

**THE HARTFORD FOUNDATION FOR PUBLIC GIVING'S EDUCATION STRATEGY:  
AN INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS IN PARTNERSHIP AND SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT**

**Prepared by  
Samuel A. Stephens, Ph.D.  
and  
Bernard J. McMullan, Ph.D.**

**The Center for Assessment and Policy Development**

**Revised — May 18, 2016**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **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 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 certain communities as evidenced by the wide range of results.

The Foundation's strategy to achieve this 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 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 systems rather than discrete programs or services.

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. 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 for all children and youth."

### **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:
  - o 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 - readiness to succeed in kindergarten and preparedness for adult roles after high school.

### **Education Strategy Areas of Work Selected for Intensive Ongoing Evaluation**

The Foundation's education strategy is broad-reaching and includes a wide range of projects and activities in both the early childhood and K-12 arenas. Foundation staff worked with the evaluation team to select five areas of work for intensive ongoing assessment 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 as a set 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 are:

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

The evaluation team then developed tools for collecting data to measure progress on outcomes in those areas of work. In late 2015, the team conducted in-depth interviews with 29 key partners and stakeholders to gain their perspectives on progress in those areas of work.

## **Foundation Contributions to Progress on Partnership and System Development Outcomes**

Work in the areas selected for intensive assessment are at differing points in their implementation, based on the extent of work with and support from the Foundation prior to 2013 and the initiation of their activities since the adoption of the strategic education goal. For example, the BFI Family Centers have been supported by the Foundation with both grants and technical assistance for two decades, while the work in the Alliance Districts began with planning opportunities in 2014 and initial implementation grants either early in 2015 or in the fall of that year. Even so, there is solid evidence of that **the Foundation's actions and investments have built and strengthened partnership capacity and supported collaborative actions to develop effective systems that promote children's development and learning.**

Stakeholders across all five areas were unanimous in their acknowledgement of the critical contribution of the Foundation to partnership development. The Foundation's vision and values were recognized as underlying the effectiveness of its financial and other supports. In addition, the specific ways in which the Foundation catalyzed the formation, functioning, and effectiveness of partnerships in the five areas include its support for partner capacity building, relationships that brought diverse stakeholders to the partnerships, provision of facilitation and logistic support, access to technical assistance and expertise, and direct and leveraged funding to support development and implementation of partnership plans.

While progress on system development will ultimately be in the hands of stakeholders directly involved in and responsible for system-level policies and actions, the contributions of the Foundation have been transformative, empowering those stakeholders to take the risks and commit to the long-term trajectory inherent this effort. The Foundation's contributions have been in three main ways: a consistent explicit focus on system development in support of learning, technical assistance and support for the implementation of detailed system development plans; and funding for the initial development of key infrastructure components necessary to make system-wide improvements.

### **Overall Assessment of the Foundation's Partnership and System Development Strategy**

The evaluation's overall assessment of the Foundation's education strategy at this early point in its implementation considered four questions

- Does the strategy make good use of the Foundation's strengths? What tools and supports have been the most valuable at this point in the work?
- Are the partners ready to engage in collaborative action to promote system development and what role did the Foundation play in preparing the partnerships to take on this work?
- Has the Foundation's engagement and support increased the likelihood of sustained partnerships? Has it increased the likelihood of broad scale improvements in systems?
- What is the likely timeframe for observing community-wide changes in educational outcomes? What would be the most likely shorter-term changes that could be observed that predict longer-term success?

In brief, the evaluation concluded that:

- The Foundation has 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 are at different stages in their formation and focus on system development. At the same time, all have 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 has been critical in that progress.
- The Foundation's attention to community partnerships and parent engagement and leadership as well as its multi-year but time-limited commitment is building the demand for 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.

## THE HARTFORD FOUNDATION FOR PUBLIC GIVING'S EDUCATION STRATEGY: AN INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF PROGRESS IN PARTNERSHIP AND SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT

### THE FOUNDATION'S EDUCATION STRATEGY GOAL

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 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 certain communities as evidenced by the wide range of results.

- In the 2008-2009 school year, the average percent of children entering public school kindergarten across the 29 communities in the region that needed substantial instructional support was 21% in literacy skills, 18% in language development, 14% for personal and social development, and 15% in numeracy. In some communities in the region, more than one-third of entering students were not well prepared for kindergarten and their teachers reported that they would need substantial assistance to succeed.
- The Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) results for 2010 indicated that many children across all districts in the Hartford region were not achieving proficiency in basic skills - reading, writing, and mathematics - by the third grade. The average percent of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders who did not score at the proficient level in reading was 21%, in writing 15%, and in mathematics 11%. Again, there was wide variability across the region's 29 communities in these results. The percent not achieving proficiency in reading ranged from 6% to 54%, in writing from 3% to 34%, and in mathematics from 3% to 39%.
- This pattern was also evident in the 2010 CMT results for 8<sup>th</sup> graders, with an average of 13% not proficient in reading, 15% not proficient in writing, and 10% not proficient in mathematics. The range across all communities in the region was from 3% to 43% for reading, 4% to 28% for writing, and 2% to 37% for mathematics.
- The drop-out rate in the region averaged 2.3% in the 2010-11 school year, with a range from zero to 7.4%. Among high schools in the region, an average of 82% of 2010 graduates enrolled in higher education institutions, ranging 66% to 94% across districts.
- Of 2010 high school graduates from the region's districts who enrolled in Connecticut's public higher education system (community college or university levels), 38% required some remediation support. The range across districts in the region was from 18% to 63%.

In light of these results and analysis of gaps in access to a broad range of opportunities for learning across racial, cultural, and socio-economic groups, and drawing on its years of experience working on early childhood and K-12 education issues, the Trustees acknowledged that a stronger, more concentrated focus on school readiness and school success was needed to prepare the region's children for adulthood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In adopting this education goal, they sought solutions that would be transformative and support enduring change. Therefore, the Trustees authorized

the Foundation to implement a comprehensive strategy to strengthen partnerships - between the Foundation, partner organizations and agencies, and with families so as to develop systems of services and supports, ensuring that all children and youth have equitable access to high quality opportunities for learning, inside and outside of school.

Two basic concepts about what is needed to achieve this goal, based on analyses and observations by Foundation staff and partners and congruent with the Foundation's values, underlie the Foundation's education strategy. One has to do with the holistic nature of children's development and its dependence on a web of supports and opportunities provided first and foremost by their immediate family but also in their neighborhoods and communities. As described by Foundation staff in a presentation to an external audience in October 2014,

"We start...with the understanding that children's success in learning requires that their families have the resources they need to support their children's health, development, and learning; that through their childhood and adolescence they experience optimal physical and emotional development; and that they have many opportunities to learn the academic, social, and life skills they need to be successful in life."

The other underlying concept is that providing this web of supports and opportunities and achieving the strategy's goal on a broad scale for all groups of children requires both partnerships and systemic responses. The strategy's strength will depend on collaboration with partners, including families, willing and able to align efforts and commit resources. Broad-scale and sustainable improvements in the supports and opportunities children and families experience will require that the partnerships be focused on developing systems rather than unconnected discrete programs or services. The proposal made by Foundation staff to the Trustees as they considered adopting this goal described this as follows:

"Using a holistic approach, our...strategies will build connections across schools, community-based organizations, children's health providers and support for families so that children's experiences are seamless and, we believe, ultimately improved...[To achieve the goal, we will] strategically support efforts at the local, regional and state levels that can be effective models for integrating, strengthening and supporting three critical components of educational systems: learning and academics, healthy child development (including physical and social-emotional health), and family support and engagement."

In developing the evaluation framework for its education strategy, the following statement was crafted to describe the education strategy's unified approach, incorporating both assumptions: "Developing partnerships and systems focused on equity and opportunity to promote learning for all children and youth."

## **HISTORY AND CONTEXT FOR THE EDUCATION STRATEGY**

While the education strategy goal as adopted in the fall of 2013 is relatively new in its explicit attention to partnership and system development, the Foundation's commitment to the education of children and youth in the region has been long-standing. The current strategy was built from lessons learned from previous long-term education investments, including substantial investments

in long-term initiatives, including Hartford Community Schools,<sup>1</sup> the Hartford Partnership for School Success,<sup>2</sup> the Brighter Futures Initiative (BFI),<sup>3</sup> and the Hartford Area Child Care Collaborative,<sup>4</sup> as well as many smaller grants and projects. 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. Its work in the education arena has also developed substantial "social capital" in its relationships at all levels, its place at policy advisory and decision making tables, and its deep knowledge and expertise from early childhood into post-secondary education.

In 2010 the Foundation reached out to hundreds of stakeholders as it developed its 2011-2016 strategic plan. In these conversations, the Foundation was seeking advice on how it could be a more effective partner in the success of the region. Based on input from these extensive conversations and its staff's own experience and internal expertise, the Foundation's Board of Trustees adopted a partnership and system development approach to achieving its strategic education goal. Again, while the strategy's explicit focus on partnership and system development toward a goal for community-level outcomes may be new, it has been implemented in the Foundation's prior work and flows organically from the lessons learned from that work. The Foundation has consistently engaged in partnerships, whether with grantees, including those listed above, or in collaborative bodies at the local, regional, or state levels. This reflects the historic value it places on collaboration and its recognition that, while its contribution to addressing problems and issues in the region may be critical, it cannot expect success on its own. Its focus on building effective systems is also long-standing, whether in establishing a network of services around a specific program — such as with the Hartford Community Schools — or supporting a common set of quality practices across programs — such as the work with community-based and city-administered child care centers conducted by the Hartford Area Child Care Collaborative.

What is different about the education strategy adopted in 2013 is the Foundation's emphasis on partnership and system development as necessary to reduce substantial and persistent systemic

---

<sup>1</sup> The Hartford Community Schools Initiative is currently implemented in seven schools in the Hartford Public School district. These schools are each partnered with a community agency that provides services and supports to students and their families, including educational and enrichment activities and access to health and social services.

<sup>2</sup> The Hartford Partnership for Student Success is a collaboration among the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, Hartford Public Schools, the City of Hartford's Department of Families, Children, Youth and Recreation, and the United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut. The Partnership oversees Hartford Community Schools and works to embed family and community partnership principles and practices throughout the district.

<sup>3</sup> The Brighter Futures Initiative supported the development of Family Centers, currently located in six Hartford neighborhoods. Brighter Futures Family Centers provide, in partnership with other community agencies and programs, an array of services and supports that promote the strengthening of parents as their child's first nurturer, teacher and advocate.

<sup>4</sup> Until recently a project of the Foundation, the Hartford Area Child Care Collaborative formed a network of more than 300 organizations and individuals to promote high quality child care in the region. The Collaborative provided information, technical assistance, and training for providers, operated an early childhood resource library, and conducted advocacy. The Collaborative is in the process of becoming fully integrated into the Foundation, continuing its support for quality child care through network building.

inequities in children's educational outcomes beyond Hartford into the region. As stated in the Education Strategy Summary prepared for the Board on September 11, 2013,

"We know that high quality programs like Community Schools and BFI Family Centers cannot reach scale or be sustained without improving the connectivity of the broader system of which they are a part...Our ambition to improve and connect systems requires that we work with partners from various sectors...to establish shared vision."

## **THE EDUCATION STRATEGY EVALUATION**

In the spring of 2014, the Foundation issued a request for qualifications for an evaluation team to assess its education strategy. After a round of submissions and presentations, in September 2014 a team headed by the Center for Assessment and Policy Development was awarded this project, which officially began in October. Over the next seven months, the team worked with Foundation staff to develop an evaluation framework that was appropriate for both the early childhood and K-12 areas of the overall strategy, articulate unified outcome statements and evaluation questions, and identify partnership and system development outcome measures and sources of data. After presenting the framework to the Board's Strategy Committee in April, the evaluation team continued to refine the evaluation approach and worked with staff to identify areas of work for intensive assessment that could exemplify the range of partnership and system development activities being undertaken in the overall strategy. The evaluation team then developed tools for collecting data to measure progress on outcomes in those areas of work. In late 2015, the team conducted in-depth interviews with 29 key partners and stakeholders to gain their perspectives on progress in those areas of work.

### **The Evaluation Framework for the Education Strategy**

The evaluation framework had to reflect the Foundation's focus on partnership and system development to reach its education strategy goal and utilize evaluation processes that were consistent with the Foundation's own approach. Specifically,

- Just as the Foundation is investing in partnership capacities and collaborative actions, the work of identifying outcomes, developing measures, and interpreting patterns is expected to be a collective effort among the Foundation, its partners, and the evaluation team. As a first step in taking this collaboration beyond the interchange among Foundation staff, leadership, and the evaluation team, discussions with a small set of key stakeholders were held by the evaluation team in the summer of 2015. As noted in the summary of those interviews, "These stakeholders understand that partnership and system development...are vital to broad scale and sustained improvements in learning and educational outcomes...[and they give credit to the Foundation]...for ensuring that partnership and system development work is clearly focused on the goal of improved...learning from all children and youth."
- As noted above, the Foundation's education strategy is based on the understanding that stronger, more coordinated, and responsive systems are needed to increase opportunities for success in learning for all children, particularly those who are vulnerable due to family, community and economic circumstances. The evaluation likewise focuses on measuring

and assessing sustainable system development outcomes - the development of infrastructures and policies that can support more accessible, appropriate, consistent, and effective front-line practices and both better experiences and greater benefits for children and families. This approach differs from more traditional evaluations that examine specific programs or projects and focus on measuring changes for direct participants.

- Improving learning and educational outcomes for children across an entire community and implementing strategies to build sustainable partnerships and systems will require a long-term perspective, even while tracking benchmarks for progress. The timeframe for evaluating the Foundation's strategy needs to mirror this process and help the Foundation and its partners set realistic expectations. Recognizing this, Foundation staff worked with the evaluation team to delineate measures of success in changing partnership and system development outcomes that could be expected in the short-, medium-, and longer-term.
- Finally, the Foundation recognizes that its contributions to system development through partnerships may be indirect and less visible than for its support of specific programs or projects. The evaluation will examine both direct and indirect contributions of the Foundation's support and focus on assessing contribution rather than attribution.

With these considerations in mind, the evaluation team worked with Foundation staff and leadership to develop the evaluation framework illustrated on the following two pages. This framework 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."

Specific measures of these outcomes were developed for each area of the education strategy selected for intensive assessment. Each measure was identified as expected to be observed in the short-, medium, and longer-term, depending on when activities in the area began and the extent of prior investments and capacities in place at that point. Charts displaying these measures accompany the detailed profile of each area in the appendices.

THE HARTFORD FOUNDATION FOR PUBLIC GIVING  
OUR EDUCATION STRATEGY

Our Goal, adopted by Board, September 2013:

**"Children, especially those most vulnerable,  
are ready to learn when they enter kindergarten and  
are prepared to succeed when they leave high school"**

Our Approach:

**System  
Development**

**Partnership  
Development**

**Developing partnerships and systems  
focused on equity and opportunity  
to promote learning for all children and youth**

**Why Partnership and System Development?**

<b>National Research and Best Practices</b>	<b>Building on Our Prior Investments</b> <i>(Brighter Futures, Community Schools, Hartford Area Childcare Collaborative)</i>	<b>Our Unique Role and Capacities as a Community Foundation</b> <i>(e.g. Grantmaker, , Convener, Advocate)</i>	<b>Advice from Thought Leaders and Partners</b>
---	---	---	---

## Partnership Capacities

Key stakeholders, including families, share a common vision and develop the skills and commitment to working together.

## Improved Experiences for Children & Families

All children and their families benefit from access to and use of services and supports to meet their needs and interests.

Children, especially those most vulnerable, are ready to learn when they enter kindergarten and are prepared to succeed when they leave high school

## Partner Collaborative Actions

Key stakeholders develop, commit to, and implement action plans.

## Improved Practices<sup>Th</sup>

Key stakeholders consistently ensure that effective, high quality, culturally competent services and practices are available, accessible and responsive to individual needs and interests.

## Infrastructure & Policy

Fundamental changes in organizational relationships, structures, policies, and resource allocation are made to promote and sustain progress.

### ACCOUNTABILITY & LEARNING

The Foundation and its partners will monitor data on children's learning and the factors contributing to improved educational outcomes to assess progress toward the strategic goal and to refine and strengthen their efforts.

## Areas within the Education Strategy Selected for Intensive Assessment

The Foundation's education strategy is broad-reaching and includes a wide range of projects and activities in both the early childhood and K-12 arenas. Foundation staff worked with the evaluation team to select five areas of work for intensive ongoing assessment of the partnership and system development strategy. While these are areas where Foundation resources - both in terms of grants and technical assistance from staff and consultants - are substantial, they are not the only areas under the education strategy in which the Foundation will continue to invest.

The areas for intensive assessment were identified to represent the range of types of partnership and system development activities being supported and engaged in by the Foundation. They are all areas with the potential to inform state policy and for broad-scale replication across the state. Further, the purpose of looking intensively at these areas as a set is 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 are:

- Development of a Hartford-based family support micro-system, building from the **BFI** Family Center network, to expand the implementation of effective practices that will support parents in accessing resources and strengthening skills to promote children's learning.
- Design and testing of a model for utilizing public resources to fund facility and quality improvement among home-based child care providers to ensure that all children have rich learning experiences, regardless of setting.
- Use of data on children's development to engage parents, residents, and community organizations in towns across the region in developing neighborhood- and community-level system innovations.
- Implementation of a wide range of family and community engagement activities undertaken by the Manchester Public School district and its local partners to increase opportunities for learning at home and in the community.
- Collaboration among the Bloomfield Public School district, families, and community partners to offer a wider range of learning opportunities during an extended school day.

In addition to ongoing intensive assessment of these areas within the education strategy, the Foundation intends to work with its partners to identify and track specific indicators of progress on the strategic goal - readiness to succeed in kindergarten and preparedness for adult roles after high school. Details of how these indicators will be selected and how data will be collected and reported have not been determined at this point, but are expected in 2016.

## **PROGRESS ON PARTNERSHIP AND SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT IN SELECTED AREAS**

Work in the areas selected for intensive assessment are at differing points in their implementation, based on the extent of work with and support from the Foundation prior to 2013 and the initiation of their activities since the adoption of the strategic education goal. For example, the BFI Family Centers have been supported by the Foundation with both grants and technical assistance for two decades, while the work in the Alliance Districts began with planning opportunities in 2014 and initial implementation grants either early in 2015 or in the fall of that year. Even so, there is solid evidence of progress on partnership and system development in all five areas.

### **Summary Findings**

- The Foundation's actions and investments have built and strengthened partnership capacity and supported collaborative actions to develop effective systems that promote children's development and learning.
- There are strong indications that partnerships are contributing to initial system development and practice changes linked to children's development and learning.
- New infrastructure is being developed, such as new cabinet-level Offices of Family and Community Engagement established in both Alliance districts and a memorandum of understanding among the agencies operating the BFI Family Centers committing to shared data collection and joint projects.
- The Foundation's contributions have been decisive in building partnerships and stimulating collaborative action.
- Along with its partners, the Foundation has made key contributions toward progress on system development.

Detailed descriptions of each of the selected areas of work within the Foundation's education strategy are provided in the appendices. This section outlines, with examples from work in the selected areas, progress observed through 2015 on the partnership and system development outcomes expected at this stage and the contributions made by the Foundation toward this progress.

### **Progress on Partnership Development Outcomes**

The evaluation framework identifies partnership capacities as having two components: a shared vision and a commitment and skills to working collaboratively; these capacities underlie the partnership's ability to plan and carry out coordinated actions directed toward the development of systems that support children's development and learning.

There has been substantial progress since 2013 in building partnership capacity and collaborative action across all of the areas selected for intensive assessment. Specific examples, documented in more detail in the attached descriptions of work in each selected area of the strategy, include:

- The network of six BFI Family Centers has adopted a shared framework for their work, identified priority areas of practice on which to focus, are working together on common data tools and data analysis, and have, independently of the Foundation, committed through a memorandum of understanding to share resources and carry out joint activities and projects.
- Convened by the Foundation, a steering committee that includes critical stakeholders from state government, the state-level financing agency, and the union representing home-based child care providers has designed a pilot project to support quality improvement in an often-overlooked sector in early care and education.
- Data on areas of strength and vulnerability in young children's development have been the focus of discussion and planning at the neighborhood or community level, facilitated by parent leaders and supported by local partnerships in Hartford and West Hartford.
- The Manchester Public School district has adopted family and community partnership as one of four priority areas for district-wide improvement, developed and begun implementing a detailed action plan for this area. It has formed new partnerships with town government agencies and other major community institutions so as to collaboratively increase opportunities for student learning.
- Similarly in Bloomfield, there has been community-wide agreement on the district's improvement plan—based on extensive consultation with parents and families—that will significantly extend the school day and will draw upon the expertise and resources of community based partners to provide curriculum-aligned enrichment to all students during this extended day. Further, the plan calls for transforming school climate in ways that welcome families and engage parents as co-teachers of their children. This ambitious plan was developed with extensive parent and teacher participation. It is guided by the work of a steering committee that includes school and community program staff and parents from the school parent-teacher organizations.

