

**THE DISCOVERY INITIATIVE:
2004-2007**

**INTERIM SUMMATIVE EVALUATION REPORT
SUMMARY**

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This report was prepared by the Discovery Initiative Evaluation Team for the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund in late 2008 and early 2009. The information used in this report was collected between 2005 and 2007. Further details on the data collection are presented in the appendix to the report.

We greatly appreciate the input and feedback of the Memorial Fund staff, the members and staff of the Discovery community collaborative groups, the staff of the statewide organizations receiving Memorial Fund grants, and other individuals in the Discovery communities and at the state level who were interviewed during the course of the evaluation. The questions and advice of the members of the Evaluation Consultative Group – Andrea Anderson, Prudence Brown, Charles Bruner, and Sue Wilson – on an earlier draft were also very valuable, as were those of Sally Leiderman. The analyses and conclusions in this report solely reflect the perspective of the Evaluation Team.

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The Context for the Discovery Initiative

The well-being of Connecticut's young children — with a particular emphasis on education — has been a major focus of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund since 1993. Between 1995 and 1999, with a legacy period in the following two years, the Memorial Fund worked with seven Connecticut communities in the Children First Initiative (CFI), with the goal of improving life and educational outcomes for children from birth to age eight.

In 1997 the Connecticut legislature established the School Readiness program to provide grants to school districts with substantial numbers of children eligible for the federal free or reduced price lunch program. The School Readiness Act funds preschool slots in accredited or approved programs for eligible children and provides full-day, part-day/part-year and extended day options through public, nonprofit and for-profit providers who have achieved accreditation from recognized regional or national organizations. From 2004 through 2007, the state expended over \$200 million in the School Readiness program, and in 2007 the program served 8,685 children throughout the state. The vast majority of the School Readiness funds (94 percent) were allocated to Discovery communities and 93 percent of the children served live in these communities.

Based on lessons learned from the CFI community experience and the evolving support for early childhood education at the state level, the Discovery Initiative began in 2001. Connecticut communities were invited to participate in an initial planning process during 2002 and 2003, followed by implementation beginning in 2004. Eventually, 49 communities joined the Initiative, organizing themselves into 47 collaborative groups.ⁱ The Memorial Fund made annual grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$50,000 each year beginning in 2002 to the Discovery communities and committed a total of \$16 million between 2002 and 2007 to the Discovery Initiative as a whole.ⁱⁱ The Memorial Fund made substantial investments in a variety of supports for its grantees – communities and state-wide and regional organizations. It has also supported other state entities such as the Early Childhood Research and Policy Council and participated in funding partnerships with state agencies and the Parent Trust Fund.

The Discovery Initiative Theory of Change

The Discovery Initiative identified four specific objectives as its focus:

- Expand the supply of high quality early childhood education
- Increase the quality of existing early childhood education
- Build strong connections between early care and elementary education
- Improve students' social, emotional and academic performance

The Initiative also intended to create a legacy of sustained community and statewide focus on early childhood issues and capacity to influence policy on behalf of young children.

The Initiative as an intervention includes the Memorial Fund's approach to working with its partners, the assumptions or principles that underlie the Initiative, and the specific investments made in capacity building. The direct contributions of the Discovery Initiative are expected to be strengthened capacities (infrastructure, skills, and processes) and relationships (networks and partnerships) within and among communities and state-level organizations and groups.

According to the Initiative theory of change, strengthened capacities and relationships will enable stakeholders to mobilize for specific changes in local and state early childhood education policies and practices. These intermediate policy and practice changes at the community and state levels are then expected to contribute to cumulative benefits for young children, a critical

mass of advocates and engaged constituencies including parents, enhanced organizational capacities and individual skills among those stakeholders, and political momentum and champions. These factors will contribute to the longer-term development of the capacity to maintain and build political momentum and continue the development and expansion of policies in support of early childhood issues in Connecticut.

