

COMMUNITY USE OF CAPACITY-BUILDING SUPPORTS AS OF MID-2007

**Report to the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund
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This report was prepared by the Discovery Initiative Evaluation Team for the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund in April 2008. The information used in this report was collected in the summer of 2007. Further details on the data collection are presented in the report.

We appreciate the input and feedback of the Memorial Fund staff and the members and staff of the Discovery community collaborative groups. The analyses and conclusions in this report solely reflect the perspective of the Evaluation Team.

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The focus of this report is the use and value of capacity-building supports for communities. The evaluation is designed to assess how Memorial Fund's capacity-building approach in the Discovery Initiative has influenced community and state practice and policy related to early care and education. The evaluation is compiling information from a variety of sources to determine the extent to which specific supports provided *are needed, utilized, seen as producing value, and associated with actions taken* by the community groups.

What Do We Expect from Community Capacity-Building, According to the Discovery Theory of Change?

The Discovery Initiative theory of change posits that capacity building work with communities and state wide organizations will further the long-term goal of sustained focus on early childhood issues and the capacity to influence state and community policy. In the process of building this focus and capacity, specific changes in policies and practices related to the four Discovery objectives are expected to be observed.

Capacity-building supports for communities are expected to promote collaboration and parent engagement and reinforce community efforts to analyze, reflect, organize, and act on behalf of young children. Within and among communities, between communities and state-wide organizations, and with state entities like the Early Childhood Cabinet, the Discovery Initiative's capacity-building approach is expected to promote:

- *Collaborative processes* at the community and state levels that bring diverse voices and perspectives, particularly those of *parents*, to decision-making, ensuring that policies are well-designed and appropriately implemented;
- Dissemination and adoption of *early childhood programs and practices* that are known to contribute to positive child outcomes; and
- Adoption of *policies* necessary to bring these practices to scale within a community and across the state.

These results are then expected to create and support:

- A *critical mass* of communities, advocates, and citizens, actively engaged in policy work at the community and state levels on early childhood issues;

- *Enhanced ability* of community collaboratives and statewide organizations to work effectively on these issues, singly and in partnerships;
- *Political momentum* and a groundswell of public support for these issues; and
- *Cumulative results* of specific changes in policy and practice related to the Discovery objectives.

These dynamic forces are then expected to contribute to state and community capacity to sustain and build engagement and continue to influence policy on early childhood issues.

What are the Capacity-Building Supports Provided to Communities?

In addition to community grants, the Memorial Fund provides a range of supports to communities to support the work of the Discovery Initiative. This presentation organizes the capacity-building supports into three categories:

- ***Community Liaisons:*** A consultant hired to work regularly with the collaborative group to offer advice, give feedback, provide limited facilitation support, encourage use of other capacity-building supports, and promote understanding of the Discovery values and goals as they apply in the community's unique context;
- ***Opportunities for Peer Sharing:*** Connections with other communities through convenings (the annual Stone Soup conference, regional and cohort meetings, and other events) and electronically through a listserv; and
- ***Training and Tools:*** Access to expert knowledge, tools, and other information resources in a variety of ways -- electronically through the Discovery web site and weekly newsletter, single-session workshops and training sessions, multi-session institutes, and on-site technical assistance. Some of these supports are provided by statewide grantees and others by other groups or individuals from within Connecticut or elsewhere.

What Has the Evaluation Observed To Date?

These observations are primarily based on written community applications submitted in February 2007 and interviews primarily with coordinators during the summer of 2007. These sources are used as "informants" about the community collaborative as a whole.

Summary of observations about how communities use the capacity-building supports

- Every community is aware of the capacity-building supports that are available.
- Communities most consistently use and value liaisons and peer sharing opportunities.
- Communities use resources and tools provided at trainings when they have an immediate need.
- Communities use the website to access archived materials from trainings and peer connections to obtain examples from other communities, when needed.
- Many communities can describe specific ways in which the knowledge, tools and relationships from capacity-building supports have furthered their work.

Preliminary lessons learned about effective capacity-building supports

Communities particularly value opportunities to learn through relationships.

