equal educators of Manchester children.**

As part of the Hartford Foundation supported work, the district and the City of Manchester forged a new partnership focused on children and families. The partnership between the school district and the municipality, as evidenced by the recent co-location of their offices and coordination of activities, has helped ensure that parents and families know about and have access to resources to help them support their children’s academic success as well as broader whole-child development.

Substantially redesigned as well as new family resource centers (FRCs) are now operating in all district elementary schools and have expanded their programming well beyond traditional FRC models. In addition to offering programs and services for families of preschool children, Manchester’s FRCs provide resources and information and facilitate access to available community services to the families of children already enrolled in K-8, ensuring that a wide range of academic and other services and resources are available to these families as well.

Those aware of the Hartford Foundation’s role in supporting the developments in Manchester give it high praise for its combination of both direct funding for developing the community’s and district’s capacity for partnership and family engagement and for the technical support and counsel for exploring strategies, reflecting on key elements and decisions, and presenting research/experience-based options for infrastructure, policy, and practice. These stakeholders credit the Foundation with pushing planning groups and leadership to think beyond simply setting in place temporary programs or even creating infrastructure within the district and community. They note that the Foundation has given them freedom to pursue a range of approaches for engaging families and teachers in different approaches to partnership, choosing those models and approaches that best fit the community, schools, students and families. The Foundation’s consistent emphasis that partnership and family engagement

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must be ultimately focused on student learning is a touchstone for all their efforts, according Manchester stakeholders.

Like other districts, Manchester faces significant challenges as it continues to transform its schools. For example, changes in demographic, housing patterns, and size of youth cohorts coupled with district buildings in need of repair has caused the district to announce the closing of some buildings and re-assignment of students and staffs to new locations. Further, on-going budget crises at the national and state level have made planning for future elements of the partnership and parent engagement plan both more critical and more challenging.

Looking to the future, Manchester district and community stakeholders expect to continue strengthening of the engagement of families and community partners in supporting children’s learning. This will require on-going work to ensure continual review of existing and new activities that are informed by data analysis and research; use of tested, proven curricula where available; attention to sustaining current parent and community engagement; exploration of new avenues to reach groups of parents who have not yet been involved; and fostering of creativity and resiliency among staff to maintain the focus on partnering with parents as active co-teachers. In addition, Manchester—as well as other districts involved with the Hartford Foundation—has identified the negative impacts of trauma and the need for staff to increase their cultural competency as deep-seated needs within schools and the community that must be addressed to support student learning immediately and over the longer term. These districts see a potential role for the Hartford Foundation as identifying local and national resources that can help districts and communities address these issues.

## **Bloomfield**

Throughout 2016 and through mid-2017, Bloomfield began the task of integrating a new enrichment program provided by the Boys and Girls Clubs of Hartford (BGCH) into the regular school day in two elementary schools in which leadership and staff had spent the prior school year exploring how to launch this approach, selecting a community-based partners, and addressing the logistics of making it happen. While there were typical start-up challenges, most of which were resolved, by virtually all accounts, the quality of the programming was very strong and embraced by students.

*“What is really exciting for me, as a former science teacher, I am seeing actual growth in science understanding and in principles of engineering. This level of knowledge and understanding will help kids when they enter middle school and high school. Kids are having fun learning; it’s not rote.”*

First year implementation was facilitated by BGCH’s engagement of recently retired teachers who served both as staff working with students and coaches to newer program staff. However, their presence may have delayed a more difficult conversation about whether or not only certified staff can effectively and consistently deliver high quality academic content. The Foundation has advised the district that staffing afterschool enrichment programs with certified teachers will prove fiscally unsustainable.

Bloomfield district leadership regard the Foundation as an engaged partner in the endeavor using terms like “critical friend”, “always willing to listen and offer wise counsel and resources,” “reasonable,” “tough, but fair minded,” and “consistently pressing us to think ‘out-of-the-box’ and then supporting us when we do.”

*“The grant from the Hartford Foundation has been both affirming to what we are trying to do, but also challenges us to think bigger and differently than we normally would do in applying for support from a state, federal or other foundation program that has its own, very specific objectives and strategies. The Hartford Foundation has given us a much bigger playing field—sometimes it’s overwhelming, in fact.”*

Bloomfield also faces both internal and external challenges that may affect its pursuit of this effort. As the involvement of BGCH staff in leading extended day learning activities expands to include other grades and other schools, it will face staffing and training challenges. At the same time, more district teachers and school leaders will need to adapt to sharing instructional responsibilities.

The district recognizes that engaging families in a community that itself is struggling to accommodate rapid change in the demographic composition will continue to be a challenge. Enhanced and more transparent communication with parents while the program is being refined. Similarly, ongoing communication with school teachers in grades not yet incorporated into the BGCH/District extended day program will be critical as it expands. As the effort adds new grade levels, the administrations in both schools will need to cultivate involvement among new sets of teachers with different expectations and concerns.