The Discovery Initiative Evaluation

The focus of the evaluation through this interim summative report was on documenting and assessing the extent to which the Discovery Initiative contributed to the development of community and state capacities to effectively mobilize and advocate for early childhood education policy and practice changes. The evaluation posed two questions for this stage of the Initiative – is the Initiative “on track” in the key elements of the Discovery theory of change, and how have these elements contributed to the objectives and long-term goal of the Initiative? The key elements that were examined included:

- Using technical assistance and other tools to build capacities and leadership
- Encouraging parent engagement and leadership in communities and statewide
- Supporting collaboration at the community and state levels
- Building public support for early childhood education in communities and across the state

Evidence was gathered using both quantitative and qualitative methods from and about the Discovery communities and collaborative groups and the statewide and regional organizations funded by the Memorial Fund as part of the Initiative. Memorial Fund staff and state-level stakeholders were also asked to share their observations and perspectives on the Initiative and its work.

Interim Results of the Initiative

Within and among communities, between communities and state-wide organizations, and with state entities like the Early Childhood Education 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, ensure 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.

The results of work in individual communities, regionally, across the state, and at the state level are expected to create a dynamic interaction among the following factors:

- A *critical mass* of communities, advocates, and citizens, actively engaged in policy work at the local and state levels on early childhood issues;
- *Cumulative results* of specific changes in policy and practice related to the Discovery objectives;
- *Enhanced capacity* of community collaboratives and statewide organizations to work effectively on these issues; and
- *Political momentum* and a groundswell of public support.

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

Observed Results through 2007

Through 2007, almost all of the Discovery collaborative groups were able to report improvements within their communities on one or more of the four objectives, and to identify ways in which the work of Discovery had contributed to those results. However, in general, these improvements were too recent and too small in scope and scale to result in major changes in children's experiences and outcomes. Most often mentioned, by between 70 and 80 percent of communities, were increases in the supply and quality of early education opportunities and strengthening of connections between early education providers and the K-12 school system, while improvements in children's social-emotional development or early school success were noted in about one-third of communities. The Discovery collaborative groups were believed to have contributed to these improvements through a variety of local strategies.

By 2007, some cross-community or regional work was being organized, but less than one-third of the Discovery communities were involved and most of the work was programmatic in nature. Less than one-third of the Discovery communities requested funding to carry out activities with other communities in their region and most of these projects were intended to provide joint programs. Five of the six regional grants awarded were to take advantage of economies of scale in providing parent leadership training or professional development for early education providers and kindergarten teachers. One of the six regional grants was focused on cross-community mobilization and policy advocacy.

About half of the Discovery collaborative groups had the capacity and community support to begin more comprehensive local planning around the needs of young children in 2008. In 2007 the Connecticut General Assembly authorized, with matching funds from the Memorial Fund, a partnership grant program to support communities in developing comprehensive local plans to respond to the needs of young children. These plans were intended to strengthen the capacity of communities to take advantage of increased investment in the state-funded School Readiness Program as well as to mobilize local and other resources on behalf of young children's health, development, and school success. Communities were encouraged to assess their readiness before applying for these grants. Readiness factors included community engagement, political and other leadership, and resources.

By 2007, 60 percent of the 49 Discovery communities were engaged in either regional projects or in community-wide planning, or in eight communities, in both. These efforts took the work outside the bounds of a small group to the larger community and beyond.

Community experience in collaboration and demographic characteristics were factors in community readiness to engage in broader work in their community, but not in their participation in projects with other communities in their region. Communities with longer collaborative experienceⁱⁱⁱ were more likely to consider themselves ready to engage in broader community planning, compared to less experienced communities. These characteristics were not associated with whether communities participated in a regional grant. The nature of the regional projects – focused more on programmatic than policy activities – may not require a high level of collaborative experience. In fact, these kinds of projects – both locally and regionally – may be stepping stones for collaborative groups in developing the broader engagement and support needed to spearhead community planning.

Community demographic factors were also strongly associated with whether a community applied for and received a community planning grant. The more populous Discovery

communities, those with larger populations of color, and those designated as priority school districts based on the percent of low income school children were all more likely to have the resources, infrastructure, and capacity to apply for and receive a planning grant.

Through 2007, political support in Connecticut for early childhood issues grew, with credit given to the sustained work of the Memorial Fund in laying the foundation for action spearheaded by the Governor and Legislature. However, the apparent gains were not fully realized. The 2007 legislative session resulted in substantial increased state investment in early childhood education services and for community early childhood planning. The 2007 legislative session saw an increase in new state funding for early childhood education of \$56.2 million. These funds authorized for the School Readiness program were expected to create 2,000 to 2,400 new slots in 2008 and 2009. However, new funds from the 2007 session were not fully used, as the Connecticut State Department of Education chose not to spend the full \$15 million allocated for preschool expansion.