### **Foundation Contributions to Partnership Development Progress**

Stakeholders across all five areas were unanimous in their acknowledgement of the critical contribution of the Foundation to partnership development. The Foundation's vision and values were recognized as underlying the effectiveness of its financial and other supports. In addition, the specific ways in which the Foundation catalyzed the formation, functioning, and effectiveness of partnerships in the five areas include:

- Its support that has built and continues to develop partner capacities, expand knowledge, and form relationships.
- Its reputation and deep relationships that modeled partnership values and behavior and helped bring needed stakeholders to the partnership, including parents, community-based organizations, local government, and state agencies.
- Its provision of "backbone support" by consultants and Foundation staff to the partnerships for facilitation, guidance, and logistics, broadening the concept of "convening" as a philanthropic tool.

- Access for the partnerships to technical assistance, data tools, national experts, and new research that developed a shared knowledge base and created excitement around a common vision within the partnerships.
- Funding to support the development and implementation of partnership plans, including using Foundation resources to leverage state investment.

**Representative Comments from Stakeholders on the Foundation's Contributions to Partnership Development:**

- "The Foundation comes in with an asset-based approach, not with a prescribed idea."
- "Because of its consistent commitment to children's issues, people are willing to listen to the Foundation."
- "Certainly the Foundation has the power of convening - they assembled a good group that have all contributed expertise and passion to the work."
- "A major contribution of the Foundation has been its commitment to data collection and community engagement using the data - this has been very intentional and continually reinforced by Foundation staff."
- "The Foundation's grant has really helped us strengthen our partnerships with the local community and do so in a way that helps advance our agenda."
- "In planning for the grant, we brought parents together...That part of the process forced us to consider *how* we invite parents into a true discussion about learning and education."
- "We learned a lot through the entire process. The Foundation has introduced us to professional development opportunities including some cutting edge approaches to family engagement and productive partnerships."

**Progress on System Development Outcomes**

The evaluation framework identifies system development outcomes in three areas:

- infrastructure and policies,
- improvements in practice, and
- Improvements in children's and families' experiences.

Progress in system development is not necessarily linear and is both long-term and ongoing. Therefore, given the short period of time since the Foundation's education strategy was initiated in late 2013, it is to be expected that progress on system development has just begun, with the primary area being in creating the necessary infrastructure and policies to support more effective practices to support children and their families.

Specific examples, documented in more detail in the attached descriptions of work in each selected area of the strategy, include:

- Within the BFI Family Center network: Shared standards for best practices and use of common tools to measure and monitor practice across the BFI Family Center network;

the development of referral arrangements among the Centers and with other community programs; and the memorandum of understanding as the basis for ongoing work on policies and practices that ensure high quality family support services that are consistent across the network.

- By the home-based child care steering committee: Development of policies and procedures for the pilot project that, once tested, provide the basis for replication; Linkage with the state-wide, regionally-based Help Me Grow network to expand knowledge of and skills in family support practice.
- In the communities implementing the data-informed, parent-led assessment and planning activities: Use of identified priorities by community agencies and service provider organizations to guide decisions on programming; Parent/resident group-led activities to address these priorities.
- In Manchester: Creation of an Office of Family and Community Engagement within the school district and its co-location with a comparable city agenda to ensure coordination and joint programming; Initial implementation of a district-wide professional development plan to increase staff knowledge and skills in family engagement; Expansion of family resource centers to all elementary schools in the district.
- In Bloomfield: Creation of a position within the school district to coordinate the Extended Learning Time initiative; Design of an extended learning time model and identification of community organizations to collaborate in implementing standards-based academic enrichment activities.

### **Foundation Contributions to System Development Progress**

While progress on system development will ultimately be in the hands of stakeholders directly involved in and responsible for system-level policies and actions, the contributions of the Foundation have been transformative, empowering those stakeholders to take the risks and commit to the long-term trajectory inherent this effort. The Foundation's contributions have been in three main ways:

- By holding a consistent explicit focus on system development in support of learning as the goal of the partnerships it convenes and supports;
- By providing technical assistance and support in helping the partnerships develop and implement detailed system development plans; and
- By funding the initial development of key infrastructure components necessary to make system-wide improvements.

### **Representative Comments from Stakeholders on the Foundation's Contributions to System Development:**

- "One of the things that the Foundation has done very well is make abundantly clear the long-term goal of system building, without getting mired in the minutia."
- "My first thought [in response to a question about the most effective ways that the Foundation has contributed to the work] was funding, but it's their emphasis on community engagement and commitment to early childhood in general."

- "The Foundation has the staff and the stamina and the vision of themselves as provider of best practices and best information about areas affecting families and young children - I hope they continue to go out and research what will work for our community."
- "While the process of investigating the viability of district-wide extended learning has been multipronged, requiring patience and a willingness to listen, the Foundation's support, both financially and through mentorship, has allowed Bloomfield a unique opportunity to tackle a complicated process strategically."
- "As a result of having the grant and the clear strategy that it supports, we have more leverage and capacity to say, 'Although this is a wonderful idea, this is not the time to pursue this opportunity.' In the past, we could never do that out of fear of missing out or alienating a potential partner."
- "Even after we received the grant, we've been in regular contact with the Foundation ...to review progress, talk about challenges, and confirm that we are each doing what needs to be done to help the process along."

### **Summary of Progress and Foundation Contributions through 2015**

There has been substantial progress in the development of partnerships among the Foundation's grantees organizations, community agencies and organizations, and families in each of the areas being assessed. The extent to which these partnerships have built from a shared vision and commitment to work together to the development and initial implementation of specific action plans intended to promote learning depends primarily on the length of time the Foundation has engaged with and supported the partnership. Regardless, those involved in the partnerships describe the Foundation grants, technical assistance, and overall support as critical to convening partners and supporting their work together.

Since work began at different points in time and faced different challenges in their initial periods, progress on the implementation of action plans is variable across the areas. All, however, have laid out, and in some cases begun, specific steps for the next year and in most cases beyond to begin creation or modification of structures, policies, and practices needed to ensure that the experiences of children and families in those systems support learning. Again, the Foundation's support was critical in supporting the partnerships take these steps.

### **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE EDUCATION STRATEGY**

The current environment in Connecticut and in the communities in the Foundation's region of interest presents challenges for moving the Foundation's education strategy of partnership and system development forward. Limited public resources to expand and sustain effective system innovations are a constant challenge, one that is made more difficult with the state's current budget deficit. The press of other important issues affecting the region and competition for those resources are also perennial, making it challenging to maintain the level of attention and commitment across multiple partners, including the Foundation, that will be necessary for long-

term success. Changes in leadership and political agendas at all levels - school district, municipal, and state - will naturally occur and must be taken into account as the strategy unfolds, whether they offer support or present barriers.

Other challenges are perhaps more subtle. Recognizing and addressing the need to change perceptions, beliefs, and long-standing patterns of behavior - "culture" - of key organizations and groups will be necessary to open up opportunities for change. For example, expanding quality improvement opportunities for home-based child care providers will require that these settings be recognized by other provider groups, policymakers, and the public at large as a valuable component of the overall early care and education field. Engaging parents as allies in supporting children's learning will require adjustments in how families are treated in their interactions when they enter a family support center or a school building as well as in the usual types of opportunities for engagement offered to families. Seeking and accepting authentic parent input into school district, service provider, or governmental policies and practices will require that underlying issues associated with race and citizenship status be raised up and addressed as well as reconsideration of the usual settings and processes in which decisions are discussed and made.

At the same time, the Foundation has at its disposal tools and capacities to help its partners address these challenges. By sustaining a multi-year commitment of its resources at a level commensurate with these challenges and the outcomes it seeks, the Foundation will help its partners take the long-term perspective as well and invest in actions that set the stage for sustainable change. A case in point is leadership development - whether among parents and community residents or among school principals. Cultivating a cadre of leaders - rather than relying on a few "natural" champions - is more likely to sustain and expand attention to changes that benefit many children and families on an ongoing basis. But this effort will take time. Likewise, demonstrating an effective model in a small number of communities may need to be replicated in additional communities to generate sufficient data and backing for broad-scale expansion.

The Foundation can also help its partners tackle the difficult challenge of culture change by continuing to support reflection and assessment processes - such as use of the Practice Change Survey used by the BFI Family Centers and the planning grant support for the Alliance Districts. Culture change can also be supported by the Foundation by connecting its partners with external voices - such as Karen Mapp - and tools - such as the Early Development Inventory to inspire and reinforce new ways of thinking and innovative practices. The Foundation can also use its own grant making processes to incentivize and reward collaboration among partners by offering funding specifically for collective action plans. It can also focus attention on partnership and system development activities by including these topics in its grant applications and reporting requirements.

The Foundation is already investing in leadership development as a key technical assistance component of its overall strategy. Family Centers and other family support hubs are natural loci for helping parents develop self-advocacy skills, take leading roles in the Center's activities, and be encouraged and supported in leadership in other settings in the community. Family

Centers and family resource centers have demonstrated this capacity in their role in enlisting and training parents to facilitate community café conversations around the EDI data, as well as in recruiting home-based child care providers for the facility and quality improvement pilot. Providing opportunities for Superintendents and leadership teams from the Alliance Districts to learn from national experts and each other has spread leadership capacity for change within those districts. Continued technical assistance to both districts and community partners from Foundation consultants and staff will be opportunities to further strengthen and extend that capacity.

Partnership capacity development and collaborative action are labor and resource intensive processes, requiring time commitments by partner organization leadership and staff, usually above and beyond their usual duties. Supporting the work of partnerships includes tasks such as handling logistics, facilitating meetings, and documenting discussions and decisions as well as providing advice, sharing new research and policy developments, and helping resolve the inevitable tensions and conflicts. These capacities may be beyond those of the partners as well as requiring additional time and effort. The Foundation can continue to support the developing partnerships by providing this type of "glue" support through consultants such as the Family Center circuit rider<sup>5</sup> and the peer consultant working with district superintendents. The Foundation can extend the value of this support by communicating its expectation that over time internal capacity to carry out these functions will be developed. This expectation can also apply to infrastructure such as a central school district office of family and community partnerships set up initially with Foundation funds or a formalized network among Family Centers. The Foundation might also help develop regional infrastructure to support partnership capacity building and system innovations such as it did with the Hartford Area Child Care Collaborative's child care network and the Connecticut Children's Medical Center in its replication of the Help Me Grow model.

The Foundation can capitalize on its capacities and relationships to keep its strategic goal at the forefront and focus attention on developing effective partnerships and systems not only locally and regionally but at the state level as well. In doing so, the Foundation can both leverage and take advantage of its existing strong connections with state agencies such as of the Office of Early Childhood and the State Department of Education, with statewide coalitions such as the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy and the Early Childhood Alliance, and with long-standing partner organizations and groups. It can use its new capacity to conduct public policy advocacy to deepen the impact of these relationships and take on additional leadership roles at the state level in support of its education strategy agenda. In addition, the Foundation is active at the national level through professional groups such as the Education Funders Strategy Group, in partnership with national philanthropic organizations such as the Ford and Annie E. Casey Foundations, and by providing guidance supporting the replication of its work in other areas of the country. These relationships not only give the Foundation access to expertise, experience,

---

<sup>5</sup>This consultant, on leave from one of the BFI Family Center lead agencies, provides technical assistance to the individual Centers and convenes and facilitates both the BFI Family Center network and the broader Hartford-area family support network.

and resources from outside the region, they also provide Foundation staff and partners opportunities to share their work and participate in peer exchange with other innovators in early childhood and K-12 education.

## **OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF PARTNERSHIP AND SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY**

In providing an overall assessment of the Foundation's education strategy toward the goal of ensuring readiness for school and life success among all the region's children and youth, there are several important questions to consider:

- Does the strategy make good use of the Foundation's strengths? What tools and supports have been the most valuable at this point in the work?
- Are the partners ready to engage in collaborative action to promote system development and what role did the Foundation play in preparing the partnerships to take on this work?
- Has the Foundation's engagement and support increased the likelihood of sustained partnerships? Has it increased the likelihood of broad scale improvements in systems?
- What is the likely timeframe for observing community-wide changes in educational outcomes? What would be the most likely shorter-term changes that could be observed that predict longer-term success?

Here in brief are answers to these questions, based on the evaluation findings and analysis to date.

### **Does the strategy make good use of the Foundation's strengths? What tools and supports have been the most valuable at this point in the work?**

Being able to provide substantial funding on a long-term basis is obviously an important strength of the Foundation that will be especially important in this strategy, as partnership and system development are long-term in nature. Focusing the Foundation's resources behind a defined goal with profound implications for the region's economic and social well-being and making a substantial and ongoing commitment bring credibility and urgency to this goal. It is also clear that other capacities and tools at the Foundation's disposal have been equally important in this early stage of the strategy.

Relationships developed over the past decades of work in early childhood and K-12 education at all levels — locally, regionally, statewide, and nationally - have made it possible for the Foundation to engage with individual partners and bring them together to work collaboratively. This has been true in the early childhood field, which is notoriously fragmented, and in work with school districts, which often lack the opportunity to learn from each other and do not have strong relationships with community-based organizations working with students and their families. Similarly, the Foundation's national reputation and connections make it possible to expose its partners to others working on similar issues and strategies around the country and give them additional momentum by highlighting their successes on the national stage.

Also of value has been the Foundation's support of access by the partnerships to national experts, emerging research and best practices, and data and tools. Reinforcing and extending the value of these opportunities has been the substantial support provided by Foundation staff and consultants, who have acted as mentors, brokers, and facilitators for the partnerships.

**Are the partners ready to engage in collaborative action to promote system development and what role did the Foundation play in preparing the partnerships to take on this work?**

The length of time that the Foundation has worked with the partnerships currently engaged in the education strategy varies, for example from decades for the BFI Family Centers to within the past two years among the Alliance Districts in the region. The current Alliance District strategy was adopted in late 2013, with implementation beginning in earnest in 2014 for some partnerships and later for others. Therefore, it is not surprising that the partnerships are at different stages in their formation and in their focus on system development. At the same time, there is clear evidence that the partnerships are beginning to engage in system development through collaborative decision-making and action. One example is the memorandum of understanding among the six BFI Family Centers and their lead agencies to use common tools measuring family support practice and family experiences, share data from these tools, and develop joint projects to increase family access to resources and supports for children's learning. Another is the commitments in Alliance communities to strengthen their district's infrastructure for supporting family and community engagement, recognized as a critical component of their overall school improvement plans, by establishing permanent central administration offices or positions specifically for this purpose with Foundation funding. Still another is the development of policies and procedures for the pilot work making state funding available to home-based child care providers for facility and quality improvement.

In all these examples and others, the Foundation played a decisive role, not only in convening the partnerships but also in supporting their capacity to engage in collaborative planning and to take initial steps toward system development aimed at improving practice, family experiences, and children's outcomes. The ways in which the Foundation carried out this role have varied across the areas of work - from planning grants to the Alliance Districts and colloquia among superintendents in the region; to facilitation and consultation for network building with the Family Centers and other family support programs in Hartford; to access to data, training, and mini-grants to support neighborhood- and community-based deliberations and actions; to leveraging state resources with its own funds for the work with home-based child care providers.

Above and beyond these concrete supports has been the Foundation's clear and consistent focus on ensuring that supporting children's success in learning drive the work of the partnerships and be the explicit goal of system development actions.

**Has the Foundation's engagement and support increased the likelihood of sustained partnerships? Has it increased the likelihood of broad scale improvements in systems?**

Just as the current capacities and actions of the partnerships vary across areas of work within the education strategy, so does the likelihood of their sustainability, as assessed at the current time. For newly forming partnerships - such as those in the Alliance Districts that just received their implementation grants in the fall of 2015 and the family support steering committee in Hartford that was formed at about the same time, their sustainability is hard to predict over the long term, although with the Foundation's support these partnerships are likely to expand and strengthen over the next several years. In other cases, such as among the organizations in Hartford supporting the parent-led conversations based on neighborhood-level Early Development Inventory (EDI) data, there does not currently appear to be a stable partnership structure in Hartford beyond what is provided by the Foundation and the BFI Family Centers, while in West Hartford an existing early childhood collaborative partnership body has incorporated the EDI work into its work in the community.

In some cases, close connections between local and state partners - for example, in the case of the pilot with home-based child care providers in which not only community-based organizations but also the state Office of Early Childhood, a state-level public-private financing agency, and the statewide union representing this sector are involved - suggests that there is an avenue for possible replication and for the development of system-wide policies and structures. In the case of the Alliance Districts, Foundation funding and support to plan and implement broad family engagement strategies, form strong community-school partnerships, and provide training for capacity building of school and community partner staff in transformational attitude and skill building are infrastructure and policy developments expected to contribute to changes in practices and opportunities to support student learning. However, the resource requirements for sustaining these developments - both financial and human - are high; local districts will need to pay close attention to building internal capacity, planning diligently, and seeking broad-range support in order that these practices are internalized and sustained. The Foundation's attention to community partnerships and parent engagement and leadership is one way to build demand for sustainability. Certainly the Foundation's multi-year commitment has accelerated these developments and, with the recognition of a time-limited grant, given them urgency.

**What is the likely timeframe for observing community-wide changes in educational outcomes? What would be the most likely observable shorter-term changes that could predict longer-term success?**

While a system-development approach has the greatest likelihood for improving and sustaining educational outcomes and increasing equity in those outcomes at the community level, the timeframe for realizing these benefits depends on several factors. These include characteristics of the population of interest, the intensity and scale of changes in practices that directly affect learning opportunities and the engagement of children and youth in those opportunities, and the effort it takes to develop the infrastructure and policies to support the consistent, ongoing,

and widespread implementation of those practices. In addition, external factors may impede or facilitate these dynamics.

One simple example is the fact that widespread implementation of effective practices that support the health and development of infants and toddlers and that ensure their access to high quality early learning experiences can be expected to impact rates of kindergarten readiness within a shorter period of time than extended learning opportunities beginning in elementary school will affect high school completion and the demonstration of readiness for adult life. Populations that include children, youth, and families who face more financial challenges, who experience the effects of racism, who are not proficient in English, or who have disabilities affecting learning are likely to require differentiated practices appropriate and responsive to their specific needs. This, in turn, will require that development of supporting infrastructure and policies promote this nuanced approach, generally an extended iterative process. Populations defined by geographic or jurisdictional boundaries may experience substantial family mobility and to the extent that learning and educational outcomes are dependent on the intensity and duration of the supports to promote those outcomes, observing improvements at the community level may be difficult. With these caveats in mind, the Foundation will undoubtedly want to monitor kindergarten readiness and successful transition into adulthood after high school and to work with its leadership and among its partners to identify and track appropriate measures.

At the same time, the Foundation and its partners may wish to identify and follow other measures that may show progress on a shorter time horizon. Some of these may be at the child level - for example, the percent of 3- and 4-year old children who are enrolled in early childhood programs that meet high quality standards, the percent of children who are reading proficiently as they enter the upper elementary grades, or the percent of ninth grade students who successfully transition to ninth grade.

The evaluation framework also suggests that interim measures will be evidence of widespread changes in practice that support children and families in accessing quality learning opportunities and changes in the experiences of children and families that indicate that they are benefiting as expected from these opportunities. For example, "school climate" surveys with parents or "experience of care" surveys with families using programs and services in the community can measure the extent to which those settings implement best practices in family engagement and offer access to services and programs that support children and their families. Such tools can also collect data on ways in which parents are encouraging their children in learning at home and to participate in community-based learning opportunities, as well as other information on children's health and development and family well-being. At the present time, there are few consistently and broadly used tools to collect these types of data over time. This is an area the Foundation may want to consider for further discussion with its partners and possible investment.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

This early assessment of the Foundation's education strategy suggests some possible implications for future action - for Foundation staff, for its Board, and for its partners.