**Bloomfield, like other districts surrounding Hartford, is also challenged by having relatively few obvious partners (large corporations, not-for-profit agencies, universities and colleges, etc.) and thus must be more creative in identifying less obvious partners or expand the scope of its partner base beyond the immediate community.**

Bloomfield, like other small districts surrounding Hartford, is also challenged by having relatively few obvious partners (large corporations, not-for-profit agencies, universities and colleges, etc.) and thus must be more creative in identifying less obvious partners or expand the scope of its partner base beyond the immediate community. Such efforts take both experienced staff and greater time for the district and community to make the case of why a partnership might be beneficial or justified.

Loss of funding in state budget for Youth Service Bureaus (YSBs) is a major concern in Bloomfield and other smaller communities. The local YSB is a potential source for additional programming and support for families and youth—often filling the gap in such services in communities where a vibrant not-for-profit service sector does not exist—but their statewide existence is jeopardized due to state budget crisis.

Implementing the program for a second year, informed by the experiences of the first, was at the top of minds of district administrators, principals, teachers, and staff of BGCH. All saw the first year as a “pilot year.” Bloomfield partners named the following topics as areas for expected improvement: keeping parents informed of developments (especially parents with limited experience dealing with schools); offering on-going, relevant professional development to BGCH staff to ensure consistency in content, classroom management, etc.; managing expansion of the program to additional grades—including developing new content for students who had already been in the program for the first year; and,

continuing to sustain communication with all school faculty (including those teaching grades not yet included in the extended day program) to understand the approach and how it will support their work.

## **Summary**

In both Manchester and Bloomfield as well as with the other districts in its K-12 education work, the Foundation brought its multi-decade experience and expertise in supporting schools and student learning to challenge districts to reach out and develop productive family and community partnerships that best meet the needs of children. The Foundation provided extensive technical assistance, shared information, fostered a cross-district learning community, and gave district teams access to national and local resources. These opportunities were all designed to help districts design effective family, school, community partnerships focused on improving student academic success. Further, the Foundation compelled districts to develop longer term sustainability plans to ensure that the structures and resources identified and leveraged during the grant period would be continued at its close.

In Manchester, the relationship between schools and educators is being fundamentally transformed as parents and families are welcomed (and supported) as co-educators of their children. These efforts are furthered by new and closely coordinated partnerships between the district and broader community resources and agencies, most notably the Office of Families and Neighborhoods in the Town of Manchester. In Bloomfield, the effort has focused on deeply engaging a community partner to offer a high quality enrichment experience focused on STEM. The program is distinctive because it is a “push-in” program in which community agency staff come into the schools and deliver instructional content, which challenges assumptions about the definition of “school-day” and “academic enrichment” activities in a novel manner.

Beyond these two examples in the K-12 arena, the Foundation has fostered greater collaboration in its education strategy across early childhood and school-age work, both internally and with its grantees. One example is the adoption of early education as a key component in several districts’ improvement plans, using EDI data to build partnerships with parents and community providers and to inform practice in kindergarten and the primary grades.

## **SUMMARY OF PROGRESS IN THE FOUNDATION’S EDUCATION STRATEGY OVERALL**

The Foundation’s strategy for achieving its goal of ensuring that all children in the Hartford region are successful learners from their earliest years through completion of high school is based on extensive data analysis, research evidence, and the Foundation’s own experience and expertise. Children’s optimal development and learning depends on creating a web of supports and opportunities provided by their families and through opportunities in their neighborhoods, schools, and communities. Broad-scale and sustainable improvements in the supports and opportunities children and families experience requires that the partnerships be focused on developing structures, policies, and systems of practice rather than unconnected discrete programs or services. Through intentional and increasing efforts that span the early childhood and K-12 areas of work within its overall education strategy, the Foundation is contributing to pathways toward success for children and their families.

In both the early childhood and K-12 components of its education strategy, the Foundation is supporting effective partnerships by simultaneously building and strengthening the capacity of all partners -- public agencies, community organizations, schools, and families. The Foundation is itself a member of these partnerships, and its role is often described as being a “thought partner.” The Foundation plays a critical

role in convening its grantees, their partners, and other stakeholders to share knowledge, encourage relationships, and offer technical assistance. The Foundation’s capacity building approach produces “ripple effects” in which members of the partnerships the Foundation helps form work with each other independently of direct Foundation action to align, coordinate, and integrate their efforts. These “ripple effects” are evident both within sectors of the Foundation’s work (such as among family support providers and programs) as well as across sectors (such as the use of data on young children’s development in district-wide improvement plans). The Foundation’s support for and participation in partner relationships as well as its expectation that its education grantees themselves initiate and engage in partnerships is especially critical in the current environment of state budget cuts.