Use and Value of Initiative Capacity-Building Supports

The Memorial Fund implemented a strategy for supporting the Discovery Initiative communities that combined relatively small grants with an array of technical assistance resources focused on building collaboration, encouraging parent engagement, and promoting community change. The Memorial Fund also provided support, in addition to grants, to a group of statewide and regional grantee organizations, intended to build their internal capacities and promote coordination and collaboration as well as to support specific activities.

One of the lessons learned in the Memorial Fund's Children First Initiative was that most communities had little experience in developing broad-based collaborative groups, particularly groups engaging non-professionals and parents from diverse backgrounds. Further, communities beginning this type of work with foundation funding often chose to create direct services or run programs, rather than invest the funds in building their capacity to mobilize public support and develop sustainable plans to invest in young children. It took guidance and incentives from outside the community, and leadership, vision, and experience from within the community for such groups to move from a focus on developing and implementing specific programs or activities toward a role as a catalyst for mobilizing community resources and actions to improve the early experiences of all the community's children. Since the Discovery Initiative is focused on building capacity, not funding programs or direct services, the technical assistance strategy was designed to support the development of community groups that embodied the core principles of collaboration, parent leadership, and community engagement and that could lead a community change process.

Capacity building for the statewide and regional grantee organizations unfolded in a different way than for the community grantees. The Memorial Fund has supported state-level policy research and advocacy since its founding. However, until the Discovery Initiative was being planned, the foundation did not articulate specific expectations about the importance of coordinated agendas and actions among organizations working on early childhood issues at the state-level. Early on in the Initiative, statewide and regional grantees were provided with opportunities to build their organizational capacities to work on those issues and develop more complementary relationships. Increasingly, the understanding by the Memorial Fund and by the grantee organizations has been that a shared agenda and a common voice are needed to develop broad support and public investment in early childhood education. Further, as with communities, the Memorial Fund believed that funding and technical assistance would be necessary to build this collaboration and realize these results.

At the end of 2006, the Memorial Fund began to focus on four statewide advocacy organizations

-- Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS), Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance (the Alliance), Connecticut Parent Power (Parent Power), and Connecticut Voices for Children (Voices) – and support their capacity to do their work more effectively. This support included individualized technical assistance to work on both internal capacity building and cross-organization collaboration.

Findings related to Use and Value of Capacity-Building Supports through 2007

While communities valued opportunities to learn through relationships with their community liaison and from their peers, the single-session technical assistance workshops offered were considered less helpful. It proved challenging for these workshops to provide relevant and immediately applicable information and tools to many communities simultaneously. While the workshops were generally attended by someone from most communities, applying the information provided was affected by relevance to what the community was working on at the time and the amount of follow-up support available. On the other hand, learning from peers and from the community liaison was more often of immediate value to the collaborative's work. Communities could share experiences with their peers and get a sense of how they were approaching the work and dealing with challenges. Liaisons, through their regular contact with their assigned communities, could identify appropriate times to offer information and resources when the community would be "ready" to take them up. Communities also made use of the Initiative's vehicles for electronic communications to access information. Here, they could obtain materials and resources from the workshops or other communities when they were most interested and able to make use of them.

Community use and value of capacity building supports were greater among the collaborative groups with robust organizational structure and capacity. Communities that received value from Discovery technical assistance and training workshops had collaborative groups that were more inclusive and engaged and with stronger collaborative structure and leadership. These communities, and those that found the work of their liaison helpful, also were more likely to have used the bulk of their prior Memorial Fund grants, indicating that they had been better able to implement their action plans. This relationship suggests that there may be a minimum level of collaborative organization and capacity necessary to make good use of technical assistance, and/or that the supports were helpful in strengthening the collaborative group.

Grant funding and staff support were important in building the capacity of statewide and regional organizations to work on early childhood issues, particularly as advocates. The statewide and regional grantees valued the supports received from the Memorial Fund staff to build their capacity, including convening funders, offering advice and insight and sharing contacts, relationships and knowledge. Two of the four statewide organizations that now form the core of the Memorial Fund's statewide strategy received technical assistance to build their internal capacity. All of the four organizations used the technical assistance offered to develop collaborative projects.