### **Implications for Foundation staff:**

- Continue to reinforce the long-term goal, asking the question: How does this [particular action/policy/change] contribute to progress toward the goal? - through grant applications/renewals, reporting requirements, one-on-one discussions, guidance documents, peer convenings, etc.
- Continue to provide grantee organizations and partnerships with access to data, research, both local and national experts and with opportunities to learn from each other and reinforce each other's work.
- Continue to use and facilitate convenings to support the development of a learning community among those committed to building effective partnership focused on early learning and student success.
- Cultivate support through knowledge building among peers (e.g. state and regional union leadership, leaders of other related organizations, other funders) who might be doubters or pose potential roadblocks.
- Assess the effectiveness of Foundation actions, policies, and resource allocation in supporting grantees and partners and building long-term capacity to support system development.
- Work with the Board, grantees, and partners to identify, measure, and monitor specific indicators of the goal and engage them in using these data and data on implementation and outcome progress to refine the strategy as appropriate.
- Assist the Board in assessing the extent to which the strategy is yielding results in a time frame and at a scale that is reasonable to expect in light of when the strategy began and when implementation was initiated with the various grantees and partners, and with consideration for environmental factors beyond the Foundation's control.
- Examine the implications of expanding activities within the strategy by realistically assessing the current capacities among potential grantees and partners and the likely level of support needed against the availability of staff and consultants and other Foundation resources and the desired timeframe for results.
- Watch for unbridled mission shift as initial success in implementation begets calls for action and change in other areas, adding responsibilities to the duties of existing staff.
- Use the Foundation's leadership in the policy arenas at both the local and state levels to support the sustainability and expansion of partnerships and implementation of system changes necessary to achieve the strategic goal region-wide and replication across the state.
- Develop exit strategies for each grant to ensure that the Foundation is prepared to be decisive and rational in dealing with unexpected turmoil or insurmountable challenges in the short term and to ensure that eventual diminution or cessation of support in the

long run does not cause undue disruption in the partnerships and system developments implemented to date.

**Implications for the Board of Trustees:**

- Maintain the vision articulated in the Foundation's strategic goal for education balanced with a realistic understanding of the long-term nature of the partnership and system development approach.
- Recognize the unique value of what the Foundation can contribute while accepting the "risk" that the level of Foundation resources may not be sufficient to realize the strategic goal, given other forces.
- Be generous in modeling partnership - sharing credit and recognizing the contributions of grantees, partners, and other important actors.
- Encourage staff to identify co-funders to support complementary activities with the Foundation's partners.
- Understand the local and state policy aspects and impacts of this work, including the policy action that will be necessary to sustain the benefits of the Foundation's strategy.
- Be flexible in responding to opportunities and challenges and continue to be diligent in asking for and assessing solid evidence of progress and results.
- Be supportive of staff in making necessary changes - including withdrawal of Foundation support - in those areas or communities that are not proceeding in good faith, are foundering in implementation, or where leadership focus has fundamentally shifted.

**Implications for grantees and partners:**

- Continue to expand connections, linkages, and partnerships, particularly those that foster and strengthen parent and community leadership.
- Commit sufficient resources (financial and otherwise) to "do business differently," particularly in improving practices and experiences of children and families.
- Engage faithfully in the learning opportunities and technical assistance resources provided by the Foundation, including those with other grantees and partners to exchange information, share ideas and experiences, and craft common approaches where these are likely to build momentum and leverage resources.
- Be realistic about the depth of change (professional development, institutional, infrastructural) needed to meet the demands of change and realize the goals set in collaboration with the Foundation.
- Plan for long-term sustainability and for continuity in the midst of potential leadership and/or staff turnover.
- Provide timely and honest feedback about the Foundation's actions and decisions and about opportunities and barriers to progress.

## THE HARTFORD FAMILY SUPPORT MICRO-SYSTEM AS A PLATFORM TO EXPAND EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN ENGAGING FAMILIES OF YOUNG CHILDREN

### INTRODUCTION

This Early Childhood Investment strategy seeks to increase the capacity of programs in the region to engage families of young children, strengthen their resilience and capacity to promote their children's development, and build parent-program partnerships that encourage parent decision-making and leadership. This strategy builds on understanding that children develop and learn best when their families are equipped to provide nurturance, guidance, stability, and encouragement and that families' ability to do this well is affected by their overall physical, emotional, social, and economic well-being. Principles, policies, and practices that contribute to family well-being holistically and in partnership with families are referred to by the term "family support."

Best practice family support principles, as articulated in the Strengthening Families approach adopted by the Foundation and its partners,<sup>6</sup> call for policies and practices that:

- Value the cultures and strengths of families;
- Strengthen parenting skills;
- Link families to services and opportunities;
- Facilitate peer relationships and mutual support;
- Anticipate, identify, and respond to risks and crises in collaboration with the family; and
- Encourage parents as advocates and decision-makers for themselves, their children, and their community.

While these principles can be applied to programs and organizations that offer a discrete service to families, they are often most fully exemplified in place-based settings where the family as a whole and all its needs can be addressed, either directly or through connections with other community resources. Such hubs are often referred to as family centers, family resource centers, or family support centers. In the Hartford area, these include the Brighter Futures Initiative (BFI) Family Centers and the school-based Family Resource Centers. Such hubs can serve as platforms from which to promote and model the adoption of family support practices in other settings and develop and demonstrate innovative approaches to break down barriers for family access to integrated and comprehensive services. These practices and approaches help create local systems of family support at the neighborhood or community level and can inform the development of such systems in other communities and statewide.

The Foundation is continuing to build on its long-term commitment to the BFI Family Centers, supporting collaboration among them, as well as initiating the development of a network

---

<sup>6</sup> "The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework: Branching Out and Reaching Deeper," Harper Browner, C. Washington DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy. September 2014.

among Hartford-based family support programs. Both efforts are co-designed with the participating organizations and are being linked with family support efforts across the state.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is well positioned to engage in partnership and system building in this area. The BFI Family Centers have been supported by the Hartford Foundation for approximately 20 years, since their creation grew out of neighborhood planning grants with groups of self-organized community residents. The core beliefs underlying the work of the BFI Family Centers are consistent with and reinforce family support principles, and include:

- "Power with" rather than "power over" model of working with families;
- Put families in the "driver's seat" of their own lives working in partnership with staff;
- Recognize the need for a holistic perspective;
- Build trusting relationships with families to realize deeper engagement, better results, and stronger communities;
- Value social networks of support by connecting people with each other and to community resources;
- Create supportive opportunities to build on families' strengths and capacities to nurture their children and themselves; and
- Establish families in leadership roles in designing and governing programs and services that affect them.'

Over the past several years the Foundation has provided technical assistance, coaching and consultation, and opportunities for cross-center exchange and collaboration. This support has assisted the six centers, operating under three lead agencies, to engage in "redesign" - developing a shared theory of change, identifying key practice drivers (critical characteristics of effective family support practice) and beginning development of common tools for working with families and tracking the quality and impact of the Center's operations.

As stated in the BFI Family Center Continuation Grant Application of April 27, 2015, the work with the Centers will "set the stage for ongoing planning, learning and coordination among the Family Centers and other family support entities in Hartford." The Foundation's relationships with organizations and agencies across the region have already given it the capacity to convene an informal group of family support programs, including the Family Centers, from the Hartford area. This group has been meeting to exchange information about each other's work, about opportunities and available resources, and about new developments in policy and research. Beginning in mid-2015, this informal network, with facilitation supported by the Foundation, began coalescing into a learning community, deciding together the direction it will take and the areas in which it will concentrate.

---

Adapted from a presentation by Richard Sussman to the Two-Generational Policy Work Group on October 21, 2014.

Through its connections with state agencies, particularly the Office of Early Childhood's Family Support Services Division, the Foundation is positioned to share lessons from its work in local/regional family support network building and to engage in further collaborative efforts to expand family support practice.

## **THE WORK**

In June 2013, the Foundation, with consultation from the ULCA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities, began working with the BFI Family Center lead agencies on a process that would result in the Centers operating as a unified network offering families a consistent, common set of experiences. This process was informed by an assessment conducted by the UCLA consultant earlier in 2013 that made the following observations:

- The data being collected about Center participants was not helpful in demonstrating the impact on families, informing decisions about programming and operations, or clearly communicating the family support principles guiding the Centers.
- While cross-referrals and connections with other community programs were being conducted, there was no systematic information on these relationships or their value to families either at the individual Center level or across the Centers.
- The lead agencies were willing to share information and coordinate programming, but they and the Family Center staff needed support in how to do this without overwhelming limited staff capacity and administrative operations.

One of the key recommendations from this analysis was to form a "community of practice" among the Centers to share knowledge, engage in joint problem-solving, and develop and replicate collaborative innovations. This recommendation has been implemented, with the network being facilitated by a Foundation-supported consultant who acts as "circuit rider" to support the individual centers and now the Family Center network. With guidance from the circuit rider and the UCLA consultant, the Family Center network is using or is in the process of developing data collection tools to:

- Document current connections among available services and supports across the Centers and with other community agencies (Linkages Survey);
- Identify structural and organizational culture barriers to changing practice within the Centers (Practice Change Survey);
- Measure the extent to which family support practice is being implemented by the Centers (Family Experience of Care Survey); and
- Track family conditions that affect their well-being (Family Well-Being Survey).

The goal of this "redesign" work is to ensure that families - regardless of which Family Center they engage with - experience consistent and effective positive relationships with Center staff, are connected with Center and other community programs and services that encourage and support them, and become empowered to take leadership as they nurture and guide their children's development.

In addition to developing a community of practice specifically among the BFI Family Centers, other family support programs in Hartford have been invited to regular Family Center meetings for information sharing and updates on initiatives and opportunities. Activities of this broader network have included surveys among participating organizations and program to identify areas of common practice and shared professional development on the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework.<sup>8</sup> This broader family support network, which includes the school-based Family Resource Centers and the Hartford City Department of Families, Children, Youth and Recreation, became more formally organized with an initial meeting of a steering committee convened by the circuit rider in mid-2015. While the specific objectives for this group - now named the Capitol Region Alliance for Family Support and Engagement - have yet to be set, its overall goal is to expand and strengthen practice that follows effective family support principles and builds family strengths such as those outlined in the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework, which has been adopted by the BFI Family Centers and the City of Hartford's Department of Families, Children, Youth & Recreation.

## **OBSERVATIONS FROM KEY STAKEHOLDERS ON THE PROJECT TO DATE**

Five individuals were interviewed in December 2015 to obtain external stakeholder perspectives on the project, feedback on progress to date, and reflections on the contributions of the Foundation. These individuals represent a diverse set of perspectives and include staff at two of the BFI Family Centers, a staff member at the Hartford Public Schools Welcome Center, a representative from the state Office of Early Childhood's Family Support Services division, and the UCLA consultant who has been working with the Family Center network. In addition to evidence related to partnership and system development outcomes, these stakeholders were asked to describe what they saw as the goals and outcomes of the pilot and potential or actual areas of opposition or challenges to achieving those goals. These observations are summarized here, noting areas of consensus as well as areas where a range of perspectives were given.

### **Stakeholder Perspectives on Goals and Expected Outcomes of Network Building**

There was broad understanding among the interviewed stakeholders about the goals of network building among the BFI family centers and its potential for building a local system of family support. As one stakeholder described it, "when we can maximize the network of [family service] providers in Hartford, it is a win-win for families as well as the providers."

Several stakeholders elaborated on the benefits of network building for family support providers. According to one of the BFI Family Center staff, the network building process has "allowed us to scaffold our approach to match our ideals and investments while not forgetting the agency's strategic plan - we engaged in critical thinking that allowed us to align our mission and strategic plan with the Family Center." Another pointed out the value of a collective voice, "[the network] is a way we can get our voices heard - we can make more noise in the

---

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies>. The five protective factors are parental resilience, social connections, concrete support when needed, knowledge of child development and effective parenting practices, and support for children's social and emotional competence.

community, develop stronger partnerships, and create a larger impact." A participant in the broader family support network building effort noted, "There is tremendous value in bringing together family support programs — it has made us rethink where we are spending our efforts, refocusing on things that actually work."

The stakeholders also articulated goals of family support network building as they benefit families and children as well. These benefits include families having better access to community resources and being able to expect and experience positive, consistent support at the Centers. A stakeholder associated with one of the **BFI** Family Centers reported that "by having a more structured system of care, we are viewed as one — even though we have little differences [across the Centers], the community knows that any family will get the same experience, which gives a sense of security for families."

### **Stakeholder Perspectives on Concerns and Challenges**

Several of the interviewed stakeholders saw challenges in the network building work, both among the BFI Family Centers and more broadly. One challenge recognized by **BFI** Family Center interviewees was the difficulty in balancing pursuit of collective goals and implementation of common policies and practices with consideration of the different capacities within each center or program and the diverse cultures and missions of the lead agencies. Achieving and maintaining a feasible balance was recognized as being difficult in and of itself, but likely to face additional challenges during inevitable transitions in agency or center leadership. As one stakeholder noted, "The risk-reward balance is starting to make people anxious — taking on collective work will mean giving up some other activities without a guarantee of success." In addition, facing a new city administration in Hartford was also described as a factor leading to agencies engaging in competitive positioning.

Related challenges were raised by the interviewed stakeholders with regard to the broader family support network building. Until recently, the work with family support programs beyond the BFI Centers has been primarily for information sharing, so moving to work on system development on a community level was described as requiring "change in the culture of the group to really have meaningful engagement and meaningful change." Further, there is the possibility that engagement of City programs currently in the network may not be in line with the new administration's policy agenda.

### **PROGRESS ON PARTNERSHIP AND SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES**

The Foundation is making strategic investments to develop a Hartford-based family support network that can strengthen systems of support for the families of young children locally and provide a model for similar networks statewide. This broad network includes both the BFI Family Centers and the newly formalized Capitol Region Alliance for Family Support and Engagement. As noted above, the six Family Centers operated by three community agencies have been supported by the Foundation for two decades with concentrated support for greater collaboration and alignment over the past two years, while the Alliance is just emerging as a more organized learning community after operating as an informal group for about the same

period. Taking this into account, this section summarizes progress toward the partnership and system development outcomes, which are shown in the accompanying appendix.

### **Progress on Partnership Outcomes since 2013**

In 2013, when the Foundation formally adopted the education strategy focused building partnerships to support systemic change, the recommendations to develop a "community of practice" among the BFI Family Centers were just being implemented. Since that time, as described earlier, the BFI Center network has developed a shared understanding of outcome goals for families and identified priority practices to guide their work together. Based on this common framework, the Centers as a network undertook the collection and sharing of data on their connections with each other and other community agencies and on organizational barriers to changing practice and to working more collaboratively. The network has developed and piloted tools to collect and assess data on how families describe their experiences at the Centers and to begin to track family well-being.

This work together has been helped individual Centers to align their operations with shared goals and practice standards, strengthening their contribution to the network. As described by one Family Center stakeholder, "By becoming more transparent about Family Center goals, I was able to hire a team that share the vision and see this vision in their personal goals." Beyond individual Center capacity development, the shared process has resulted in a Memorandum of Understanding among all the centers and their respective lead agencies with key provisions for information and resource sharing, shared professional development, and commitment to developing joint projects to enhance family access to specific services and programs.

The broader family support network building work has just recently reached a key milestone with the establishment of a steering committee and adoption of a formal name - the Capitol Alliance for Family Support and Engagement. As noted earlier, moving the focus of this group from information sharing to system building is just beginning, with a foundation laid in shared acceptance of a common set of principles in the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework and commitment to work together to establish a collective agenda.

Another partnership development - facilitated by the Foundation's close partnership with the state Office of Early Childhood - involves the Help Me Grow regionally-based network. The Help Me Grow program, which organizes developmental screening for young children across the state and provides training on child development and screening to family support home visitors, is represented on the steering committee. Conversations have been underway to combine the Capitol Alliance network with the Help Me Grow network, both of which support relationship building and knowledge sharing among staff working closely with families of young children, with the hope to launch the new combined network early in 2016.

## **Foundation Contributions to Partnership Outcomes, 2013 through 2015**

The stakeholders interviewed described the Foundation's contributions to the development of partnership capacities and actions at two levels - one in terms of the technical assistance provided to the Centers and the family support network and the other in terms of the overall approach and culture of the Foundation.

The technical assistance provided by the "circuit rider" and by lead Foundation Early Childhood Initiative staff was cited by stakeholders from all levels - staff at BFI Family Centers, members of the Hartford family support network, and state agency representatives. These individuals were described as "knowing the needs of families and the Centers," being "very visible and easily accessible to us," "constantly looking to bring in national trainers on best practices and evidence-based models," and "asking questions - how else can you support families? what else do you need? - and communicating the willingness of the Foundation to listen and support Family Centers to address family needs as a whole." In addition, as described above, work with the UCLA consultant has supported concrete steps to develop the network and give it a framework and tools to describe and measure its shared practices and outcomes.

Beyond these specific contributions, stakeholders across all levels described the Foundation's approach and culture as being critical in "creating the movement needed to support families as a whole." Other descriptions of the Foundation expand on this overall assessment:

- "The Foundation has evolved to recognize that the needs of families and adults are critical to supporting children's development and learning."
- "The Foundation makes investments of both financial and human resources -they assess needs and build capacity so that there can be continuity even if individuals leave."
- "The Foundation comes in with an asset-based approach, not with a prescribed idea."
- "They are very careful to include self-correction and self-evaluation as they do the work - have made changes frequently based on what they learn."

These characteristics were cited as important in both sustaining attention to young children and their families and supporting strategies that emerge from community processes and address community needs. The Foundation's commitment to partnership through network building was seen as a natural extension of this approach.

## **Progress on System Development Outcomes since 2013**

In addition to the stakeholder interviews, the continuation grant applications submitted by the BFI Family Centers in the spring of 2015 offered evidence of two types of system development outcomes emerging from the network building work so far. These included changes in policies and practices within the lead agencies that operate the Family Centers and cross-center sharing of resources and programming. Examples of the former described in the applications include:

- Co-location of agency programs within the Family Center was described as encouraging integration and availability of more comprehensive services for families.
- Relocation of a Center prompted the development of additional services.
- The agency established a new unit for family and youth development that incorporates the Family Center.

Examples of cross-center sharing include:

- Sharing of a staff member focused on fatherhood programming.
- Making a food pantry accessible for families from other Centers.
- Communicating information on open slots in a child development program.

In their grant applications, several Family Centers mentioned the regular convening of the broader family support network as providing opportunities to initiate partnerships for shared programming or other collaboration. This was particularly the case for relationships with the school-based family resource centers, which were described in four applications. Other examples of system development between the Family Centers and other community programs included:

- Relationships with organizations such as the Public Library, the Boys & Girls Club, Girl Scouts, and others to expand programming.
- Collaboration to bring legal resources to families.
- Partnerships with the Institute for the Hispanic Family for family access to clinical treatment programs.
- An MOU with Literacy Volunteers for shared programming.

In addition, the Family Center applications noted ways in which partnerships they formed with other community programs had resulted in changes in their capacity or operations. In one case co-location with a City-operated recreation center was reported to have increased the recreation center's staff skills in family engagement. The staff were trained in supporting the parent/resident community café forums on the Early Development Inventory (EDI) data and, following the adoption of the Strengthening Families protective factors framework, have been trained on providing strength-based family support. In another instance, the relocation of the Family Center to a larger facility has led to partnerships with neighborhood organizations and initial discussions about the formation of a neighborhood collaborative.

Described earlier, the broader family support network convened by the Foundation through the family support circuit rider has evolved from an informal opportunity for information exchange into the Capitol Alliance for Family Support and Engagement. This more formalized body's commitment to develop a shared agenda represents an initial step toward a stable infrastructure for strengthening and expanding effective family support practice in Hartford and a potential model for the region and the state.

## **Foundation Contributions to System Development Outcomes, 2013 through 2015**

As described earlier, the facilitation and technical assistance provided with Foundation support by the circuit rider and UCLA consultants have been critical in assisting the BFI Family Centers to work collaboratively. With their guidance and expertise the Family Center network has developed a shared framework for operating as a micro-system with common data collection tools to monitor their practices and develop and deliver integrated services and join projects.

The existing informal connections among the broader set of family support centers and programs in the Hartford area, initiated by the Foundation, are becoming more formalized. As this broader network matures, the expectation is that it will begin to develop shared practices and inter-organizational connections that further expand the access of families to community resources and help them promote their children's health, development, and learning.

### **STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON NEXT STEPS AND BENCHMARKS FOR**

#### **PROGRESS Stakeholder Suggestions for Next Steps**

Several stakeholders made specific suggestions for next steps in family support network development. Some of these related to the BFI Family Centers in particular, including completing the design team work and assessing results from data collection with families as well as developing a collective project through a unified advisory board that can "shine a spotlight on what we do as Family Centers," with one possibility being to set a target for increasing the percent of children who are registered for school on-time. Other suggestions had to do with working with the family support network's steering committee to set up a schedule of meetings with agendas that cover topics and actions relevant across the entire network.