- An on-going relationship with the community liaison has been an important way for communities to understand the values and goals of Discovery and receive feedback on their work.
- In addition, liaisons have often encouraged and supported peer learning by sharing what they know about the other communities with which they work.
- Opportunities for peer sharing and learning are highly valued, even if time-consuming and logistically difficult at times.
- The website and listserv create opportunities for peer learning and are used for this purpose by the majority of communities who take advantage of this tool.

It is a challenge to provide relevant and immediately applicable information and tools to many communities simultaneously. Some strategies are more successful in this regard than others.

- Approaches that have been especially valued include on-site technical assistance, engagement of teams in trainings, multi-session institutes, and methods that foster direct peer communication (listserv, regional or cohort meetings).
- Traditional methods – single shot workshops held at a central location — are of interest to communities, but applying what is learned is affected by

relevance to what the community is working on at the time and the amount of follow-up support available.

- Different approaches work for different communities at different times dealing with different issues. Toolkits and other written pieces are generally seen less valuable than peer learning, but are very valuable when they provide an immediate fit with an existing need of the collaborative.

The individual capacity-building supports not only serve specific purposes, but also amplify each other, creating synergistic or multiplicative effects.

- Liaisons encourage communities to take advantage of trainings and use toolkits.
- Liaisons also share lessons learned from other communities, helping build peer learning networks.
- The website captures tools and resources from trainings and makes them available to communities on an as needed basis.
- The website encourages and supports peer exchange by providing a forum for communities to post their own materials and stories.
- Training sessions and other convenings create opportunities for communities to establish relationships and learn from each other.

Next Steps for the Evaluation

The evaluation will continue to document and analyze the Discovery capacity-building approach, looking at the following questions:

- How was communities' use of capacity-building supports related to progress in the Discovery work through 2007?

To do this, the evaluation will develop community profiles of the use and value of capacity-building supports. These community profiles will be correlated with measures of community progress through 2007, derived from information on their 2008-09 applications.

- How are communities making use of capacity-building supports in 2008-09?

The evaluation will document the capacity-building strategies during 2008-09, particularly in the areas of leadership development and community planning, and compile information on their use and value in communities. The evaluation will document the use of capacity-building supports among those Discovery communities that also have partnership planning grants for comparison with use by other Discovery communities.

- Are the supports provided through Discovery developing sustainable capacity in communities?

The evaluation will use multiple approaches to measuring the development of community characteristics associated with sustained attention and capacity to influence policy and practice.

ADDENDUM: Observations on Specific Supports

Community Liaisons

Description of this capacity-building support:

The liaison role¹ has been carefully crafted and articulated by the Memorial Fund in written documents and through meetings and discussions with the consultants hired for this work. Liaisons are provided with peer support through monthly meetings and professional development opportunities by being expected to take part in all capacity-building workshops.

The liaison role was modified mid-way through the Initiative to allow and encourage them to facilitate community self-assessment and planning activities associated with the annual applications.

Observations about how this support has been used and valued by communities:

Liaison role is well understood by communities, both what they can and are expected to do and what they cannot do.

Liaisons are almost universally valued as a support to communities.

Communities report that the liaisons have been especially valuable in four areas:

- Communications from the Memorial Fund and Memorial Fund processes and forms
- Links with other Discovery communities
- Support for the collaborative in its work
- Source of expertise

Related to Memorial Fund communication and processes, between half and three-quarters of communities reported liaisons as helpful in:

- Linking the community's work with the Discovery vision (73 percent)
- Clarifying Memorial Fund communications (67 percent)
- Being a vehicle for communicating with the Memorial Fund (58 percent)
- Facilitating assessment and planning processes required for the Discovery application (51 percent)

Approximately 40 percent of the communities noted that their liaison had been helpful in sharing information from other communities and/or facilitating a direct peer exchange with another community.

¹ Please refer to the description above.

Between one-quarter and one-half of the communities mentioned ways in which their liaison helped support effective group processes within their collaborative:

- Keeping the group on track by referring to their action plan or to the Discovery values and goals
- Listening and asking questions to stimulate deeper reflection and ensure that multiple perspectives are considered
- Being a sounding board for ideas

In addition, almost 60 percent reported that the liaison was an important support for the community coordinator.