There is evidence that communities' and statewide and regional organizations' internal capacity to act as catalytic agents for change has increased. However, for both, the impact of this capacity on early childhood issues in the state remains to be seen. Through 2007, community use of the Initiative's capacity building supports was associated with the strength and functioning of the Discovery collaborative group. However, community collaborative use of capacity building opportunities was not associated with greater parent leadership and engagement in the community or on the collaborative, with broader community support for the work, with improvements on the Discovery objectives, or with participation in regional work or community planning projects. For the core group of statewide organizations, the technical assistance and increased funding that helped strengthen their internal capacities and

encouraged them to work together may have set the stage for more coordinated advocacy in the 2007 legislative sessions. Still, as of 2007, these organizations' ability to mobilize parents and communities was limited, and some concerns remained about consensus among them on a clear vision for early childhood policy.

Parent Engagement and Leadership

Parent engagement is a core value of the Memorial Fund and of the Discovery Initiative. Supporting parent engagement at the community and state levels is a central strategy of the Discovery Initiative because of the underlying assumption that parents are the best advocates for their children, effective agents for change on their behalf, and necessary to ensure sustained attention to the needs of young children. Further, parent input into the design and implementation of programs and services is assumed to be critical to ensuring that these investments will meet actual needs in ways that are accessible and acceptable.

The Discovery Initiative defines parent engagement as a collective responsibility, not something an individual parent is responsible for doing. The Discovery community collaborative groups and statewide parent organizations were expected to be the vehicles for promoting parent engagement and ensuring that there are ongoing supports for the development of leadership skills among parents. The Discovery community collaboratives were intended to provide one way in which parents could have a strong role in influencing local policies and practices affecting young children as members and leaders on the collaborative group. At the same time, the Memorial Fund was clear that parent engagement need not and should not be limited to participation on the Discovery collaborative group. The expectation is that the Discovery work would stimulate other community groups and institutions, including schools, to find ways to encourage and support multiple forms of parent engagement.

The Memorial Fund provided funds to the Parent Trust Fund to make it possible for communities to offer high quality parent leadership training, build up a cadre of parent leaders, and give them experience in taking community leadership roles. The Fund also supported state-level parent organizing through Connecticut Parent Power. Both investments were intended to provide opportunities for parents from across the state to learn about the structure of local and state government and the legislative and budgeting processes, set policy priorities based on parent interests, and bring parents together in coordinated advocacy activities to speak with one voice.

Findings related to Parent Engagement and Leadership through 2007

While almost universally acknowledged as an important goal and thriving in some communities, parent engagement and leadership was generally modest in many communities and at the state level. The Discovery communities had engaged parents as members and offered them leadership opportunities on the collaborative groups in many cases, but almost two-thirds of the groups had few parent members or leaders. While almost all Discovery collaboratives supported activities and events to provide parents with access to information on community resources, many fewer reported examples of parents taking leadership roles in the community. Further, about half Discovery communities had offered none of the statewide parent leadership training programs between 2002 and 2007 and, among those that had, the average community offered training only occasionally.

Parent participation on the collaborative and parent leadership programs were distinct aspects of work on parent engagement in the Discovery communities. Progress on one was not associated with progress on the other. Parent leadership training did not appear to make it easier or more likely that parents would play a substantial role in the Discovery work, nor did having parents as members and leaders on the collaborative lead to more opportunities for

parents to receive training and exercise leadership in the community. However, communities that began the Discovery Initiative with a longer history of working collaboratively with parents involved also had higher levels of community support for parent engagement and leadership. Further, while parent membership and leadership on the collaboratives was not associated with progress on the Discovery objectives or with undertaking broader community planning, community support for parent leadership training was.

There was growing recognition of the critical role for parents in both community and state work on early childhood issues, but overall, by 2007, parent voices were not yet strong drivers of that work. Although the level of parent membership and leadership on the collaboratives was not associated with progress on the Discovery objectives overall, there were specific examples where parents made substantial contributions through Discovery. In communities where there was greater support for parent leadership training, improvements for young children were more often reported. It also appeared that experience with parent leadership training, rather than parent membership and leadership on the Discovery collaborative group, played a role in preparing communities to take on broader community planning work.