#### **Stakeholder Suggestions for Benchmarks**

Stakeholder suggestions for measuring progress varied based on their relationships to the family support work. Representatives of the BFI Family Centers anticipate using the Experience of Care and Family Well-Being survey results to help them understand the needs and interests of families from diverse backgrounds and to track how well they are able to engage and serve them. The stakeholder representing the state perspective suggested two types of measures of progress: one regarding the family support network itself - participation, linkages, and referrals within the network, and the other regarding the benefits of a more robust network for families, specifically having streamlined access to services. The external consultant to the BFI Family Center network recommended both tracking improvements in protective factors among families and the network as a platform for service integration and engagement of isolated families.

## **SUMMARY AND ASSESSMENT**

In sum, partnership capacity and collaborative action has substantially increased between 2013 and 2015, particularly among the BFI Family Centers and their lead agencies, building on more than 20 years of Foundation investment and staff involvement. The development of the Family Center network's overall vision, framework, and action plans was encouraged, facilitated, and supported by the Foundation and its consultants and their contribution was acknowledged as critical.

During the same two-year period, the broader family support field in the Hartford area, initially convened by the Foundation's consultant, moved from an informal forum for peer exchange and knowledge building to a more formally organized network. Even before this, the connections formed with peers had already resulted in partnerships between individual Family Centers and community agencies and programs and adoption of the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework by City family support programs.

Development of infrastructure and policies for the BFI Family Center network has been substantial during the same period, as evidenced by the use of common data collection tools, information sharing agreements, and a memorandum of understanding (MOU) committing members of the network to continued collaboration and joint action. The broader family support network has adopted a formal name - the Capitol Region Alliance for Family Support and Engagement - and has identified a steering committee structure as first steps in building the infrastructure for expanding effective family support practices city-wide. Again, while some steps were taken independently of the Foundation - for example, the Family Center MOU was developed by the Centers and lead agencies on their own - the relationship building, facilitation, and guidance from the Foundation's consultant circuit rider and Early Childhood Initiative staff were given credit for catalyzing and supporting these developments, without prescribing or forcing them.

The continued development of the BFI Family Center network is nearly certain, given the momentum established to date, the lead agencies' formalized commitment to collaboration, and the expectation of continued support from the Foundation's consultants. The trajectory for the Capitol Alliance for Family Support and Engagement is less certain, given the change in City administrations, and, based on the experience with the BFI Centers, likely to be long-term, but a strong foundation has been laid. The Foundation's convening and facilitation support has been and will undoubtedly continue to be critical, providing the time and space for relationships to develop and sharing new ideas and knowledge without being prescriptive about either a timeline or agenda. The near-term likelihood of statewide replication of locally-or regionally-based family support networks is strengthened by two factors - existence of state-funded, school-based family resource centers in communities across the state and plans to merge the regionally-based Help Me Grow network with the Hartford area family support network and hopes to expand these partnerships in other communities. The Foundation's connections with the state Office of Early Childhood have opened up this opportunity, although it too is likely to take time to move from a small-scale local effort to a state-wide initiative.

**HIGH QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES FOR ALL CHILDREN  
THROUGH HOME-BASED CHILD CARE QUALITY IMPROVEMENT**

**INTRODUCTION**

This Early Childhood Investment strategy seeks to increase the capacity of home-based child care providers in the region to provide high-quality of early care and education experiences for young children. Its focus is on a sector within the early care and education field that is often overlooked in quality improvement initiatives—settings in which children are cared for by individuals in their own homes or in home-like settings. These settings provide a substantial portion of subsidized child care for infants and toddlers and are often used by families who need affordable care during non-traditional hours or on a flexible schedule as well as those who desire care by someone who shares their language or cultural background.

Recent data from the child care subsidy system in Connecticut, shown in the table below, illustrate the same patterns. For Connecticut as a whole, among infants and toddlers receiving subsidized care, 23 percent have part of their regular arrangement in regulated family care while 25 percent are in an unregulated home-based setting (either their own home or a relative's home), while among preschool age children, the comparable figures are 12 percent and 21 percent. In the towns in the Foundation's region of interest, use of regulated family child care is very similar to that for the state as whole. However, it appears that young children in the region - both infants and toddlers and children of preschool age - are more likely than children across the state to have some of their subsidized care arrangements in unregulated home-base settings - 33 percent among infants and toddlers and 29 percent among preschoolers.

<b>Region/ Age Group</b>	<b>Center</b>	<b>Regulated Home</b>	<b>Exempt Program</b>	<b>Relative Care &amp; Care in Child's Home</b>	<b>Total (Distinct Count, Not Sum of Columns)</b>
<b>CONNECTICUT</b>					
Infants & Toddlers	3791 (53%)	1597 (23%)	27 (<1%)	1759 (25%)	7084
Preschool Age Children	3931 (62%)	786 (12%)	387 (6%)	1319 (21%)	6295
<b>HARTFORD REGION</b>					
Infants & Toddlers	675 (44%)	367 (24%)	4 (<1%)	519 (33%)	1545
Preschool Age Children	809 (58%)	143 (10%)	69 (5%)	395 (29%)	1385

Source: Care 4 Kids report: Number of Children Paid by Age Category and Service Setting, October 2015.

Given the critical importance of the earliest years of life for long-term learning and the impact that parental stress, including stress related to concerns regarding child care arrangements, can have on children's development, strengthening this sector within the early care and education field has the potential to substantially improve school readiness outcomes overall while reducing disparities associated with race, language, culture, and income. Home-based child care settings that receive support for ensuring healthy and safe care space, attaining and maintaining a high quality learning environment, and sustaining a viable business model that provides sufficient reimbursement for caregiver time and expenses can provide children with continuity in their relationship with a nurturing caregiver and appropriate opportunities to promote their language, cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development. Their parents can be assured of their children's safety in a developmentally rich setting, one with stability they can count on.

However, home-based child care providers have generally not had access to public resources supporting quality; the majority of policy attention and funding has been focused on center- or school-based settings, particularly for 3- and 4-year olds. That situation is particularly true for resources that can be used to improve the physical environment in home-based child care settings. This priority ECI strategy is intended to build systems of support for home-based child care providers, including linking these providers with professional development, tools and resources for enhancing their learning environments, and opportunities for exchange of information on best practices.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is well positioned to engage in partnership and system building in this area. In particular, the Foundation's long-term grantee and partner, the Hartford Area Child Care Collaborative (the Collaborative), has for many years worked with providers in the region on quality improvement initiatives. Begun in 1987, the Collaborative began working on access to child care, but soon began to expand its focus to include quality improvement efforts. In the early 2000's, with funding from the Foundation's Brighter Futures Initiative, both community-based and city-administered child care programs benefitted from multi-year grants coupled with technical assistance from the Collaborative. Evaluation of these efforts demonstrated improvements in all areas of development among children in participating centers.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to its work supporting quality improvement through professional development and technical assistance to providers, the Collaborative has built a broad-based network of regional and state groups and individuals committed to quality early care and education and the Collaborative staff have worked on initiatives and policy efforts at the state-level. For example, the Connecticut Accreditation Facilitation Project model was developed by the Collaborative

---

<sup>9</sup> "Hartford Children are Learning by Leaps and Bounds: Achievements of Children Involved in Brighter Futures Child Care Enhancement Project," October 2004.

and its partners and is now authorized in legislation and supported by the state budget. the Collaborative lead staff continues as an active member of the Early Childhood Alliance, a statewide coalition of communities, advocates, state agency representatives, and service provider organizations organized to advocate for policies to improve outcomes for young children. She also served on the Quality Rating and Improvement Committee for the Connecticut Early Childhood Cabinet, which developed standards and indicators of quality for center-, home-, and school-based early care and education programs. This extensive prior work equips the Foundation with the experience, knowledge, and relationships to engage a broad group of stakeholders, design and implement effective models, and encourage development of policies and infrastructure that can eventually address the needs of the home-based child care sector state-wide.

Several key events and actions in recent years opened opportunities for advocacy and planning in this area. The unionization of family child care providers in 2011 resulted in a contract executed in 2013 with the State that contained provisions for supporting quality, including facility improvement. In 2013 the State allocated school facility improvement bond funds for projects in child care centers. These laid the groundwork for focusing on access by home-based child care providers to public funding for facility improvement as a priority early childhood partnership and system development strategy.

## **THE WORK**

This area of early childhood work within the Foundation's education strategy is intended "to develop a tiered level of support for the Hartford region's home-based providers that is based on valid and reliable data, research, and best practice at the local, regional, and statewide levels. This process will allow the Hartford region to collect data, build infrastructure, form new partnerships and connections, and build the capacity in the region as the leader for home-based care." As expressed by a key state-level member of the home-based child care pilot project's steering committee, the long-term goal is to "bolster and legitimize home-based child care as a valuable part of the early care and education system in Connecticut, which will formalize the relationship between the State and these child care providers and increase accountability."

There are two strands currently underway in this area. One is the project linking home-based child care providers with public funding and training and technical assistance for improving overall quality, using the process of applying for and using facility improvement grants as a means of engaging and supporting these providers more broadly. The other is to continue to build networks among home-based child care providers in the region to provide opportunities for building their knowledge and skills through professional development, access to tools and best practices, and exchange of information. The first strand is in the early stages of implementation, following an extensive planning period that involved establishing a broad-based steering committee with partners in the region and state. The second strand, while

---

From a Foundation document titled "Home Based Child Care Grant to Create a Tiered Support System," no date.

building on the long-standing work of the Collaborative, will approach the work in a new way as the Collaborative's staff moves into the Foundation. The focus of the current summary is on the first strand of work.

## **PILOT PROJECT - RENOVATE TO EDUCATE**

The Foundation is making strategic investments to develop a model for supporting quality improvement in this sector that has the potential for state-wide implementation and is engaging partners in using this opportunity to change policies and develop infrastructure to support this long-term objective. The specific goal of this project is to demonstrate the feasibility and benefits of using public funds to improve home-based child care environments through facility improvements and technical assistance and coaching.

To initiate the project, the Foundation began discussions with the state Office of Early Childhood about funding and offered to commit private funds for coaching, technical assistance, and evaluation to supplement the state allocation for facility improvement. A steering committee was assembled that included key stakeholders, including representatives from:

- The Office of Early Childhood's child care resource and referral program for parents and providers (2-1-1 Infoline) and its professional development and accreditation program (Charts-a-Course);
- SEIU Local 2001, which negotiated the contract with the State on behalf of unionized child care providers;
- All Our Kin, a New Haven-based organization that provides support for family child care providers in pursuing licensing, establishing sound business practices, and offering a high quality learning environment;
- Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), a national organization with a Connecticut office that provides technical assistance and training to communities seeking to improve local conditions, including the availability of high quality child care;
- The Connecticut Health and Educational Facilities Authority (CHEFA), a quasi-governmental agency that manages the Child Care Loan Fund, which provides financing for the construction and renovation of child care centers;
- The Hartford Department of Family, Children, Youth, and Recreation's Division of Young Children;
- The BFI Family Centers and regional school-based Family Resource Centers;
- The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving; and
- Cross Sector Consulting, the evaluation organization chosen for the project.

The steering committee then engaged in a planning period during which the needs of home-based child care providers in the region were identified and key elements of the strategy developed, based on data shared by the partners. The planning period was critical in preparing for the implementation of a pilot project. During this period the committee designed procedures for distributing the funds to providers for facility improvements, including creation of eligibility guidelines, intake and application forms, and contractor forms, and selection of a

tool to identify priority areas for improvement in the care environment. A school-based family resource center in the region was recruited to assist in provider recruitment and support because of its strong relationships in its community. An experienced early care and education consultant was hired to help recruit providers and coach successful applicants in developing a plan for using grant funds to address priority needs as well as support them in the licensing process. In December 2015 an initial meeting was held with interested home-based providers who could then initiate the application process. Eight providers will be selected for the pilot project. State funds are being administered through CHEFA as the intermediary, an agreement reached to meet state contracting requirements and to build on that organization's expertise in bond funding and working with building contractors.

Overlapping with the development of the pilot project, the Foundation provided funding to a Connecticut policy analysis and advocacy organization to compile and analyze data on home-based child care providers in the region participating in the child care subsidy system. A report summarizing these data and suggesting next steps for supporting these providers was completed in early 2016 and included recommendations for creating regionally-based hubs for professional development and technical support and linking home-based providers and the families they serve with other early childhood programs and services.

#### **OBSERVATIONS FROM KEY STAKEHOLDERS ON THE PROJECT TO DATE**

Six individuals were interviewed in December 2015 to obtain external stakeholder perspectives on the project, feedback on progress to date, and reflections on the contributions of the Foundation. These individuals represent a diverse set of perspectives and included representatives from the statewide union representing home-based child care providers receiving payment through the state child care subsidy system, a state-level policy research and advocacy organization, the public-private education facility financing agency, the family resource center in the community outside of Hartford where the project is being piloted, a consultant to the project, and two representatives of the state Office of Early Childhood. In addition to evidence related to partnership and system development outcomes, these stakeholders were asked to describe what they saw as the goals and outcomes of the pilot and potential or actual areas of opposition or challenges to achieving those goals. These observations are summarized here, noting areas of consensus as well as areas where a range of perspectives were given.

#### **Stakeholder Perspectives on Goals and Expected Outcomes of the Pilot Project**

There was broad understanding among the interviewed stakeholders about both the short-term goals of the pilot and its potential for building a system of support for home-based child care providers. The immediate focus was on successfully completing the pilot project, evaluating its impact on quality, and using the experience to make adjustments in procedures. The expectation is that, if successful, the pilot experience can be used to engage the legislature in understanding the need for supporting home-based child care providers in quality improvement, recognizing this sector's interest and commitment to providing quality care that promotes children's school readiness, and making state investment in a proven approach.

Immediate outcomes for participating home-based providers were also described in consistent ways - care that would provide young children high quality learning experiences in a safe environment. Participating providers were expected to see themselves as members of the early care and education system, pursuing continued training and at least some pursuing becoming licensed if they were not already. In addition, stakeholders expected that participating providers would gain a better understanding of how to support children's development and learning and have greater confidence in themselves as professionals able to communicate with families about what quality means and how important it is for parents to recognize and choose quality care. Finally, of course, children in settings where the overall learning environment had improved would benefit in their enhanced developmental outcomes.

### **Stakeholder Perspectives on Concerns and Challenges**

While the stakeholders interviewed all believed that the approach has high likelihood of success in the pilot phase and potential to become a state-wide effort, they also recognized that there were concerns and challenges that needed to be addressed.

One major area of concern had to do with the intertwining of home and business within home-based child care settings - how can the funds be focused on just improvements that benefit the children in care when the provider's family shares the space? This issue was expected to be particularly important for legislators, who would be asked to commit public funds on a larger scale if the program were to be replicated state-wide. The steering committee devoted considerable attention to these issues and developed guidelines for eligible and non-eligible improvements and a detailed application that asks the provider to describe the relationship between the improvement being proposed and the quality of the children's learning environment.

The possibility of giving grants to providers who are renting also raised concerns, including whether the landlord would agree to the proposed repairs or renovations and whether the landlord would raise the rent or evict the current tenants once the improvements were made. Again, the steering committee addressed this issue by requiring documentation similar as that required for facility improvement grants to centers leasing space - written approval of the proposed improvements from the landlord and a lease committing the landlord to a specific term of tenancy and rent for the provider.

Stakeholders also believed that attitudes about home-based child care - that it is "just babysitting" - are held by many working in center-based settings as well as by many in the general public. Some in the field may believe that home-based providers are not "true" professionals and that the funds could be put to better use by offering additional scholarship assistance and professional development opportunities for teachers in child care centers. Similarly, members of the public are likely to be reluctant to have their tax dollars pay for improvements to the homes of what they see as "babysitters." These concerns were also expressed at the policy advocacy level - how much will such quality improvement efforts, particularly those associated with moving home-based providers toward licensing - affect the ability of families, particularly low-income families and families of color, to choose care

arrangements that meet their needs and preferences? This might exacerbate the impact of the new requirements for background checks called for in the Child Care Development Block Grant Reauthorization of 2014 and may put pressure on legally exempt providers to leave the subsidy system. This would have negative effects on caregiver financial well-being as well as on consistency and reliability of care arrangements for children and families.

In addition to these areas of concern raised by the interviewed stakeholders, they also pointed to major challenges in moving from a pilot project to a state-wide program. Major among these was the state budget deficit with its obvious implications for funding new programs. Another is the lack of a strong widespread community or regional infrastructure across the state for connecting with and supporting home-based child care providers, particularly unregulated providers. Also, within state government, there appears to be no institutionalized approach for structuring partnerships such as undergird the pilot project, in which state funds are combined with private resources, administered through community-based intermediaries, and allocated to contractors and vendors. This situation led to delays in beginning the pilot project and may stymie a state-wide effort.

## **PROGRESS ON PARTNERSHIP AND SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES**

The Foundation is making strategic investments to develop a model for supporting quality improvement in home-based child care that has the potential for state-wide implementation and is engaging partners in using this opportunity to change policies and develop infrastructure to support this long-term objective. This section summarizes progress toward the partnership and system development outcomes intended by this effort, which are shown in the attached accompanying appendix.

### **Progress on Partnership Outcomes since 2013**

In 2013, when the Foundation formally adopted the education strategy focused on building partnerships to support systemic change, home-based child care received little sustained state-wide attention. At that time there was no regional or state coordinating entity specifically addressing home-based care issues, there were only scattered locally or regionally based quality improvement projects incorporating or targeting home-based child care providers, and the attention of state-wide early childhood advocacy was focused on creating a state Office of Early Childhood.

As of the end of 2015, partnership capacity to focus on improving the quality of care in home-based settings in the region has been developed. A regional steering committee for the home-based child care facility improvement project, which includes representatives from the State Office of Early Childhood and the union representing family child care providers serving families receiving child care subsidy as well as other key state and regional stakeholders, meets regularly. As noted by one state-level stakeholder, "The range of individuals that have been brought to the table to work on this project is really remarkable - with a range of talents and a high level of commitment. They can take a lot of credit for the success of the work."

Members of this partnership shared data and, with Foundation support, compiled and assessed data on provider characteristics and needs and on available supports. Based on this information, a collaborative pilot project - Renovate to Educate - was designed and initial steps toward implementation undertaken, including development of policies and procedures and execution of contracts with consultants and contractors for key components of the project. Arrangements with the Office of Early Childhood for the flow of funds through an intermediary were finalized and recruitment of providers begun.

On the state level, the state's early childhood advocacy coalition, on which Foundation staff serve in leadership roles, now highlights infant and toddler care, which is often provided in home-based settings, in its policy agenda.

### **Foundation Contributions to Partnership Outcomes, 2013 through 2015**

As noted earlier, building on its experience and relationships through the Hartford Area Child Care Collaborative, the Foundation convened the steering committee in 2014, with strong participation by OEC and the union representing home-based providers receiving Care 4 Kids subsidy payments. In that year the Foundation provided funds to support analysis of regional data on home-based providers and the children and families they serve and collection of data on regional organizations and networks supporting these providers. The Foundation put funds on the table to encourage state investment of facility improvement funds in a pilot project with home-based child care settings. Through its participation on the statewide advocacy coalition, the Foundation continued to raise issues affecting providers, families, and children in these settings.

The value and critical role of these actions by the Foundation to building partnership capacity to focus on this important sector of the early care and education system were acknowledged by the interviewed stakeholders. Examples of how stakeholders described the Foundation's contribution include:

- "I really respect that they have been critical in supporting the holistic development of young children through home-based child care providers, bringing out that these providers are a critical part of the early childhood continuum."
- "Certainly the Foundation has the power of convening - they assembled a good group that have all contributed expertise and passion to the work."
- "With the Foundation being the one coordinating [the project] it doesn't feel top down from OEC or CHEFA. It feels like a working group with state agencies there but with everyone having a more equal footing - it makes me feel like an equal partner."
- "Having the staff who always make themselves available to meet the needs of the group - they are very dedicated."
- "Really [the Foundation] has been the driver of the whole project - from Foundation leadership to staff, bringing funding, expertise, and connections."

- "The Foundation has a reputation for being able to create change and state agencies have a certain amount of trust with the Foundation; because of its consistent commitment to children's issues, people are willing to listen to the Foundation."

### **Progress on System Development Outcomes since 2013**

While the contract with the home-based provider union signed in 2013 included support for facility improvement, no specific funding was allocated for that provision and there were no mechanisms in place for distributing state funds for this purpose. On the other hand, contract provisions for other aspects of professional development and support for quality began to be implemented, as specified in the contract, building on existing infrastructure such as 2-1-1 Infoline. Home-based providers who serve children receiving subsidy are now required to take part in a one-session training/orientation offered by 2-1-1 Infoline — a first step in a statewide system of training and support for this sector.