More than half (56 percent) of the communities commented that their liaison brought valuable expert knowledge, not necessarily in the field of early care and education, but in group dynamics, community collaboration, state policy issues, or other topics.

Peer sharing

Electronic communications

Description of this capacity-building support:

Electronic communications are intended to provide communities with access to tools and resources (via the website discovery.wcgmf.org and the weekly Digest) and to help communities learn from each other (via community pages on the website and the listserv). The website includes all capacity-building tools and resources, a page for each community with background and activities, and research and other information from state and national sources. The listserv is open to any community member to join; coordinators are automatically enrolled on the listserv. The weekly Digest message was developed to address possible information overload because the website is dense and complex; the message goes to all listserv members and highlights three items only.

Observations about how this support has been used and valued by communities:

Almost all communities have used the website at least once between 2003 and 2007. ???

Communities report being able to use the website to get information and resources when they need it, and that the website is an efficient way to make these available.

The main ways communities make use of the website are:

- Get access to information about other communities (70 percent)
- Locate resources and tools on specific topics (almost 50 percent)

- Learn about Discovery or the Memorial Fund in general (20 percent)
- Look up Memorial Fund forms or check the Discovery calendar (20 percent)

All communities have used the listserv at some point since 2004, either posting a message (such as notice of a community event, request for a sample document, or request for advice or experience on a specific topic) or responding to a message from another community. A small set of communities are frequent users of the listserv.

The number of messages posted on the listserv has remained steady over the years, being used on an as-needed basis.

Communities report that the listserv has been particularly valuable to find out what other communities are doing related to a specific issue or topic (52 percent) and to exchange information or share documents with other communities (36 percent).

About one-quarter of communities especially mention the weekly Digest as efficient and effective in highlighting new information, tools, or learning opportunities.

The Digest also serves as a reminder about resources available on the website and upcoming capacity-building opportunities.

Face-to-face peer sharing opportunities

Description of this capacity-building support:

In addition to electronic communication channels to encourage and support peer sharing, there are face-to-face opportunities. These opportunities include state-wide meetings (such as the annual Stone Soup conference), convenings of subgroups of communities (regionally or in groups based on similarity in level of development), and training sessions.

Observations about how this support has been used and valued by communities:

Almost all communities mention specific ways face-to-face peer connections have been helpful.

Opportunities that were mentioned as particularly valuable included Stone Soup, personal contacts among coordinators or other collaborative members, regional meetings, and visits to other communities.

Common ways that face-to-face peer connections have been valuable were:

- Get ideas that could be used in one's own community (64 percent)
- Build relationships and networks with those working in other communities (36 percent)
- Draw more community members in the Discovery work (18 percent)
- Provide support for the coordinator (16 percent)

In addition to face-to-face peer sharing, three-quarters of the communities mentioned some cross-community activity, most often joint parent leadership training or professional development. Other cross-community activities included a network among coordinators and joint planning, policy work, and publicity.

About two-thirds of the communities mentioned some barriers to peer connections or cross-community work. Most often mentioned were the time involved, the distance to travel, and work overload on community activities.

The Discovery communities indicated a strong desire for the Memorial Fund to continue to offer opportunities for peer connections. One common method was to set aside time during other activities (conferences, meetings, etc.) for peer exchange.

Training and tools on specific topics

Description of this capacity-building support:

Each year a set of training sessions, usually to introduce a tool or method, have been held. These sessions have generally been held centrally (usually in the Hamden area), but some have been regionally offered.

The topics have varied across the Initiative's period. Between 2003 through 2006 the topics have been on general strategies (advocacy, communications, community organizing, parent engagement, strategic planning) and on specific early care and education issues (best practices, informal care, kindergarten transition, program quality).

Observations about how this support has been used and valued by communities:

About four in ten communities were able to describe a specific example of how they applied information or skills from a training session in their work.

The tools and associated training that were mentioned as especially helpful related to parent engagement and strategic communication.

On-site technical assistance when provided (to about half of the communities) was rated as very helpful in advancing the community's Discovery work.