Statewide and regional grantee organizations, interviewed in 2006, were encouraged by their perception of a new momentum around parent and community organizing. However, state level stakeholders still talked about a need for greater parent voice. During the 2007 legislative session, parents from various communities participated in Parent Power events, such as advocacy training sessions, field trips to the State Capital, community candidate forums, and a letter writing campaign in which 500 parents wrote letters to legislators, delivered along with 5,000 pictures from young children. However, after the 2007 legislative session, state level stakeholders, including legislators, reported that neither parents nor communities had exercised a strong voice on early childhood issues.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a core value underlying the Discovery Initiative. The Memorial Fund understands collaboration to be the “process whereby multiple organizations, systems and community stakeholders work together to achieve outcomes beneficial to a community that could not be achieved individually.” Collaboration at the community level was a principle of the Children First Initiative. In Discovery, it has also become an explicit part of the Memorial Fund’s strategy at the state-level as well.

As a requirement for participating in Discovery, the Memorial Fund asked participating communities to identify an existing collaborating group, or assemble a new group, defined as “a broadly representative body of community stakeholders that assumes responsibility, on behalf of the community at large, to improve outcomes for young children. The collaborating group functions as a catalyst or change agent by creating and sustaining the political will necessary to change social conditions including community attitudes, institutional policies, professional practice, the allocation of resources, and the ways in which the community makes decisions and establishes priorities. Participants commit to a common vision, conduct joint planning, pool institutional resources and share the risks, results and rewards.” The community collaborative groups were assumed to need infrastructure that included “mechanisms or functions necessary to assess and sustain a community change agenda” such as “...management information systems to collect data across agencies to assess progress and impact; dedicated staff; parent leadership training opportunities; and public communication mechanisms.”

The Memorial Fund's expectations about how the statewide grantees would contribute to the work of the Discovery Initiative on the community level evolved over time. In the beginning, these organizations were encouraged to support the work of the communities through data

analysis and public policy research. The capacity to do this work had been supported and fostered by the Memorial Fund throughout the Children First Initiative. Over time, these organizations were increasingly expected to build stronger relationships with each other and with communities and carry out collaborative projects.

Collaboration among the statewide and regional grantee organizations was not strongly emphasized in the early years of the Discovery Initiative. As the Initiative evolved, it appeared that these organizations could be more effective advocates if they were working in collaboration toward a common agenda. The Memorial Fund began convening the statewide grantee organizations on a more regular basis to give them opportunities to explore connections with each other's work. The Memorial Fund also began talking with its "core" grantees about how to foster collaboration among them and with Discovery communities.

Findings related to Collaboration through 2007

By the end of 2007, collaboration within communities had increased overall to a moderate level, although some collaborative groups remained loosely structured without strong member engagement or leadership. The available measures of collaborative membership, infrastructure, and functioning generally indicated that by 2007 many communities had established a collaborative body with diverse membership, leadership, and organizational structure. Most had engaged a substantial number of stakeholder groups – on average, about 10, with a range from 18 to 4. The superintendent or his/her designee was a collaborative group member in almost 80 percent of the Discovery communities. However, at that time some continued to struggle with establishing or maintaining a well-functioning collaborative group. The average collaborative group's structure and functioning was rated by their liaison at about mid-way between "minimal" and "good", with 42 percent of the collaboratives below that value. Relatively few (38 percent) had engaged city elected leadership as active members on the Discovery collaborative. About one-third had not used a substantial portion of their prior year's Memorial Fund grants, even though those groups with substantial carryover amounts had significantly less of their Discovery budgets coming from local sources.

Developing strong and stable collaboration in communities required time to build relationships and put in place mechanisms for communication and decision-making. After a planning period and four years of funding and capacity-building support, many of the 47 Discovery collaborative groups appeared, based on available measures, to be organized and functioning at modest levels. While many of the communities that started the implementation period in 2004 with minimal collaborative infrastructure and experience have become stronger, collaborative infrastructure and capacity assessed in 2004 remains a good predictor of collaboration strength as measured in 2007. Further, there is both quantitative and anecdotal information to confirm the observation that the kind of loosely organized collaborations currently existing in most Discovery communities can fluctuate in capacity and functioning over time.