The needs assessment undertaken by the steering committee with Foundation support underscored the scarcity of, not only funds for facility improvements, but also tools and technical assistance to assist home-based child care providers to create learning environments consistent with best practices in the field. The pilot project is designed to develop a prototype of the necessary infrastructure and policies to allow public funds to be used for this purpose and to support home-based providers in making measurable improvements in the quality of care they offer.

As of the end of 2015, funding was in place, albeit at a lower level than originally anticipated, both from the state and from the Foundation and agreement reached on the intermediary for the flow of these funds (the Connecticut Higher Education Facility Authority - CHEFA). As described earlier, the steering committee was aware of and responded to concerns and questions regarding accountability by developing policies and procedures that clearly specified eligible improvements, obtained commitment from the recipients for their participation in quality improvement training and technical assistance activities, and contracted with an evaluator to assess implementation and measure changes in quality indicators in the participating home-based settings. As one member of the steering committee noted, "We spent a lot of time developing the paperwork and procedures, with a lot of tweaking of paperwork to reduce burden" and a state-level stakeholder acknowledged the care in balancing the need for accountability with the desire to make the effort of complying with paperwork and procedures worthwhile for providers. Members of the steering committee anticipate that revisions and additions may be needed to these policies and procedures, based on the experience of the pilot project, but expect that, when refined, they will provide the foundation for replication on a broader scale. One possible vehicle for replication may be regional technical assistance hubs, an idea being considered by the OEC, although current budget issues may decrease the likelihood that they can be established in the immediate future.

## **Foundation Contributions to System Development Outcomes, 2013 through 2015**

The contributions of the Foundation toward building a system of support for quality improvement in home-based child care settings go beyond assembling a strong steering committee, supporting data collection and analysis, and leveraging state investment with its own funds. As noted by the interviewed stakeholders, engaging in the development of a model ready for testing was critical. One state-level steering committee member noted that, since only a few states have attempted a project like this, it was valuable to start with a pilot, but one that was based on research and best practice and that had detailed requirements and procedures to try and evaluate. This individual concluded by stating that "without the Foundation, we wouldn't have been able to have the pilot; if we are successful in getting longterm funding, it will be because of this initial effort." Another pointed to the unique capacity of the Foundation to support the development and testing of this model, noting that "the Foundation is well suited to begin this work - they have a lot of experience doing pilots in other areas."

In addition to supporting the detailed work needed to design and implement a collaborative pilot project, the Foundation has contributed to the long-term goal of system development by its consistent vision. As one stakeholder described it, "One of the things that the Foundation has done very well is make abundantly clear about the long-term goal of system building, without getting mired in the minutia." This individual noted that, consistent with the Foundation's values and culture, staff supporting the project appear to have been given "the latitude to be flexible and creative" and use their talents and relationships to build a strong team with the expertise and capacities needed.

## **STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON NEXT STEPS AND BENCHMARKS FOR**

### **PROGRESS Stakeholder Suggestions for Next Steps**

Continued work in 2016 is expected to focus on completing implementation and evaluation of the pilot and presentation of results to state-level policymakers in the administration and the legislature. In addition, the steering committee is expected to continue work on plans for developing quality improvement infrastructure and resources for home-based providers both regionally and statewide, based on the experience of the pilot project.

Beyond these broad goals, the interviewed stakeholders had a number of specific suggestions for possible next steps, some of which the Foundation might undertake as well as some aimed at other entities engaged in the work. These included:

- Coordinating marketing of training opportunities region-wide;
- Expanding to additional communities to build the evidence base and support;
- Strengthening regional supports for home-based providers, possibly using a hub or circuit rider approach;

- Developing resources specifically for home-based providers within the OEC, such as a resource person to reach out to home-based providers and a website with resources specifically tailored to their interests and needs;
- Continuing advocacy for state funding for home-based child care; and
- Establishing a liaison in the Governor's Office to negotiate collaborative projects between state agencies and foundations and other non-profit organizations.

These stakeholders also described how they hoped the Foundation would continue to contribute to progress beyond the pilot project. Several specifically mentioned the reputation and relationships that the Foundation has statewide as a powerful asset. One state-level stakeholder stated: "Personally I am planning to use the Foundation's goodwill regionally and statewide to give more credibility to the effort and also the influence of the Foundation with the state legislature and business sector so we can enlist their support." Others encouraged the Foundation to exercise its new ability to conduct advocacy, building on their relationships with both legislators and with officials in state government. One stakeholder specifically mentioned that the Foundation's interest and investment in the home-based child care sector would be valuable in raising public and policymaker awareness of its importance to many of the state's young children and their families and generating support for state funding to ensure quality in this sector.

Since the Foundation focuses its funding primarily in the Hartford region, another stakeholder suggested working in additional communities to develop capacity to connect with and provide training and technical assistance to home-based child care providers. One suggestion was to adopt a train-the-trainer approach to increasing community-level supports. A related suggestion was for the Foundation to engage with other community or regional foundations and funders in similar replication efforts.

### **Stakeholder Suggestions for Benchmarks**

The Foundation has worked with the evaluation team to develop a set of measures for partnership and system development specifically for the work with the home-based child care sector. The interviewed stakeholders were asked to describe benchmarks they would consider evidence of progress.

One stakeholder foresaw that, by explicitly connecting home-based child care into the early care and education system, "This should result in more frequent supports being offered - such as training, capital grants, opportunities to move toward accreditation - and we might start measuring the outcomes of those programs as well - how efficiently they operate as a business and how much they see themselves as an important part of children's education."

As a whole, interviewed stakeholders focused their comments on possible specific indicators of changes in practice among home-based child care providers including:

- Improvements noted during licensing inspections.
- Decisions to become licensed or pursuit of accreditation.
- Participation in training and coaching opportunities.

- Stability of operations and continuity of care arrangements.

## **SUMMARY AND ASSESSMENT**

In sum, partnership capacity and collaborative action to focus on strategies to improve the quality of home-based child care has substantially increased between 2013 and 2015 through the work of the steering committee assembled by the Foundation. The Foundation's actions and investments made decisive contributions to progress to date in the development of partnership capacity and partner collaborative action. Specifically, the Foundation was instrumental in convening the steering committee, bringing broad range of partners to the table, and in providing funding and technical assistance for regional needs assessment and pilot project development. It negotiated with the state Office of Early Childhood to obtain state funds for the pilot, leveraging those funds with its own investment.

Initial development of infrastructure and policies has occurred during the same period in conjunction with the design and implementation of the pilot project, laying the foundation for potential state-wide replication. Again, the Foundation's contributions were critical. The Foundation staffed the steering committee's work in developing policies and procedures for the pilot and is funding the evaluation. It utilized relationships with existing organizations to recruit home-based providers and invested in strengthening local capacity for working with these providers on facility and quality improvement. Its staff have continued their leadership role in the statewide early childhood advocacy coalition and maintained ongoing relationships with key members of the state Office of Early Childhood, both of which enhance the potential for the pilot project to become a statewide program, similar to the Foundation's role in the development of Connecticut's accreditation facilitation project.

The likelihood of statewide replication in the near term is uncertain. The union contract, advocacy related to the quality of care for infants and toddlers, and the Office of Early Childhood's interest in supporting quality across all care settings present opportunities to move from a small regional pilot to scale across the state, something that the Foundation can encourage based on its relationships, reputation, and capacity. At the moment, the state budget deficit limits the possibility of new state investment and at this early stage, the pilot cannot not yet demonstrate strong positive results on which to make the case for this investment. The Foundation might use this period to continue to inform and engage key stakeholder groups, including other sectors in early care and education field and early childhood advocates, to build consensus on the role of home-based care and the value of investment in improving the quality of care in those settings.

**USING DATA ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT & LEARNING TO ENGAGE PARENTS & RESIDENTS  
IN CREATING SHARED VISION AND ACTION PLANS FOR LOCAL EARLY  
CHILDHOOD SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT**

**INTRODUCTION**

This Early Childhood Investment strategy seeks to stimulate local (town or neighborhood) early childhood system development based on parent and resident assessment of and response to critical needs among young children. The strategy provides data on patterns of strength and vulnerability in children's development and learning at the town or neighborhood level, builds parent and resident skills in leading community dialogue about the data, and supports local partnerships in crafting action plans to address identified areas of vulnerability. This strategy specifically focuses the attention of parents and residents on conditions in the neighborhoods and communities where they live that can be changed to strengthen young children's learning.

Young children grow, develop, and learn beginning in their families and then through experiences offered in their neighborhood and local community. While it is critical that there are structures, policies, and resources in place that promote positive development and learning across communities, it is how these are implemented in practice at the local level that has greatest impact. Local system development therefore is needed to ensure that families can easily access and use services, programs, and supports that meet the specific needs of their children. Providing families and residents with information on how children in their area are faring and engaging them in problem-solving around areas of vulnerability will help ensure that local supports for children's development and learning are aligned with local needs and priorities.

Connecticut collects data on young children at kindergarten entry, as mandated by the 2007 state legislature. Based on that mandate, the Connecticut State Department of Education developed an instrument to provide "a statewide snapshot of the skills and behaviors students demonstrate, based on teachers' observations, at the beginning of the kindergarten year." According to a consultant working with the Department, a new kindergarten entry assessment, currently under development, is expected to be implemented in 2017. In the meantime, various communities across the state use data from the Kindergarten Entrance Inventory and other sources in tracking children's development and learning in their own "report cards" as a tool to engage their partners and community members in planning to improve those outcomes. The work that the Foundation is supporting is intended to deepen this process by providing data that are available at the neighborhood level and supporting processes in which parents and community residents take leadership in setting priorities and developing action plans to address identified system development issues.

---

ii From "Understanding Students' Skills at Kindergarten Entry: Findings from Connecticut", a presentation by Peter Behuniak at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, April 2012, Vancouver, B.C.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is well positioned to engage in partnership and system building in this area. Its support of the Brighter Futures Initiative family centers and engagement of other family support programs within Hartford has built a network of neighborhood-based hubs for engaging families in the city. Family support practices that build on family strengths and promote parent leadership are the hallmark of "the family center way." Further, in building a broader family support network that includes school-based family resource centers, the Foundation could engage these natural venues in organizing and supporting this strategy.

The Foundation's partnerships across the region in developing and promoting key indicators of community and regional well-being in Progress Points illustrate its commitment to using data to help communities focus on developing systemic responses to tough issues, something recognized by stakeholders. The potential contribution of the Foundation's investment in the Early Development Inventory (EDI) project was noted by a Foundation staff member, who suggested that, not only might the use of the EDI influence the breadth of the new kindergarten entry assessment tool, but the overall data-driven community engagement process was an opportunity for the Foundation "to learn from and understand the process of engaging residents from diverse groups around data and problem-solving." This experience may have implications for the Foundation as it considers supporting these types of data-driven community conversations and action planning in other areas of its work.

## **THE WORK-THE EDI PROJECT**

The Early Development Instrument (EDI) was selected by the Foundation for this strategy because of its comprehensiveness and demonstrated value in stimulating community engagement in analysis, interpretation, and action planning. The EDI, completed by kindergarten teachers about the children in their classroom as a whole, addresses young children's development in five domains: social competence, emotional maturity, physical health and well-being, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge, using 3 levels of development: on track, at risk, and vulnerable. While based on information provided by school staff, the EDI data are analyzed and reported at the neighborhood level and is not published by the school system. The data are used in the Transforming Early Childhood Community Systems (TECCS) mobilization model to encourage collaboration and shared accountability within communities. The goal is to use these data to support young children's development and learning by stimulating local system-level innovations developed jointly by residents and community organizations. This model is a good fit with the Foundation's overall partnership and system development strategy and its commitment to family engagement and leadership.

To date, EDI data have been gathered, data reports published, and community café discussions held in two communities — Hartford<sup>12</sup> and West Hartford.<sup>13</sup> In conducting data analysis and mapping, the Foundation partnered with two academic centers — Trinity College's Cities, Suburbs and School Project, and the University of Connecticut's Mapping and Geographic Information Center, as well as with the Connecticut Data Collaborative, a public-private partnership that provides public access to data for planning, policy, budgeting and decision making at the state, regional and local levels.

In Hartford and West Hartford, members of the family support network — BFI Family Centers and school-based Family Resource Centers — have been closely involved in recruiting and training parent facilitators and organizing community café discussions. In both communities, these discussions have led to follow-up work with the data. In Hartford, a back-to-school picnic that provided information and backpack with supplies to over 200 families and the Foundation has held meetings with neighborhood associations and the city library as well as with the Mayor and City Council. In West Hartford the local early childhood community collaborative body, Great by 8, presented the EDI findings to the local recreation department and to the school district's kindergarten teachers.

## **OBSERVATIONS FROM KEY STAKEHOLDERS ON THE WORK TO DATE**

Six individuals were interviewed in December 2015 to obtain external stakeholder perspectives on the project, feedback on progress to date, and reflections on the contributions of the Foundation. They included organizers of the community conversations in Hartford and West Hartford, representatives from the East Hartford school district,<sup>14</sup> a consultant working with the OEC on the development of the new kindergarten entry assessment tool, a consultant with the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities, and a member of the Foundation staff involved in its broader data work. In addition to evidence related to partnership and system development outcomes, these stakeholders were asked to describe what they saw as the goals and outcomes of the pilot and potential or actual areas of opposition or challenges to achieving those goals. These observations are summarized here, noting areas of consensus as well as areas where a range of perspectives were given.

---

<sup>12</sup> In Hartford in particular, based on comments received by staff and parents participating in national forums on EDI, progress in using these data has been deeper and more developed than in most other communities in terms of community forums held and local plans developed and implemented.

<sup>3</sup> Two other communities — East Hartford and Windsor — will implement the EDI process as part of their overall family-community-school partnership work funded by the Foundation.

<sup>14</sup> In East Hartford EDI data collection is expected to take place in the 2016-17 school year across all nine elementary schools in the district. While the superintendent has a steering committee guiding that plan, as of late fall 2015, with the grant just awarded, the district had not yet begun officially inviting organizations to be part of the community engagement effort.

## Stakeholder Perspectives on Goals and Expected Outcomes of the Work

Depending on their relationship to the project and their organization position, the interviewed stakeholders described the goals and expected outcomes in a range of ways, but within two overarching themes:

- To drive local response to identified areas of children's development that were reported to be more vulnerable, and
- To catalyze broader discussion of and attention to the needs of young children in the community.

One of those directly involved in the community conversations described a short-term goal as having the neighborhood Family Center and other community agencies "be more supportive with activities and programming." In fact, some of these changes were already being implemented at the Center where staff are "trying to get parents more involved in academically-oriented activities during family events - giving parents information and skills that they can use with their children." In another community, the interviewed stakeholder noted that the EDI results have identified areas of vulnerability that had not previously been addressed by community programs - such as fine motor skills. This knowledge led to changes in activities included in the community's summer preschool program. Other organizations in this community were also using the EDI results to refocus their activities on critical areas of development. In the community where the EDI data are not yet available, the interviewed stakeholders anticipate responding to the results with changes in family-school activities, building on the success of previous family workshops. Overall, the expectation is that the local school district will "reorganize our services to link to identified needs...by knowing more than we do now, we can build a blueprint driven by data that can prioritize our resources."

Stakeholders valued the EDI data as "a tool to begin a conversation around data about the [school] readiness of children with parents, educators, community providers, and leaders." In the district using the EDI data collection and community conversation process as part of its overall family-school-community engagement plan, it was described as a way to move communication from one-way to families toward "having the voice of our community be a shaker and mover of our plan." In another community, the response was similar: "Our initial goal was to educate parents, community members, the school system, and community leaders about the needs of young children here, with the larger goal of developing a community-wide response to those needs." The importance of having locally-specific data to describe in a concrete way important skills and behaviors that prepare children to be successful in school was echoed by the consultant working on the state's new kindergarten entry assessment: "There is a general need across the state to understand what children need to be ready for school. "

## Stakeholder Perspectives on Concerns and Challenges

The interviewed stakeholders identified two major areas of concern or potential challenges in bringing this data-driven community planning process to scale regionally or statewide. One

area has to do with some limitations of the EDI instrument and the data it produces; the other relates to capacity issues.

There was some concern expressed by stakeholders that results from the EDI might be interpreted in a deficit perspective and play on preconceived notions about certain groups or areas, perhaps reinforcing low expectations for those children and families. A limitation of the data organized around neighborhoods is that in some communities neighborhood boundaries may not coincide well with school catchment areas, making it more difficult for local schools to target their efforts. Finally, the data have particular value in their concrete connection to the community's children and in its timeliness, so that the results need to be continually updated, both to engage current cohorts of families of young children and to measure change from community response. This implies the need to collect, report, and mobilize community conversations around relevant and timely data on an ongoing basis, which will require resources.

Obviously, the need for funding to support data collection, analysis, and reporting was raised by stakeholders when thinking about repetition and replication, and was mentioned as a reason to consider the EDI work supported by the Foundation as something like a "demonstration" for how similar data - such as potentially collected through the state kindergarten entry assessment - could be used. However, those interviewed also noted that data alone are not sufficient to generate community processes for change that are driven by parent- and resident-engagement. The current work was able to make use of local infrastructure, as well as relying Foundation staff support, for identifying and training parent leaders as facilitators for community cafes, recruiting and staffing these discussions, publicizing and promoting the data, and supporting follow-up actions. Some of this infrastructure resulted from other Foundation investments - for example, in neighborhood-based family centers in Hartford and in the regional family support network, as well as from long-standing relationships that the Foundation and the family centers have with local partners and in its overall support for parent engagement and leadership. In some communities local early childhood collaborative groups such as Great by 8 in West Hartford or strong neighborhood associations or community-based groups might provide that infrastructure. However, several stakeholders mentioned that this infrastructure is not present in all communities across the state and resources for implementation of the kindergarten entry assessment instrument are not likely to include funds to set up similar infrastructure where it does not now exist.

## **PROGRESS ON PARTNERSHIP AND SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES**

The Foundation is making strategic investments to develop a model for supporting local early childhood system development that is informed by data on children's development and guided by parents and residents. This model, while not necessarily using the EDI instrument but possibly other data such as from kindergarten entry assessments, has the potential for state-wide implementation. The Foundation is engaging partners in using this opportunity to change policies and develop infrastructure to support this long-term objective. This section

summarizes progress toward the partnership and system development outcomes intended by this effort, which are shown in the attached accompanying appendix.

### **Progress on Partnership Capacity and Partnership Collaborative Action since 2013**

In 2013, when the Foundation formally adopted the education strategy focused building partnerships to support systemic change, although data on young children's development and learning were collected statewide through a kindergarten entrance inventory, these data were available only at the district level. While these data have been used by some communities in developing and disseminating profiles of their young child populations, there was and continues to be no mechanism across Connecticut to hold local forums for parents and residents to discuss data on young children's outcomes and, in partnership with community organizations and agencies, develop plans for addressing areas of need.

### **Progress on Partnership Outcomes since 2013**

As of the end of 2015, through Foundation partnerships with community organizations and collaborative groups in Hartford and West Hartford, community café reflection sessions, led by trained parent facilitators, were organized and held and follow-up meetings, presentations, and immediate action steps planned and carried out. This process of holding neighborhood-level cafés "also unearthed unexpected natural partners," as it was described by Foundation staff. In Hartford, the Public Libraries and the City Department of Families, Children, Youth and Recreation volunteered to have their staff trained in supporting the community café model and in West Hartford the children's museum has reached out to the community collaborative group to strategize about how to use the EDI data to inform its programming.

### **Foundation Contributions to Partnership Outcomes, 2013 to mid-2015**

The Foundation took the lead in initiating and supporting this work, funding the EDI data collection, analysis, and report preparation; providing technical assistant consultants to help organize and manage the community café process; supporting training for parent and resident leaders and community facilitators; and subsequently offering a small grant program to support implementation of action plans that emerged from the process. In East Hartford and Windsor, Foundation staff encouraged those districts to consider use of the EDI as part of plans for their family-school-community engagement strategy, which were subsequently approved for Foundation grants.

The value and critical role of these actions by the Foundation was acknowledged by the interviewed stakeholders. Examples of how the Foundation's contribution to building partnership capacity to focus on this important sector of the early care and education system was described include:

- "A major contribution of the Foundation has been its commitment to data collection and community engagement using the data - this has been very intentional and continually reinforced by Foundation staff."
- "Their approach is very collaborative - they have been really flexible in allowing us to develop a community engagement model that works for us."
- "We have worked on our plan for over a year in close cooperation with the Foundation - the process was very valuable in clarifying our direction and what we wanted to get out of this."