**... the Foundation is supporting effective partnerships by simultaneously building and strengthening the capacity of all partners -- public agencies, community organizations, schools, and families.**

*“The Foundation is doing a good job coaching grantees in collaboration and partnership – that emphasis and consistency in message and Foundation leadership in this area are speeding up the process.”*

The Foundation also plays a critical role in identifying gaps in policy attention and quality of practice that impact children’s development and learning. These areas include a focus on parents, particularly low-income and immigrant parents, as equal partners with staff in agencies, provider organizations, and schools; capacity building with all partners – including families – in the understanding, interpretation, and use of data for decision-making; and ensuring access to best practices and effective training and quality improvement opportunities to providers working with children outside of the school setting – for example, home-based child care providers serving infants and toddlers and staff in out-of-school-time programs.

*“It is very typical of the Foundation to investigate and identify what is missing in the system and support the development of strategies to fill that gap.”*

In addition to its partnership and system development work focused regionally, the Foundation engages with state agencies to promote the adoption and expansion of effective policies and programs and with the state legislature in bringing its expertise and influence to bear on critical issues affecting the state budget and state policies.

*“The Foundation staff are invaluable to us [Office of Early Childhood] – they think the “big think” while helping accomplish the details to implement those high-level ideas.”*

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WORK GOING FORWARD**

Across their work on education, the Foundation, its grantees, and their partners are facing a major challenge in the financial impact of the state budget deficit. Without political support for tax increases, the Governor and the legislature are faced with developing a state budget that will likely require substantial cuts to early childhood, family support, and education programs and initiatives, beyond what has already been experienced recently in the closing of the child care subsidy program and possible changes in state support for poorly performing school districts. According to stakeholders and partners, the Foundation is well positioned to work with others in documenting and highlighting the long-term repercussions of proposed state budget cuts, particularly those that impact children and families. This

role in state-level public policy is one for which the Foundation has increasing capacity and experience and an area for its expanded leadership.

Beyond the role that the Foundation could play directly, the Foundation's continued work on partnership and system development among its grantees and stakeholders will build and strengthen connections and collaborative efforts among networks of individuals, programs, agencies, and institutions working on key areas in and across early childhood and K-12 education. These partnerships are critical both in the early childhood field, where funding streams are uncoordinated and complex and reinforce isolation and competition among service providers and community agencies, and in the K-12 arena, where the dominance of a single public institution often limits efforts to engage community agencies and families in supporting overall student development and learning. Partnerships are also critical across both areas in enabling agencies, organizations, and institutions to respond to changes in the demographic, economic, and social environment through coordinated adaptive strategies. The Foundation's emphasis on partnership development and strategic action focused on educational outcome goals has been critical in bringing partners, including families, to the table and supporting organizational and individual capacity for effective collaboration. Continuing to support these partnerships is likely key to weathering the current fiscal storm and to expanding capacity and commitment to systemic strategies to ensure all children have access to opportunities to develop into successful learners.

The Foundation's concomitant focus on both partnership and system development is critical to reaching this goal. The development of organizational structures, policies, and operational procedures will need to continue to address issues specific to the early childhood and K-12 fields as well as those that are shared between the two. Within early childhood, system development is necessary to expanding access through more efficient use of resources and creation of pathways that help families navigate the fragmented landscape. In the K-12 world, system development ensures that programs and schools in the community work in concert, coordinating their efforts to encourage and support youth's acquisition of skills and knowledge that prepare them for success in and beyond high school. Across early childhood and K-12, the Foundation has infused an emphasis on family engagement and leadership into its work, forming one important link in both partnership and system development work across the two areas. The use of data to inform, monitor, and assess the development and implementation of more effective systems has also been a focus of the Foundation's strategy, whether these data document children's skills at entry into kindergarten, families' experiences in seeking services for their children, or students' perceptions of their school climate. Foundation continued attention on identification, collection, analysis, dissemination, and public conversation about data on key indicators is likely to be especially valuable going forward for the partnerships it supports.

The Foundation's decision to invest in partnerships and system development has laid the groundwork for improving equitable distribution of and access to high quality, coordinated opportunities to promote children's learning and educational success. By promoting and supporting partnerships and system development explicitly linked to these outcomes, the Foundation has assisted communities, districts, and families with capacities and roadmaps for sustained improvements in outcomes for all children. Of course, given the short period of time during which the Foundation's investment strategy has been implemented, its full impact is yet in the future. By continuing to use its full array of tools that go well beyond grantmaking, the Foundation can ensure that the partnerships it has fostered reach their full potential and that the challenges of creating effective systems that serve all children well are met.