By 2007, communication and cooperation among the statewide and regional grantee organizations had increased, although active collaboration was just beginning. Early on in the Initiative, the grantee organizations were observed to be "territorial" in their approach to the work while duplicating some activities and functions. The Memorial Fund's efforts to encourage communication and relationships were seen as contributing to stronger connections between organizations working on early childhood issues. This appeared to play a role in making it possible for the advocacy organizations to craft a joint agenda that contributed to the successes of the 2007 legislative session. However, this success was realized in a much more favorable economic climate and the joint agenda was developed in reaction to legislative opportunities rather than proactively in advance of the legislative session.

Collaborative work between communities and the statewide organizations was not yet widespread nor robust by the end of 2007. While there was some collaborative work between communities and the statewide organizations by 2007, both recognized that more work was needed to strengthen the connections and engage in meaningful joint work.

Public Support for Early Childhood Issues

One of the goals of the Discovery Initiative is to mobilize parents, communities, advocates, and policymakers statewide to improve policy and practice for children from birth to eight years old. Community collaborative groups and statewide advocacy organizations that receive Discovery grants and supports and those with whom they collaborate are expected to have major roles in creating these conditions for mobilization and for policy and practice change. The Initiative has invested in capacity-building for both Discovery community collaborative groups and a set of statewide organizations so that they can effectively take on those roles. The strengthened capacities (infrastructure, skills, and processes) and relationships (networks and partnerships) that the Discovery Initiative directly supported at the community and state levels were expected to enable stakeholders to mobilize public support for changes and investments in early childhood education policies and practices.

The concept of the “50th community” was an aspiration from the very beginning of Discovery. This phrase generally referred to an organized, coordinated network of communities, early childhood champions, local and statewide organizations and agencies working together to funnel their individual early childhood goals and strategies into a cohesive state policy agenda. The 50th community was assumed to be critical in building social momentum and political capital and to have collective power that would be more influential than possible by its various individual organizations or groups.

Findings related to Public Support as of 2007

Overall, the Discovery communities provided moderate levels of support for early childhood issues and the work of the collaborative group. Evidence of community support included community leaders championing early childhood issues, the community organization acting as the Discovery collaborative (fiscal) agent providing a broad range of support to the collaborative group, and contribution to the collaborative group’s budget from local public and private sources. The largest differences among communities were the amount of local resources provided for their work; while the average percent of the Discovery budget from local sources was 39 percent, one-quarter of the communities had no local support, cash or in-kind, at all. Larger communities were better able to provide those resources, both cash and in-kind, than smaller ones. Level of collaborative functioning, currently and as of 2004, was also correlated with community support. Communities with stronger Discovery collaborative groups were also those where community leaders championed early childhood issues and where the local collaborative agent was more supportive of the work of Discovery.

While most Discovery collaboratives sponsored activities to inform their local legislator of their community’s interest in early childhood issues, these were not part of a state-wide advocacy strategy. While most Discovery communities took actions to connect with local state policymakers, this was generally carried out by each community independently, inviting their local legislators to attend a single event per year in the community. Although Connecticut Parent Power and the Early Childhood Alliance attempted to engage communities in public will building projects, only a few communities were members of the Alliance or had parent delegates in Parent Power by the end of 2007.

Although by the end of 2007 relationships between statewide grantees were stronger than they had been at the start of Discovery, they had not yet become a strong coalition, speaking with a cohesive message. After the 2007 legislative session, the statewide advocacy organizations funded by the Memorial Fund were credited with contributing to this result through their efforts to educate legislators and by coming together to develop an “Advocates Budget,” which was presented to the legislature in response to the Governor’s proposed early education budget and largely adopted by the Appropriations committee. However, state-level stakeholders did not yet see the statewide organizations as having a coordinated message and a coordinated agenda. Legislators in particular identified a need for advocacy groups to come to them with a shared agenda for action.

By 2007, there had been progress toward building coordinated public support for early care and education, but the vision of the 50th community was not yet fully embraced or implemented by communities or the statewide organizations. By mid-2007, Discovery communities were asking for additional support for regional work and in 2008 six regional grants, involving a total of 14 Discovery communities, were awarded by the Memorial Fund. These grants focused on joint programmatic activities, such as parent training and early education provider professional development; only one regional grant was to support cross-community mobilization and advocacy work. After the 2007 session, state level stakeholders, including legislators, reported that parents had not exercised a strong voice on early childhood issues and that communities had not played an active role in state policy work. This suggests that there is not yet an organized, coordinated network of communities, early childhood champions, local and statewide organizations and agencies working together to funnel their individual early childhood goals and strategies into a cohesive state policy agenda.