### **Progress on System Development Outcomes since 2013**

As noted earlier, there are currently no sustained structures or resources to support for ongoing data-based parent/resident-driven community or neighborhood planning across the state on early childhood issues and no widely implemented processes for local groups to develop coordinated strategies to address identified needs. Implemented so far in two communities with plans for two others in the next school year, these efforts have begun to foster local parent/resident-driven capacity to assess data on children's school readiness, identify priority areas for improvement, and develop and begin to implement initial follow-up action. Local organizations have begun using data and identified priorities to make changes in the programs and activities offered to young children and their families. This development was mentioned concerning a museum in East Hartford and the public library system in Hartford. For example, an e-mail (dated January 28, 2016) from a librarian in the Hartford Public Libraries noted that the EDI data have been used in the following ways:

- To select books for neighborhood-based early literacy activities ("storywalks") based on developmental needs identified in that neighborhood - for example, in one neighborhood the selected book and activities focused on developing pro-social behaviors, an area of vulnerability based on the EDI data.
- To create activities for the Library branches' Kindergarten Awareness month that reflected the EDI results - such as encouraging fine motor skill development with activities using clay and scissors.
- To substantiate Hartford's need to develop specific school readiness skills related to communication, social competencies, and general knowledge in generating support for the Library's early literacy initiative, Leap into Learning.

The work that the Foundation has supported to collect and organize valid and reliable data on the population of young children in specific neighborhoods and communities in the region is intended to demonstrate value of this approach and to understand what it takes to carry it out successfully. At the moment, these steps toward building an infrastructure to support this work on an ongoing basis and realize improvements in practice on a broad scale are primarily supported and guided by the Foundation, but offer a model for possible statewide implementation in conjunction with the new kindergarten entry assessment.

## **Foundation Contributions to System Development Outcomes, 2013 to mid-2015**

The contribution of the Foundation went beyond providing data and resources to develop local capacity to facilitate parent leadership and resident engagement. As one stakeholder noted when asked about the Foundation's contributions to progress to date, "My first thought was funding, but it's their emphasis on community engagement and commitment to early childhood in general." Another described the power of its reputation and relationships: "The Foundation was very helpful in getting commitment from the district leadership [for the data collection]. No amount of grassroots interest would have made that happen without the Foundation's relationship building." One of East Hartford school leaders commented that the policies and infrastructure called for in the district's overall family-school-community engagement plan, including the use of EDI data and parent voice in decision-making and the establishment of an Office of Family-Community Partnership - supported by the Foundation's recent 3-year grant, "will transform both teachers and families and change our practices."

In addition to these contributions noted by interviewed stakeholders, the Foundation initiated a mini-grant program to help support the implementation of locally developed action plans. The impact of these grants will be observable in the future.

## **STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON NEXT STEPS AND FUTURE FOUNDATION CONTRIBUTIONS**

### **Stakeholder Suggestions for Next Steps**

The interviewed stakeholders had three major suggestions for next steps in this work. These were:

- Learning from what has been done so far.

"We could call the same parents back together - ask them, what worked, what should we change, what is the next step."

"Ask the partners involved in setting up and running the meetings, what went well and what didn't."

- Expanding the use of data on early childhood development and learning in community engagement.

"We need to repeat the data collection if we want to measure changes due to our work."

"Engage other communities to have a strong enough regional presence to be able to influence state policy - if we want alignment across different levels of the system, we need to have stronger data and political buy-in beyond local municipalities to the region and statewide."

- Using the process to engage residents and community organizations in addressing other issues.

"We could use the café model to be the driving force on other issues."

"Use this experience to determine how to make data useful for community engagement."

However, as one stakeholder noted, "Using data needs to be paired with resources" and the Foundation was, of course, mentioned as a source for those resources. One stakeholder in West Hartford noted that mini-grants "would be a way to continue to engage parents - we could link this to our parent leadership programs." Another suggestion was to "sponsor more trainings to touch more parents by providing training once a year to new parents or agencies that have not had the chance to participate." This stakeholder also stressed the need to support the capacity to "engage in cross-community partnerships, bringing all parties to the table. "

The Foundation might "support other parts of the process for community engagement, which would buy a lot of the potential value of continuing to fund EDI data collection" in communities in its grant making region. However, it was generally understood that the Foundation could not support either statewide or continual data collection and community engagement processes. For that reason, several stakeholders stated that the Foundation could play a valuable role if the state were to adopt a high quality data collection tool like a kindergarten entry assessment by "building awareness with state and local political leaders about the need for public investment in community and parent engagement to support student learning." At the same time, some concern was expressed that the Foundation needs to be more proactive in engaging with the Office of Early Childhood on plans for how data from the assessment could be used to support community-based parent-driven early childhood system building.

### **Stakeholder Suggestions for Benchmarks**

While not all of the interviewed stakeholders gave specific suggestions for measuring progress in this area of the Foundation's work, several described measures to track how awareness and relationships built through the engagement process could continue to influence the functioning of community systems. One stakeholder described such a measure as "using our relationship with the school system...to determine if children are being supported in literacy and numeracy skills." Another expected to have evidence that the voice of parents is used in setting policies and practices related to family-school engagement and that respect and support for parents is exemplified in daily operations of schools.

### **SUMMARY AND ASSESSMENT**

Partnership capacity to support parent/resident use of data for identifying priority actions to support young children's development and learning has increased between 2013 and 2015 in the communities where the Foundation has supported EDI data collection and family/community engagement processes. The Foundation's actions and investments made

decisive contributions to this progress through its funding of the collection, analysis, and reporting of data from a valid and reliable instrument and its support of community partners in implementing a proven model for parent/resident engagement and leadership in local early childhood system development.

The work in these communities provides a potential template for how similar data - such as those generated from statewide administration of a kindergarten entry assessment - could be used in other communities and repeated on an ongoing basis. The Foundation may wish to continue to support communities in its region of interest in replicating the EDI work to build a stronger evidence base about the value of data-based, locally-driven early childhood system planning and momentum for statewide expansion. On the other hand, development of a new kindergarten entry assessment instrument is well underway, but with the focus primarily on data collection and not what would be needed to use the data for parent engagement and community collaboration on behalf of young children. The current EDI experience highlights the level of support and community infrastructure that would be needed to create and sustain authentic parent/resident engagement. There may be options for public-private partnerships and other approaches to leveraging state investment in the annual, nearly universal collection of data on young children's school readiness to build this infrastructure in all communities across the state.

**PROMOTING EFFECTIVE FAMILY, SCHOOL, COMMUNITY COLLABORATION  
TO INCREASE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES:  
MANCHESTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**INTRODUCTION**

The K-12 Education Investment Strategy in Manchester seeks to support student learning through strong partnerships with families and with the broader community. The strategy is built on evidence and research<sup>15</sup> demonstrating that strengthening the capacity of families to effectively support their children's learning has strong positive results. However, building such family capacity requires that schools are willing and equipped to welcome parents as true partners in the education of their children, recognizing that families bring substantial assets in that role. Further, the strategy assumes that strong partnerships with organizations and agencies in the community, including municipal agencies and community service providers, can provide access to services and support and are instrumental in expanding learning opportunities and family engagement.

Many schools across the nation struggle to serve students well. This is especially true in schools that serve high proportions of students from economically disadvantaged populations, students of color, students who are non-English speakers, or are recent immigrants. Such schools are often—though not exclusively—clustered in urban school districts with diminished resources to meet the needs of children. Despite its high national ranking for strong K-12 education, Connecticut has districts in which many students are not experiencing educational success. Among these are 30 "Alliance Districts"—of which seven are in communities in the Greater Hartford Region—identified by the Connecticut Department of Education as the state's lowest performing districts with low overall academic performance and substantial achievement gaps in performance among key student groups.

The Foundation's K-12 Investment strategy seeks to help Alliance Districts in its region re-conceptualize how family and community resources are leveraged to support student learning. While parent involvement is a standard component of virtually any school's improvement plan, too often it is an after-thought without any clear meaning, it is haphazardly implemented, and it receives little, if any, financial support. Indicators of parental involvement are typically limited to attendance at 'back-to-school' nights, report card conferences, and student performances. In some instances, advisory or planning teams are mandated to have parent representation on membership lists, but attendance is often limited and sporadic, and rarely are parents found in leadership positions schools planning teams.

---

<sup>15</sup>

In particular, working with Foundation staff, the district built on the work of Karen Mapp and Paul Kuttner (see a summary of her work promoted by the U.S. Department of Education at: <http://www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partnership-frameworks.pdf>). Mapp, Karen A. and Kuttner, Paul J. (2013) *Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family—School Partnerships*. Austin, TX: SEDL.

Too few schools consistently provide guidance to families on how to support student learning other than giving general advice about providing a quiet place to do homework or assigning a summer reading list. Few schools—especially in economically distressed areas—see parents as 'assets' to their children's learning; often, instead seeing parents as impediments to be bypassed.

Similarly, while school and district alignment with community-based services—academic, enrichment, recreational, social, financial—is touted as a key ingredient in helping schools and families access high quality support for improved student learning, few schools and districts have strong strategies for engaging community providers or municipal agencies as long-term partners. Even alignment between district learning goals and those of community organizations providing out-of-school time programming is often limited as each typically operates in discrete silos of goals and activities.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is well positioned to engage in partnership and system building in the K-12 education arena. In particular, the Foundation has been a critical long-term actor and funder of Community Schools in Hartford, is one of the four partners that formed and supports the Hartford Partnership for Student Success (HPSS), and has a long-term history of supporting quality afterschool programming in the capital city.

The Foundation describes the Hartford Community School Initiative as "a holistic strategy that emphasizes increasing family, school and community partnerships that can support student success." Seven participating public schools are partnered with four different nonprofit organizations identified as "lead agencies" responsible for assessing student needs and coordinating the development and delivery of student and family services. Community Schools remain open well beyond the hours of a regular school day - before and after school, into the evening, even weekends, and throughout the summer. Student learning time is extended by 3540 percent, and families are offered an array of educational, enrichment, health and social services." In supporting these efforts, the Foundation notes that "Community schools across the country have seen gains in school culture and climate, student attendance, academic achievement, parent involvement, safety, and improved student-teacher relationships."

One of the hallmarks of the Foundation's work in Hartford has been to create a strategy for sustaining the structures and benefits of the community schools. A School-Community Partnership was founded by the Hartford Foundation in 2007 to support the development of community schools. The purposes of this initiative was renamed in 2011 and six key institutions with a stake in successful student learning—The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving; Hartford Public Schools; the City of Hartford's Department of Families, Children, Youth and Recreation; the United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut, Aetna, and The Hartford—now comprise the Hartford Partnership for Student Success as it is now known. The purposes of HPSS are not only to guide and support the continued development of Hartford Community Schools, but also to consider ways in which the lessons from the experiences of these schools could be introduced in other settings as well as attract new educational, corporate, and

philanthropic support for these efforts. Similarly, in working with the planning teams in the regional Alliance Districts, the Foundation strongly supported efforts to expand the number of institutional partners who share responsibility for the success of school districts' initiatives to improve student learning through parent engagement and community partnerships.

Finally, as a result of its decades of sustained, responsive grant making in the region, the Foundation brings considerable credibility, goodwill, and knowledge of the educational and social needs of the communities in which it works. This deep understanding of the needs and nuanced challenges of communities has been further complemented by the assembling of a seasoned, experienced group of staff and consultants who can work effectively with community and district leaders on systemic change.

**THE WORK IN IN MANCHESTER**

Manchester Public Schools is one of 30 underperforming districts targeted by the Alliance District Initiative, a state-level effort to strengthen student outcomes through additional support for planning and implementation and closer monitoring. Manchester was one of 13 districts added to the Alliance District Initiative in 2012. The timeline of Manchester's work with the Foundation since that time is summarized in the chart below.

October 2012	Manchester Public Schools named as one of 13 districts in Cohort III of Alliance District Initiative
Fall 2013	HFPG issues RFP for planning grants in the Alliance Districts in regions it serves
April 2014	HFPG awards planning grant to Manchester Public Schools
December 2014	HFPG Awards 1 <sup>st</sup> year implementation grant
January 2015	Manchester begins to create infrastructure, professional development planning, and community meetings to describe new effort
September 2015	Manchester opens new Family Resources Centers to complement two existing centers; launches ongoing professional development with staff; and recruits parents as participants in policy development committees.
December 2015	District completes its first implementation year.

The Manchester Public School district is comprised of 12 schools- 9 elementary schools, 2 middle schools (one of which is entirely for sixth grade students), and 1 high school. District-wide achievement data show a great disparity for students of color, those eligible for free or reduced-price meals, English language learners, and students with identified disabilities. Academic performance has lagged behind the state in virtually all indicators that are associated with strong educational performance - preschool enrollment, regular school attendance, on-time graduation rates.

In the years leading to 2013 and 2014, according to observations made by interviewed stakeholders and Foundation staff, there was a substantial disjuncture between agencies in the city (both government and community-based organizations) and the school district, with little regular communication or coordination. What linkages that did exist were transitory and sometimes strained. Beginning in 2013, however, the superintendent (and then his successor, the current superintendent) began outreach efforts to the municipal government. Some of the impetus for this new outreach can be attributed to seeking support for a school construction bond referendum, previous iterations of which had failed. The gap between the district and municipal agencies, however, also reflected a lack of commitment to the district by many of Manchester's residents. Both superintendents were convinced that the school district needed to re-engage with the broader community if schools were to have access to greater moral, in-kind, volunteer, and financial support.

Just as these outreach efforts were in their early stages, the Hartford Foundation offered Manchester and other Alliance Districts in its funding region the opportunity to apply for a planning grant. The purpose of the planning grants was for districts to develop community-specific strategies for developing local partnerships with families and the broader community to support student learning, and therefore, the planning grant opportunity was not prescriptive in how districts might pursue such partnerships or craft strategies for improving educational success. However, it did require that, in developing their plans, the school district include the perspectives of the broader community - including parents, other residents, and community leaders, and that the plan address these constituencies' expectations for student learning. Manchester was one of first districts to submit a plan that was sufficiently supported by the community and both detailed and well-grounded to receive an implementation grant from the Foundation.

The development of the plan submitted by Manchester Public Schools and its partners was facilitated by regular and extensive support by staff and consultants to the Foundation who pressed the district's planning team about rationale, assumptions, goals and expectations supporting its proposed strategies. Participants in Manchester planning consistently reported that the Foundation's guidance was both challenging and pivotal in helping them develop a comprehensive strategy that fit their community's, families', and students' needs.

"They [Foundation staff and consultants] always ask, 'What can we do that will be helpful to you to continue your work?'"

"We've had a great experience working with the Foundation. They consistently posed questions that caused us to think about our assumptions or the implications of the plans we were developing. More than that, they would guide us to resources and people who could help us think through an obstacle."

"Each time we met, either Sara or Jackie would ask us how a particular element or idea would improve student learning. They didn't let us off the hook on this."

Based on the results of its planning process, the Manchester plan identified several focus areas for strengthening district operations and improving relationships, including:

- System-wide capacity-building among district staff, parents, community members, and students;
- Increased system-wide awareness of, access to, and use of existing school and community-based supports for students and families;
- Expansion and redesign of full-time Family Resource Centers in district schools;
- Continued strengthening of district communications and relations with multiple stakeholders;
- Improvements in the coordination of services with the Town of Manchester and others;
- Development or redevelopment of new strategic resources and new opportunities to support both increased and sustained family and community engagement in student learning and student success; and
- Development of new extended learning opportunities for students, staff and families.

The district's leadership recognized its need for a new partnership framework and more effective practice linking family and community partnership to student learning.

"I think that everyone here realized that the district was seen as separated from the city government and from the overcall community. At the same time, we realized that if we were going to undertake any meaningful efforts to change the culture of our schools and get the support we needed, we had to make the district less isolated. And it couldn't just be about getting partners on a list, but actually doing something that would directly affect learning."

Manchester Public Schools requested an implementation grant from HFPG to cover part of the costs of a comprehensive three-year strategy, including the development of an infrastructure within the district to support ongoing family and community engagement. Grant funding was to be applied toward the cost of district personnel responsible for developing and coordinating family, school, and community partnership; training and professional development for district staff and partners, including parents; direct service costs; and the development of new contracted services.

Manchester Public Schools used grant funds to open and staff an Office of Family and Community Engagement to strengthen and improve its coordination of family and community engagement policies, programs, supports and services, both internally and in tandem with current and new partners. The director of the office, formerly the district's chief academic officer, reports to the superintendent and serves on the district cabinet, reflecting an unprecedented level of visibility and support for family and community engagement throughout the district. The director is charged with increasing the district's partnerships with the Manchester Office of Neighborhoods and Families, Family Development Center at Eastern Connecticut Health Network (ECHN), the Youth Services Bureau, and local institutions of higher education, among many others. In addition, he works with other district and school staff, such as the Equity Coordinator (charged with improving the district's cultural competency), the

Office of Academics, and Manchester's parent and community leaders, to identify and pursue ways in which the district can build its own, community leaders' and families' capacity as "district partners in education." The district has hired a director of Office of Community and Family Engagement who reports directly to the Superintendent and participates in cabinet meetings championing increased attention to engaging families as partners in learning in all areas of the district's work.

MPS also identified an urgent need to build its staff capacity in the area of family and community engagement. With Foundation funds, it has begun to develop and offer district-wide staff professional development in family and community engagement, often using consultants recommended by the Foundation. With the help of these consultants, it will develop a means of engaging district and school leaders, teachers, parents, caregivers, students and community members in shared learning about best practices. The district has gathered baseline data on staff, provider, family and student perceptions of the role of family engagement in student success and has used these data to plan new learning experiences.

Finally, the plan included expansion and redesign of the district's school-based Family Resource Centers as hubs of shared district and community activity supporting healthy child development and student success. When the effort began, Family Resource Centers operated at five of nine elementary schools in Manchester and in 2015 there were Family Resources Centers at each of the district's elementary schools. New resources expected to be developed and offered through the redesigned Centers include district staff-led playgroups and socialization activities for young children aligned with Connecticut's Early Learning and Development Standards; outreach and home visiting focused on supporting parents' understanding of their children's academic goals and related needs; opportunities for parents to increase their comfort and skill in supporting student learning; positive youth development programs both before and after school hours; parent education about children's social and cognitive development; and a parent referral service.

The decision to redesign and expand Family Resource Centers was also made to provide a practical vehicle for making school buildings more welcoming and accessible while also helping to "bring the community into MPS schools on a regular basis." All new initiatives undertaken through the Family Resource Centers will focus on building the intellectual, social, and human capital of all MPS' stakeholders, and most importantly, they will purposefully be designed to connect families to teaching and learning, furthering Manchester's' educational goals.

#### **OBSERVATIONS FROM KEY STAKEHOLDERS ON THE WORK TO DATE**

Five individuals were interviewed in December 2015 to obtain external stakeholder perspectives on the project, feedback on progress to date, and reflections on the contributions of the Foundation. They included the district superintendent, the director of the district's Office of Family and Community Engagement, the director of the municipal government's Office of Neighborhoods and Families, a senior staff member of the Connecticut Center for School Change, and a community leader in local, state and national advocacy for parents and families. In addition to evidence related to partnership and system development outcomes, these

stakeholders were asked to describe what they saw as the goals and outcomes of the pilot and potential or actual areas of opposition or challenges to achieving those goals. These observations are summarized here, noting areas of consensus as well as areas where a range of perspectives were given.

### **Stakeholder Perspectives on Goals and Expected Outcomes**

The Manchester plan seeks to improve the outcomes of children and families by providing parents guidance and materials to help their children succeed. To achieve this, the district aims to transform the relationship between schools and parents and between schools, community based organizations, and parents. The specific operational objectives the district proposed to accomplish these changes are:

- Adoption of Family and Community Partnership (FCP) as one of four priorities for district improvement;
- Creation of a new partnership with town government (Office of Mayor, Office of Neighborhoods and Families, and the Police Department). & other agencies;
- Creation and staffing of District Office of Family and Community Partnerships;
- Engagement of an After School Coordinator to align afterschool programs with FCP goals;
- Provision of professional development with all staff focused on family and community partnerships; and
- Redesign and expansion of the district's Family Resource Centers to increase their support for students' learning and academic success.