Summary

In response to the question, “Is the Initiative “on track” in the key elements of the Discovery theory of change?” the interim findings suggest an overall answer of “yes, to a moderate degree.” This applies to all elements of the Initiative examined by the evaluation to date, at both the community and state levels: use of Initiative capacity-building supports, parent engagement and leadership, collaboration, and public support. Progress is evident on each, but the strength and resilience predicted by the Initiative’s theory of change have not been fully realized as yet.

The answer to the question, “How have these elements contributed to the Initiative’s objectives and the long-term goal of sustained community and statewide focus and ability to influence policy on early childhood issues?” is also “yes, to some degree.” The Memorial Fund’s long-standing commitment to and support of early childhood issues and the Discovery Initiative supports and strategies were credited with laying the groundwork in Connecticut communities and at the state level for increased attention to and investment in early education and young children’s early school success. Through 2007, however, the progress on the Discovery objectives was generally modest; even the increased state appropriations for the School Readiness preschool program were not fully utilized.

The Memorial Fund’s decision to continue the Initiative for an additional two years (2008-2009) and to increase the level of its investment reflects recognition of this reality and belief in the potential for further progress. Calling it “Positioning for Future Success,” three goals have been outlined for this phase of the Initiative - sustaining the momentum of Discovery, leveraging expanded State commitment to early care and education, and building the capacity of community and statewide organization grantees and other partners to lead and advance an early care and education agenda. This extended period for the Initiative coincides with changes in national political leadership and priorities and an economic environment in which family, community, state, and national resources have been dramatically reduced and in which the

needs of young children face even tougher competition with other critical issues. The circumstances of this period as well as modifications within the Initiative itself provide the evaluation with an extraordinary opportunity to continue its documentation and assessment.

Based on findings from the interim summative report, input from the Evaluation Consultative Group and Memorial Fund staff, and opportunities to learn from the evolving nature of the Initiative, the evaluation will focus on five main topics for the 2009-2010 period:

- What **results are observed at the state and community level** especially in terms of commitment of resources to improving the early childhood system and child outcomes? What factors appear to have contributed to observed results? To what extent does the Discovery theory of change reflect/predict the observed results and contributing factors?
- What evidence is there of a **sustained/sustainable base of support for continued work** on early childhood issues at community and state level going into 2010? What factors appear to have contributed to this base of support? To what extent does the Discovery theory of change reflect/predict the observed base of support?
- To what extent is there a **coordinated policy agenda and effort** on behalf of young children in communities and statewide? To what extent is coordinated policy agenda & effort considered necessary to achieving results? What factors contributed to current level and what do stakeholders believe is needed to go beyond that level??
- What **contribution or influence have parents individually and collectively had** on policy and practice change at the community and state levels? During the 2008-2009 period, how did community collaborative groups and/or statewide advocacy organizations engage families of color/low-income families?
- What has been the **trajectory of collaboration** -- within and between communities and statewide advocacy organizations? How long has it taken to build an effective and sustainable level of collaboration? What factors contributed to resiliency or fragility in collaboration?

ⁱ The 49 Discovery communities were priority districts, transition districts, or districts with severe needs schools, as defined by the Connecticut State Department of Education based on the family income of students. Over half of Connecticut's children, from birth through age 17, lived in these communities, according to the 2000 Census.

ⁱⁱ In December 2006, the Memorial Fund's Board of Trustees approved a plan to continue the Initiative for an additional two years (2008-2009) and to increase the level of its investment.

ⁱⁱⁱ Three cohorts of communities were defined based on assessment of the level of collaborative infrastructure and experience at the beginning of the implementation phase of the Initiative in 2004. The cohorts were expected to need different types of technical assistance and were convened together for a number of capacity-building events. The levels were defined to reflect how well the Discovery collaboratives were organized to work on behalf of all young children, the extent to which the collaboratives were taking actions that will improve how young children fare in their communities, and the extent to which changes in policies and practices were observed. Of the 49 collaborative groups formed from the 49 participating communities, 24 (51 percent) were assigned to first (starting) level indicating that there was limited collaborative structure and activity, 14 (30 percent) were assigned to the middle level, and 9 (19 percent) were at the top level. Five of the seven communities that had participated in the Children First Initiative were assigned to the top level, and one each to the middle and starting levels.