Interviewed stakeholders report that there is a broad and expanding consensus that effective family engagement can be a powerful impetus for improving student learning and for gaining broader community support for Manchester Public Schools. In the words of one stakeholder, "The Superintendent has put in both feet in support of strong, meaningful family engagement. That is critical if the overall district is going to move forward with this." Another stakeholder concurs, "[The Superintendent] gets it. He carefully reflects on what he's heard, takes his time, and brings his own personal experience to the discussion. I've worked with a lot of school systems and I can sense a special leadership style in Manchester." This stakeholder went on to note that the perspectives and attitudes of other district staff are evolving as they become involved in the work. "I've seen [a district administrator] open up and reveal a different side of himself in these sessions. This wasn't his background or perspective at all, but now he gets it. The leadership of this effort is really embracing it. Doing this work on a day to day basis, with people in the community is opening of opportunities to expose different sides of themselves that parents and families have not seen."

### **Stakeholder Perspectives on Concerns and Challenges**

All interviewed stakeholders in Manchester noted that underlying the efforts to build strong family-school-community partnerships is the need for a fundamental shift in the mindset of teachers, principals and other staff in schools, by parents themselves, by community partners, and across the broader community. There are several dimensions to this shift in mindset:

- Changing perceptions among both parents and school staff to affirm that parents are "the number one educator in their children's lives," and "that parents are a real and actual asset in student learning." Several stakeholders noted that seeing parents as "assets" remains an obstacle for many teachers conditioned to seeing parents as the reason why students are inadequately prepared.
- Realizing that there is substantial evidence of lack of trust between the district and many of its families and that this gap is a manifestation of unaddressed racial and cultural tensions between various constituencies in a changing and evolving community.
- Recognizing that changing these perceptions will be difficult and will take considerable time before fully realized.

Stakeholders note that, while the idea of meaningful family engagement to support student learning through community partnerships appears on its face to be relatively benign and readily supportable, efforts to actually implement it have demonstrated the potential for challenging the community on a critical issue. Specifically, they noted that Manchester Public Schools is one arena where the issues of race and cultural differences are publicly played out, noting that white residents have seen their community change over the past several decades and as a result of demographic trends have been less able "to see themselves" in the faces of those children attending Manchester schools. Recognition of these community attitudes plays out in the perceptions of parents who are unsure that their contributions to learning are recognized or valued among all teachers.

"In particular, the biggest mindset shift is in recognizing *all* parents are assets in their children's learning. As you start addressing this you quickly run up against issues of race, culture and trust - in a community where past experiences have left a legacy belying trust. This is critical to do and also fraught with real challenges in doing it well."

"We see some of the racial divide in the data as well. African American kids and boys in general were more likely to be suspended; non-white students were less likely to be placed in accelerated math classes and thus didn't take algebra until entering high schools. All these things point to a system of lowered expectations for some kids."

"We have to very careful when we invite parents in, that we don't exclude them by talking to them in 'edu-speak.' The result is when parents are involved 'there is a lot of smiling' without understanding or links to relevant experience. Parents are being polite or trying not to appear that they shouldn't be there."

At the same time, stakeholders see reason for hope at engaging parents in an authentic manner:

"It appears that the efforts toward parental engagement/partnership are already penetrating and this has meant authentic decision-making experience for parents. At the same time, the concern is always there that this will return to 'here's what we want parents to do for us.' But, I am seeing a subtle shift in the [school] climate committees. The classic model was parental participation meant: PTA, Report card nights, and

performances. But now there is a clear sense that parental engagement is more than that and clear efforts built on the premise 'that it is very important that we get a chance to know one another and work together' are being described as the goal. But that takes planning and time and is gradual so as not to be forced."

## **PROGRESS ON PARTNERSHIP AND SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES**

This section summarizes progress toward the partnership and system development outcomes intended by this effort, which are shown in the attached accompanying appendix.

### **Progress on Partnership Capacity and Partnership Collaborative Action through 2015**

Faced with a district that was nearly isolated from the organizations and agencies in the community and that had weak or distrusting relationships with parents and virtually no strategy for engaging families in student learning, the district's early efforts have resulted in several important steps in setting the stage for more productive relationships between the district and its constituencies. These include the following:

- Consensus was reached among the board and key community partners including the municipal government for a collaborative approach to improving student learning through Family and Community Partnership.
- District leadership share and refined this vision and approach in presentations throughout the community.
- District-level and school-based teams researched and evaluated approaches to effective family and community engagement, consulted national experts, and conducted site visits to districts and schools where new engagement practices are used.
- Subsequently teams in each school conducted own- and cross-school monitoring walkthroughs to understand and identify the factors that facilitate or limit effective family engagement.
- The district developed and executed memoranda of understanding (MOU) with community agencies and organizations to provide services and supports to families and students aligned with a focus on student learning. These MOUs are now in place with the police department, the public library, the city's Office of Neighborhoods and Families, the Manchester Early Learning Center, local YMCA and Boys' and Girls clubs and other organizations.

### **Foundation Contributions to Partnership Outcomes through 2015**

As described earlier, the Foundation provided planning funds to help the district design its overall initiative and provided on-going guidance to the planning team in its exploration of the dimensions of partnership that would best support learning among children served by the district. This support helped the district fashion a mission and goals statement that was congruent with district goals and compelling in attracting potential partners in the community to work with schools. The Foundation's reputation and relationships in the community added weight to the district's outreach to municipal agencies and officials and to leaders of

community organizations. "HFPG grant has really helped us strengthen our partnerships with the local community and do so in a way that helps advance our agenda."

Foundation support has attracted many suitors for partnership and at the same time the specific goals and objectives of the Foundation's grant have given leverage to the district in defining the nature of the potential partnerships, their goals, and their specific activities. As one stakeholder put it, "As a result of having the grant and the clear strategy that it supports, we have more leverage and capacity to say, 'Although this is a wonderful idea, this is not the time to pursue this opportunity'. In the past, we could never do that out of fear of missing out or alienating a potential partner."

### **Progress on System Development through 2015**

The work in Manchester has made substantial progress in developing the infrastructure and policies for deep and sustained family and community engagement. These include actions that are directed specifically at changing practices and family experiences in schools and increasing the range of learning experiences available to students.

- The new district Office of Community and Family Engagement has been created and is co-located in the same building a newly re-organized Office of Neighborhoods and Families of the Manchester city government. These two offices are coordinating their activities; sponsored two school-based community fairs showcasing community services, activities, and resources available to students and families; and published several issues of a community newsletter highlighting plans, goals and activities of Manchester Public Schools.
- The Office of Community and Family Engagement has conducted constituent surveys and focus groups (parents, teachers, front-line staff) to develop a baseline sense of the district's current efforts to involve families in learning and identify some of the apparent gaps and barriers. In addition, the office engaged a consultant to work with training teams at each school in the techniques of "school walkthroughs," a focused process for observing and monitoring factors, conditions, and climate that facilitate family engagement. In addition, a review of district and school websites revealed that information was static, outdated, and provided little in the way of helpful guidance for parents to support learning.
- The Office is also working with district and school staff to develop ready-to-use materials that can be given to parents to support learning at home. This builds on an assessment of current communications with families that identified the need for materials in multiple languages other than English and for greater use of web-based communication. The assessment also uncovered school staff assumptions about the familiarity that parents do or do not have about school expectations and curriculum goals as well as about their interest in support their children's learning.
- Working with the district's professional development office, the Office of Community Service has organized and provided substantial professional development for principals,

teachers, school leadership teams, and parents on effective strategies of family engagement.

- Family Resource Centers have been opened in all nine elementary schools in the district, while setting policies that "protect" the Centers from being tapped to take on roles outside of their mandate (i.e., study hall monitors, ersatz in-school discipline rooms, etc.) and to ensure that FRCs maintain their focus as a resource supporting children's optimal development and academic success
- The kindergarten registration process has been re-designed to serve as a hands-on vehicle for helping parents develop skills to be effective supporters of student learning, and a variety of new tools and resources to help families support learning at home have been commissioned.

### **Foundation Contributions to System Development Outcomes through 2015**

The Foundation's support during the planning process helped the district identify what structures needed to be in place to ensure that the district's goals for family and community engagement were achieved. During the planning phase, Foundation staff introduced planning team members to the newest research and field experience literature on best practices and gave teams access to local and national experts in schools' system building. The Foundation also provided district superintendents with peer support through a consulting contract with Dr. Jacqueline Jacoby, a respected educator and former superintendent of the Glastonbury, Connecticut, School District.

The Foundation's implementation grant is supporting the staffing costs for the new Office of Family and Community Engagement. Foundation staff and consultants continue to provide advice to and share ideas with the director of the Office and the superintendent on strategies and opportunities to implement and refine its plans. As noted by one district official,

"Even after we received the grant, we've been in regular contact with the Foundation. Each member of the team probably talks with someone at the Foundation each week informally, and we have a meeting with them every six to eight weeks and so far, we have had three big meetings to review progress, talk about challenges, and confirm that we are each doing what needs to help the process along."

In addition, Foundation funding has partially supported the expansion of Family Resource Centers and their full-time staffing.

### **STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON NEXT STEPS**

#### **Stakeholder Suggestions for Next Steps**

Most of the interviewed stakeholders noted that achieving the goals of strong, sustained family engagement and community partnership to support student learning will take time and will require deep changes in mindsets and 'the usual way of doing business' in classrooms, schools, and the central administration district. As described by one stakeholder, there always is

tension between patience with the process of undertaking such fundamental transformations and impatience for results:

"The Foundation has been fair in dealing with the district and its planning, but there is always an undercurrent of expectations that a lot will happen soon. The model sometimes seems to equate results = lots of change = lots of activities, but that doesn't mean that it will be quick or that all activities will result in change or all changes will generate better results. It will take time."

All the interviewed stakeholders described issues related to culture and race as posing a stumbling block to moving the family engagement agenda forward. They hope that by acknowledging this challenge that the Foundation will both be patient with progress that can be made in the short term and assist the district and community in addressing the underlying issues.

### **Stakeholder Suggestions for Benchmarks**

According to the interviewed stakeholders, significant benchmarks in family engagement will be felt at the school level as principals and school team begin to change practices related to welcoming, orienting, and otherwise engaging parents. As one stakeholder put it:

"First, it will be easier to find your way into schools. As Scott and I were visiting schools we were struck by how difficult it was to determine where visitors should enter, how to do it, how to get someone's attention to let us in, and how to find the main office.

Second, the school's cultural temperature will begin to warm up. You can walk into some schools and immediately feel welcomed by teachers, parents, staff and administrators. In others, you feel like you've intruded on a private meeting which you weren't invited to.

In addition, parents will have an awareness of what *they* can bring to the table. We will have schools that ensure that they are heard without shouting and screaming. This speaks to the importance of building relationships at the building level."

The first of these changes are expected as a result of changes in the 'welcoming capacity' of schools is improved in response to survey results and on-site walkthroughs conducted during the fall 2015 term. In addition, stakeholders expect some change as a result additional professional development focused on classroom teachers about effective ways to engage parents in student learning. This will be further supported as home learning materials and tools are developed for families. Efforts to revamp kindergarten registration process will also support family engagement from the start of a child time in school. While changes among teachers' practice and its impact on family engagement will likely take longer, stakeholders are confident that it will occur.

## **SUMMARY AND ASSESSMENT**

In Manchester, the planning process and the initial implementation period have demonstrated expanding partnership development among the school district, community agencies, and provider organizations around a shared vision for family and community engagement to increase and enhance opportunities for student learning success. The Foundation's actions and investments made decisive contributions to a robust process and to the development of a detailed action plan for the district and its partners.

Significant development of infrastructure to support changes in practices within schools and in the alignment of community programs with learning objectives has taken place. This infrastructure includes the district's Office of Family and Community Engagement and its partnership with its municipal counterpart, redesign and expansion of Family Resource Centers into all elementary schools, and coordination with a number of community organizations to offer increased out-of-school time programming. Again, the Foundation's contributions were critical, both in its generous funding that leveraged investment of district resources and in the ongoing advice and feedback provided by Foundation staff and consultants.

The sustainability and long-term impact of the work in Manchester will at least partly depend on the district's and community's ability to reframe broadly held attitudes, undergirded by issues of race, about the importance of authentic family engagement for students' educational success. Structural and policy changes are unlikely to fundamentally change the experiences of students and their families - their sense of belonging within the schools and community and their active participation in the learning opportunities offered there - without tackling these issues.

**PROMOTING EFFECTIVE FAMILY, SCHOOL, COMMUNITY COLLABORATION  
TO INCREASE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES:  
BLOOMFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The K-12 Education Investment Strategy in Bloomfield seeks to support student learning through strong and focused partnerships with community academic enrichment providers whose work can be closely aligned with its schools' academic goals and its increased partnership with students' families as key contributors to student learning.

The Bloomfield strategy challenges many current assumptions about the structure of the school day, the roles of community-based organizations in providing academic content, and the role of parents and families in learning. It also has significant implications for the "dual capacity building" needed among staff, parents and community partners. Its strategy seeks to expand and enhance learning time for all students by extending the school day (and potentially, the school year).<sup>16</sup> Further, the strategy provides an additional vehicle for deliberately engaging parents as co-educators, offering students instruction in subject areas identified by parents as high priority — STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics) — and by giving parents tools and resources to continue and extend children's learning at home.

Many schools across the nation struggle to serve students well. This is especially true in schools that serve high proportions of students from economically disadvantaged populations, students of color, students who are non-English speakers, or are recent immigrants. Such schools are often—though not exclusively—clustered in urban school districts with diminished resources to meet the needs of children. Despite its high national ranking for strong K-12 education, Connecticut has districts in which many students are not experiencing educational success. Among these are 30 "Alliance Districts"—of which seven are in communities in the Greater Hartford Region—identified by the Connecticut Department of Education as the state's lowest

---

<sup>16</sup>Support for extending the school day has been building for more than a decade. It was the centerpiece of several major initiatives advanced by the Obama administration including its 13 (Investing in Innovation) and Social Innovation Fund grant programs, and expansion of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers. Reviews of research on the benefits of extended learning time reveal that when trained, experienced staff use innovative techniques in the extra time with students can improve reading and math performance especially among children who are at greatest academic risk. Among recent summaries of ELT research are; Farber, David A. (2015) *The Case for Improving and Expanding Time in School: A Review of Key Research and Practice Updated and Revised*. Princeton, NJ: National Center for Time and Learning. Retrieved from <http://www.timeandlearning.org/sites/default/files/resources/caseformorelearningtime.pdf>; Kidron, Y., and Lindsay, J. (2014). *The effects of increased learning time on student academic and nonacademic outcomes: Findings from a meta-analytic review (REL 2014 — 015)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/>; and The Chalkboard Project (2010) *A Review of Research on Extended Learning Time in K-12 Schools*. Portland, OR: The Chalkboard Project. Retrieved from: <http://chalkboardprolectorg/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Extended-Learning-Time-1210.pdf>.

performing districts with low overall academic performance and substantial achievement gaps in performance among key student groups.

The Foundation's K-12 Investment strategy seeks to help Alliance Districts in its region re-conceptualize how family and community resources are leveraged to support student learning. While parent involvement is a standard component of virtually any school's improvement plan, too often it is an after-thought without any clear meaning, it is haphazardly implemented, and it receives little, if any, financial support. Indicators of parental involvement are typically limited to attendance at 'back-to-school' nights, report card conferences, and student performances. In some instances, advisory or planning teams are mandated to have parent representation on membership lists, but attendance is often limited and sporadic, and rarely are parents found in leadership positions schools planning teams.

Too few schools consistently provide guidance to families on how to support student learning other than giving general advice about providing a quiet place to do homework or assigning a summer reading list. Few schools—especially in economically distressed areas—see parents as 'assets' to their children's learning; often, instead seeing parents as impediments to be bypassed.

Similarly, while school and district alignment with community-based services—academic, enrichment, recreational, social, financial—is touted as a key ingredient in helping schools and families access high quality support for improved student learning, few schools and districts have strong strategies for engaging community providers or municipal agencies as long-term partners. Even alignment between district learning goals and those of community organizations providing out-of-school time programming is often limited as each typically operates in discrete silos of goals and activities.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving is well positioned to engage in partnership and system building in the K-12 education arena. In particular, the Foundation has been a critical long-term actor and funder of Community Schools in Hartford, is one of the four partners that formed and supports the Hartford Partnership for Student Success, and has a long-term history of supporting quality afterschool programming in the capital city.

The Foundation describes the Hartford Community School Initiative as "a holistic strategy that emphasizes increasing family, school and community partnerships that can support student success." Seven participating public schools are partnered with four different nonprofit organizations identified as "lead agencies" responsible for assessing student needs and coordinating the development and delivery of student and family services. Community Schools remain open well beyond the hours of a regular school day - before and after school, into the evening, even weekends, and throughout the summer. Student learning time is extended by 35-40 percent, and families are offered an array of educational, enrichment, health and social services." In supporting these efforts, the Foundation notes that "Community schools across

the country have seen gains in school culture and climate, student attendance, academic achievement, parent involvement, safety, and improved student-teacher relationships."

One of the hallmarks of the Foundation's work in Hartford has been to create a strategy for sustaining the structures and benefits of the community schools. A School-Community Partnership was founded by the Hartford Foundation in 2007 to support the development of community schools. The purposes of this initiative was renamed in 2011 and six key institutions with a stake in successful student learning—The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving; Hartford Public Schools; the City of Hartford's Department of Families, Children, Youth and Recreation; the United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut, Aetna, and The Hartford—now comprise the Hartford Partnership for Student Success (HPSS), as it is now known. The purposes of HPSS are not only to guide and support the continued development of Hartford Community Schools, but also to consider ways in which the lessons from the experiences of these schools could be introduced in other settings as well as attract new educational, corporate, and philanthropic support for these efforts. Similarly, in working with the planning teams in the regional Alliance Districts, the Foundation strongly supported efforts to expand the number of institutional partners who share responsibility for the success of school districts' initiatives to improve student learning through parent engagement and community partnerships.

Finally, as a result of its decades of sustained, responsive grant making in the region, the Foundation brings considerable credibility, goodwill, and knowledge of the educational and social needs of the communities in which it works. This deep understanding of the needs and nuanced challenges of communities has been further complemented by the assembling of a seasoned, experienced group of staff and consultants who can work effectively with community and district leaders on systemic change.

**THE WORK IN BLOOMFIELD**

Bloomfield Public Schools is one of 30 underperforming districts targeted the by Alliance District Initiative, a state-level effort to strengthen student outcomes through additional support for planning and implementation and closer monitoring. In 2012, Bloomfield was named as one of the 13 districts added to the Alliance District Initiative. The timeline of Bloomfield's work with the Foundation since that time is summarized in the chart below and on the following page.

October 2012	Bloomfield Public Schools named as one of 13 districts in Cohort III of Alliance District Initiative
Fall 2013	HFBG issues RFP for planning grants in the Alliance Districts in regions it serves
April 2014	HFBG Awards planning grant to Bloomfield Public Schools
September 2015	HFBG Awards 1 <sup>st</sup> year implementation grant

January 2016

Bloomfield completes first quarter of implementation grant and begins to create infrastructure for initiative, recruits community organizations as potential partners in extended day learning model, launches professional development on school climate and family engagement, and conducts community meetings to describe new effort. Implementation of extended learning day initiative scheduled for September 2016.

Bloomfield Public Schools (BPS) includes two elementary schools, an intermediate school, a middle school and a high school. In addition, the district has a magnet Pre-K and K program and also hosts two regional magnet schools, a 6-12 global experience college preparatory school and a vocational education program - both accepting students from Bloomfield and the greater Hartford area towns.

The district serves approximately 2,100 students of whom 90 percent are of African American or of West Indian descent. In part, this racial concentration within Bloomfield Public Schools is the result of regional school choice. Nearly 30 percent of students eligible to attend Bloomfield schools choose to enroll in out-of-district magnet, non-public or private schools. Fifty percent of BPS students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

### **Development of Bloomfield's Plan**

In 2011 Bloomfield's high school students lagged as much as 40 points behind other Connecticut high schools. As the introduction of more rigorous academic standards loomed in the near future, the district sought to transform itself to better support student learning. The following description of the planning process that Bloomfield engaged in with Foundation support is slightly edited from the request to the Foundation Board for the Bloomfield initiative; it provides a concise summary of the rationale for and major outline of Bloomfield's approach.

In response to poor achievement levels among students, Bloomfield's Board of Education hired Dr. James Thompson as superintendent of schools. In 2012, Thompson developed a District Accountability Plan with four priorities: accountability at all levels; rigorous curriculum, instruction and assessment; positive school climate for children and adults; and enhanced parent and community relations. Under the superintendent's direction, all Bloomfield schools also created new customized performance measures. New after-school programs and summer classes were launched for grades 5-8. By building strong collaborative teams focused on leveraging data to guide instruction and establishing a culture of high achievement, the district realized significant improvements between 2011 and 2014. Third grade scores in reading, writing and math exceeded the state average in 2013, and BPS' middle schools have achieved four consecutive years of academic progress. At the same time, BPS recognized increased challenges to sustain student learning as it moves toward full implementation of Common Core Standards. The superintendent's reform plan and its implementation have earned high praise among local and regional observers. The Foundation's grant capitalizes on Bloomfield Public School's strong plan and supports key elements related to community partnership and family engagement.

BPS' goal is to ensure that all students have access to the supports and resources needed to support optimal achievement. Building on the emergent research showing the benefits of increased learning time and longer school years, especially for at-risk youth, the district began to explore how it might extend the school year for its students. It concluded that, while it would have liked to offer extended learning opportunities to all students, it lacked both the fiscal resources and partnerships need to realize that goal.

In April 2014, the district received a planning grant from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving to determine how to increase family, school and community partnerships to address these concerns. In particular, Bloomfield Schools used Foundation funds to research a variety of extended learning models and to engage both families and the surrounding community in dialogue and community forums exploring a possible district-wide initiative of extended learning for all students.

As a part of its planning grant activity, the district also formed a steering committee including central office leadership, seven parent representatives (one from each BPS parent teacher organization), school administrators and teachers, a board of education member, and an after school program partner. A consultant was hired to support the steering committee and provide technical assistance in developing and conducting focus groups, surveys, and other processes to help BPS engage a diversity of perspectives in consideration of a possible district-wide extended learning initiative.

The Foundation grant also provided stipends for parent liaisons who facilitated planning conducted by each school's "extended day planning team." Foundation funds also enabled BPS staff and the steering committee to visit a successful extended day and extended year program in Washington Heights, New York, provided BPS an opportunity to complete an extensive literature search, and paid for software used to create an inventory of local and regional resources.

The district conducted two "community provider fairs" to offer school and district staff the opportunity to ask potential partners questions about their capacity and willingness to develop a long-term partnership in the extended day approach. Each Bloomfield school sent a team of five persons to each fair, including parents. The district superintendent writes, "While the process of investigating the viability of district-wide extended learning has been multipronged, requiring patience and a willingness to listen, the Foundation's support, both financially and through mentorship, has allowed Bloomfield a unique opportunity to tackle a complicated process strategically."

Through this extensive family, school and community engagement, Bloomfield Public Schools received wide support for moving forward on an unprecedented, district-wide extended learning initiative. At the same time, it was determined that implementation of such an initiative would not only entail adding instructional time (before and after-school and year-long), but also require a restructuring of the district's school day to provide more learning opportunities for students as well as increased opportunities for teachers and partners to strengthen their capacity to act as effective educational partners.

In brief, the Bloomfield five year plan is to develop and implement new extended day, week and year programming for all students in its district. In the first year, the central office staff will:

- Design an infrastructure within key district operations (human resources, professional development, building maintenance, etc.) to facilitate and support the expansion of school time in district schools.
- Engage staff and parent leaders in two schools to begin the process of design and preparation for an extended school day and school year beginning in the second year of the grant.
- Select community-based organizations as partners for these schools capable of providing enrichment programs that are directly aligned with the curricular objectives for each grade in the school.
- Work closely with community-based partner organizations to develop their capacity to provide continuous academic enrichment programming for all students

In subsequent years, the district will follow the same two-year planning/implementation cycle in each of the district's other schools culminating in all schools having implemented an extended learning day model by the 2019/20 school year.

### **Timeline for Implementation of the Plan**

The Bloomfield plan calls for the gradual, multi-year implementation of extended day, week and year programming to all students in its district in each of its schools. Each school site will conduct a two-phase process in which the school and its staff will develop the structure and skills to move successfully to an extended learning time model over the course of one year and then initiate the model in beginning in the second phase. The first (planning and capacity building phase) was launched in two elementary schools in Fall 2015. Over the next several years, successive levels of schools will begin the process so that all district schools have implemented the model by the 2019/20 school year.

The district will use Foundation funds to hire a district-wide extended learning time coordinator as well as school-based extended learning specialists for the initial elementary schools beginning the transition process. Working together, this staff will be charged with developing and implementing a process that ensures that the new extended learning time approach, particularly engaging families and community partners in supporting student learning. Parents and families participating in meetings at these first two schools told district planners that starting the school day earlier would be the preferred way of extending the school day. Further, parents recommended that the enrichment being provided through extended learning time be focused on STEM.

Foundation funds are also being used to support extensive school, family and partner training toward the development of a grade-specific, extended learning curriculum to be implemented cooperatively by BPS teachers, parents, and program partners. This part of the investment is crucial as having a standards-driven enrichment program aligned with school day learning is the central premise of Bloomfield's extended learning time model. Beyond curriculum

development, the joint work of Bloomfield teachers and administrators and community program staff will define the parameters and expectations of the partnership and shared ownership of the program. In working with community partners the district has emphasized how the extended learning time approach must be focused on hands-on, meaningful learning opportunities for students and reframing the parent role from observer and consumer to co-educator for their children beyond the extended school day.

## **OBSERVATIONS FROM KEY STAKEHOLDERS ON THE WORK TO DATE**

Six individuals were interviewed in December 2015 to obtain stakeholder perspectives on the project, feedback on progress to date, and reflections on the contributions of the Foundation. They included the district superintendent and his deputy, the district's extended learning time director, the district grants specialist, a principal at one of the elementary schools, and a parent involved in the process at both elementary schools. In addition to evidence related to partnership and system development outcomes, these stakeholders were asked to describe what they saw as the goals and outcomes of the initiative and potential or actual areas of opposition or challenges to achieving those goals. These observations are summarized here, noting areas of consensus as well as areas where a range of perspectives were given.

### **Stakeholder Perspectives on Goals and Expected Outcomes**

Interviewed stakeholders reported that there is a broad and expanding consensus that an extended school day model is needed to dramatically improve student learning and that it both requires and provides the opportunity for engaging families and parents in student learning at a level that has not been typical. In the words of one stakeholder, "In our discussions with parents about extended learning time for enrichment, among the key missing areas that parents expressed they wanted were foreign language, arts, technology and STEM. They feel that these areas are not as available in Bloomfield schools as they are in regional magnets and private schools. They are really pleased when they learn that some of these are subjects in which we want to offer enrichment. "

The interviewed stakeholders saw evidence that various communities within Bloomfield and the broader community are supportive of the initiative, especially as it touches on parent engagement:

"We are trying to create an empowered, informed parent audience and give them an opportunity to participate actively in decision-making at the school and district levels. We've worked at getting more parental views, more collaboration with the community, and are sending parents and community members to site visits at other districts and settings. We've also done a lot more research - a deeper dive into what parental involvement means. We've studied the Harvard work, also looked at other districts' efforts in Connecticut, all with an eye towards seeing what's possible and what fits Bloomfield. People are pretty confident we are on the right path."

"It's going to take creative use of grant funds to carry forward the superintendent's vision for the district. We're proud and excited about where things are going right now. What matters is focusing on parent involvement and getting them to have a say in the future of Bloomfield's schools."

"We brought people together interested in parent engagement, identified community groups that could provide additional support as part of their work and mission. We are hoping that by involving a broader community and not just school folks, this will provide us the support we will need to sustain the efforts once grant funding goes away. If we don't engage these constituencies from the beginning then we will always be playing catch up."

Stakeholders reported that they were already seeing subtle changes in the school related to family engagement and the ways that parents are being treated. One staff member cited the specific activities that schools were trying to engage parents in a different way:

"We are examining how and what we communicate. We are sure our meetings are about information that is of use to parents. We always have a question and answer period to give parents an opportunity to raise issues of interest to them. We've established a watchdog program to ensure that we are remaining faithful to our parent partnership goals and to call us on times when we fall short.

We are purposefully finding ways to involve parents in units of study and we are holding cultural fairs that culminate a period of study or school year with the explicit goal of demonstrating that 'we value you and what you have to offer.'

We've started a parent of the month program for those parents--who despite their own challenges—are being creative at being involved in their children's learning."

Results from these efforts were already being observed, according to the interviewed stakeholders:

"In the past schools did not have much, if any, community involvement. However, there have been big changes in how the district sees the community. There has been lots of new outreach to get the input of the community. They are asking parents and community what we are looking for in our schools that serve our children. They are also asking us to say what level of progress we hope to see in the coming years."

"PTO meetings are changing from discussions about fundraisers to real information about what is going on in schools and classrooms and discussion of school culture. The information being made available is not just about schools but includes other things in the community and of interest to parents. It's made the school a source of information for parents. "

## Stakeholder Perspectives on Concerns and Challenges

Faced with the task of re-conceptualizing the structure of the school day by implementing an extended learning day model, stakeholders were clearly focused in the initial months of the implementation on the complexities and challenges of logistics, staffing implications, structural and system challenges, and the like. As documented below, many of complexities and challenges had been identified during the planning phase and the district and its community-based partners are now grappling with the actual details.

In the implementation grant proposal, the district identified several systemic and logistical challenges to be addressed in implementing this ambitious initiative.

- Partner selection and capacity: The model calls for a much deeper partnership and commitment on part of the community providers than is generally the norm. The district and school teams not only have to select which organization will provide the best option to provide the highest quality services to children but partner organizations must assess their own capacity to be a long-term partner. Over time, the initiative will need to monitor whether participation is overly burdening partner's capacity.
- The district will need to develop protocols to evaluate the level of its extended learning partners' sustained effectiveness while acknowledging its shared responsibility for effective implementation of an extended day and year program and its results.
- The process of effectively integrating these partnerships into the fabric of the school day poses significant logistical and other challenges. Both teachers and partner staff will need new skills in collaboration, in managing space, time, and resource allocation, and in aligning their learning goals and strategies. Professional development to increase their skill in collaboration will be essential for their success.
- The change in the length of the school day and year to accommodate extended learning opportunities in Bloomfield will eventually require complex and potentially difficult collective bargaining negotiations as well as creative scheduling that requires flexibility on everyone's part.
- District leaders will need to resolve transportation scheduling issues and meet new costs potentially resulting from the extended learning time initiative.

Besides these challenges, the interviewed stakeholders raised other potential challenges. Some pointed to the difficult task of changing the dynamics in parent/teacher relationships:

"Some courageous conversations will need to occur not only about extended day or about parent engagement *per se* but about how staff perceive parents and the community. We are going to need social competency training at all levels. By its nature, this work will involve changing mindsets about parents as being partners in student learning."

Others pointed to the need to keep momentum going for such a long-term project and to be open about the time frame:

"We have to make sure we have a long term plan and we need to keep that plan before folks so they know in an-up-to-date way and keep up their interest. I know that some people don't like change. That's always the case. However, if we can get people involved in things they believe are important we will be in a better position."

"We have to recognize that for this to work [then] being transparent is very important. It can't be a secret that is then sprung on the community without their knowledge and adequate preparation for what we are trying to do."

Finally, one stakeholder bemoaned the fact that for many observers, Bloomfield is sometimes not distinguished from Hartford and the importance of a project like this might be overshadowed by events in the neighboring community:

"One of our biggest hurdles is being linked to Hartford. Our close proximity means that many observers can't distinguish Bloomfield from Hartford. So, all of the ailments seen in Hartford are attributed to us. When things are not going well, people say 'what do you expect, it's just like Hartford.'" It's hard to figure out how to stand independently. I'm afraid that even if we do a great job at this and turn our schools around, no one will notice."

## **PROGRESS ON PARTNERSHIP AND SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES**

This section summarizes progress toward the partnership and system development outcomes intended by this effort, which are shown in the attached accompanying appendix.

### **Progress on Partnership Capacity and Partnership Collaborative Action through 2015**

Building on the district's strategic goals established in 2012, the planning process supported by the Foundation has helped the Bloomfield partnership make substantial progress in both capacity and collaborative action. Specifically,

- Prior to the initiation of the planning process, the Board of Education and key community partners reached consensus on pursuing the superintendent's four-point strategy for improving student learning. During the planning process, community-wide agreement—based on extensive consultation with parents and families—was achieved supporting the development of an extended learning model. This model will significantly extend the school day and will draw upon the expertise and resources of community based partners to provide curriculum-aligned enrichment to all students during this extended day. Further, the plan calls for transforming school climate in ways that welcome families and engage parents as co-educators of their children.
- A steering committee was assembled with broad representation of key stakeholder groups, including central district administrators, parents, school administrators and teachers, the Board of Education, and community organizations offering out-of-school

time programs. The steering committee undertook a wide ranging investigation to identify effective options for a possible district-wide extended learning initiative.

- By providing opportunities for district and school-based teams to study effective approaches to family and community engagement, broad support was gained from school administrators and teaching staff to an extended school-day model. The district initiated discussions with leadership of various unions to explore the implications of the proposed extended learning time options, resulting in union leadership cooperation to help facilitate implementation of the extended learning time model.
- Parents were brought into the planning process to assist in evaluating and selecting community-based organizations to provide enrichment directly aligned to school day learning. Parents also participated in school extended day teams along with school staff in interviewing potential community provider partners.

### **Foundation Contributions to Partnership Outcomes through 2015**

During the planning process, the Foundation funded technical assistance and opportunities to observe extended day models in action, as well as providing coaching from Foundation staff and consultants. Foundation staff introduced planning team members to the newest research and field experience literature on best practices and gave teams access to local and national experts in schools' system building. The Foundation also provided district superintendents with peer support through a consulting contract with Dr. Jacqueline Jacoby, a respected educator and former superintendent of the Glastonbury, Connecticut, School District.

This support helped the Bloomfield Public School district refine its approach for engaging partners in support of student learning. It also opened the conversation within the district and with community organizations about what extended learning time could mean in Bloomfield as part of the overall school improvement plan and how this would change expectations for academic enrichment provided by community organizations. The Foundation's interest in working with Bloomfield on extended learning provided added credibility and gave a focus to key elements of the superintendent's four-point plan. As noted by one stakeholder,

"People were very excited about the superintendent's four point plan. Having the Foundation come in indicated that it was getting their support, too. The superintendent's plan aspires to achieve both a change in school climate and in family and community partnerships, but there was no 'rallying point' in the district for these two elements of the plan. The Hartford Foundation grant gives us that."

Another stakeholder noted that the effort was bringing attention from outside the district as well: "The approach is exciting and there are lots of other districts paying attention to what we are doing."

The on-going, reciprocal information-sharing between Foundation staff and consultants and the district's planning team was described as a critical factor in developing a solid plan for Bloomfield. As one district stakeholder described it,

"In many ways, we were partners in developing the [the Foundation's] RFP for our proposal. As they defined and determined how to deal with what to fund, they drew upon us to then navigate the complexities of school decision-making in schools and districts and help them understand what would work for us. The good part of this was that we weren't being told what to do. The flip side was that we didn't really know if we were right. Would it work?"

Another stakeholder noted that the Foundation played an instrumental role in helping the planning team sort through the options before them:

"They gave us tremendous support, time, advice and guidance. We worked very closely with [the Foundation's consultant]. She was tremendous. [The grant writing process] was overall a very different process and produced, I think, a very different result. It made us recognize that our ideas were interlinked, forced us to consider what needed to be done when, and made us question our assumptions about what we know and what thought would work."

The Foundation's planning grant was used to provide stipends for parent liaisons who facilitated planning conducted by each school's "extended day planning team." This gave the district the opportunity to engage parents in new ways and through this process gave experience in implementing authentic parent voice in decision-making. As one stakeholder noted, "In planning for the grant, we brought parents together who were interested in parent engagement. That part of the process forced us to consider *how* we invite parents into a true discussion about learning and education. That is much different from the past where the model was to `tell' them about learning."

The opportunity supported by the Foundation for school staff and members of the planning steering committee to visit a successful extended day and extended year program in Washington Heights, New York, allowed Bloomfield to demonstrate its commitment to authentic parent leadership in this effort. "The Foundation gave us the support and entrée into schools that were trying out extended day. It was very important that the visiting team included parents so it was not just school folks who were coming back to us what they had observed. We couldn't have brought parents without the grant support."

### **Progress on System Development through 2015**

Even though Bloomfield's implementation grant was awarded in the fall of 2015, it has already made substantial progress on infrastructure and policy development and begun work to change the practices and experiences at the school level. This progress includes:

- Creation of and preparing to staff a new position of District Coordinator of Extended Learning Time.

- Design and adoption of a new extended learning time model that has lengthened the school day for all students by starting the academic day one period earlier with the same end of school time.
- Initial steps in the development of a grade-specific, extended learning curriculum to be implemented cooperatively by district teachers, parents, and program partners.
- Invitations to community organizations to apply to provide academic enrichment experiences during the school day in two schools.
- Selecting organizations to prepare a standards-based academic enrichment unit that would meet learning goals, engage students, and provide a family component to support and extend learning at home.
- Initial discussions with key district and union stakeholders to consider the policy and practice implications of the proposed extended school day plan for restructuring the school day and school year calendar.

### **Foundation Contributions to System Development Outcomes through 2015**

Overall, the Foundation has supported the Bloomfield community to take a pioneering leadership role in both extended learning and in deep family and community engagement. As one interviewed stakeholder described it,

"Our approach makes the district (and its staff) into trailblazers in this area and that could be a challenge. What we are seeing for the future and promotion as 'education' is not the current norm. We've come to learn that using the District (its staff and resources) as a vehicle for extended learning is uncommon. Very few districts have taken on extended learning time in the way we are planning. Most have fully ceded enrichment to outside agencies. The Foundation's support has allowed us to pursue a much different approach."

Another noted, "We learned a lot through the entire process. The Foundation has introduced us to professional development opportunities including some cutting edge approaches to family engagement and productive partnerships."

### **STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON NEXT STEPS**

#### **Stakeholder Suggestions for Next Steps**

Most of the interviewed stakeholders noted that achieving the goals of strong, sustained family engagement and community partnership to support student learning will take time and will require changes in schools, community programs, and families. Those changes will have to be more than structural in nature and will require rethinking about what characterizes best practices in extended learning opportunities. As one staff member commented,

"[In our site visits looking at examples of extended learning time, we came to realize that what we wanted was NOT out there. We wanted a seamless link across the

program elements that kids would experience. We wanted true enrichment not just a bunch of activities with no link to the school day or to other enrichment. We really grappled with the question of what 'enrichment' means.

We came to recognize that enrichment had to have a 'real life' connection. And that while technology could enhance the delivery of academic enrichment, there needed to be an emotional/social connection dimension to it. We saw the need for opportunities for discovery not simply fact acquisition as well as the need for hands-on experiential learning so that students were active participants. This approach to extended day enrichment is really 'outside the box thinking'. It's not how it has been either conceptualized or implemented [elsewhere]."

### **Stakeholder Suggestions for Benchmarks**

Despite the challenges that stakeholders see for the Bloomfield initiative, they are hopeful that it will yield transformed learning experiences for students and their families:

"I see an extended day program that is very engaging and clearly related to the school day. There will be a good buzz among staff and parents about getting kids ready for their futures."

"Parents will see the excitement about learning their kids. There will be a lot more talking among parents and their children and among parents and teachers about education and learning."

"In three to five 3-5 years, the Bloomfield District extended learning opportunity will have expanded to all schools for all students."

"We will continue living out the dual capacity notion that parents are true, valuable and contributing partners to their children learning and to the improvement of schools."

"I see the Bloomfield community at large that is playing out its role as the village that is needed to educate a child."

"I expect that parent engagement has come to mean that parents are informed, advocates for learning."

### **SUMMARY AND ASSESSMENT**

In Bloomfield, the planning process built a strong partnership among the school district, community organizations offering out-of-school time enrichment programs, and families and solidified a shared vision about using family and community engagement to expand opportunities for learning for the community's students. The Foundation's investments made it possible for the partners to investigate extended day learning approaches and to develop one that responded to priorities identified by families and that was feasible to implement given school and community resources.

Significant initial steps in the development of infrastructure and policies to support extended day learning have taken place. These include the creation of a district-level coordinator, planning for rollout of the extended school day with the support from unions, and use of a structured invitation and evaluation process to identify community partners for two schools. Again, the Foundation's contributions were critical, both in its generous funding that leveraged investment of district resources and in its ongoing support for "thinking and acting differently" in family leadership, community partnerships, and school practice.

The sustainability and long-term impact of the work in Bloomfield will at least partly depend on the district's and community's ability to align and integrate the learning goals and experiences across school and enrichment curricula and practices and to maintain the focus on student learning. While there is strong commitment to both among all partners as implementation begins, experience in other settings suggests that changing attitudes and behaviors of all partners takes time and that just managing logistical and union issues can overwhelm the best intentions. Supporting Bloomfield stakeholders in anticipating and proactively responding to potential "mission drift" may be an especially important support from the Foundation.