

**NAVIGATING THE “PERFECT STORM”:
MOVING FROM PLAN TO ACTION DURING AN ECONOMIC DOWNTURN
The Experiences of Four Discovery Communities that Received 2008-2009
Partnership Planning Grants**

Prepared by

S. A. Stephens, PhD

The Center for Assessment and Policy Development

and

Donna Studdiford

On Point Consulting

June 2011

This paper was prepared by the Discovery Initiative Evaluation Team for the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund in late 2010 and early 2011, using data collected in late 2010.

We wish to extend special thanks to the members and staff of the Discovery collaborative groups in Meriden, New Britain, Torrington, and Waterbury who participated in group interviews in the fall of 2010. As always, we appreciate the input and feedback of the Memorial Fund staff. The analyses and conclusions in this report solely reflect the perspective of the Evaluation Team.

Sam Stephens

Center for Assessment and Policy Development

www.capd.org

Donna Studdiford

On Point Consulting

www.onpointconsulting.org

**NAVIGATING THE “PERFECT STORM”:
MOVING FROM PLAN TO ACTION DURING AN ECONOMIC DOWNTURN
The Experiences of Four Discovery Communities that Received 2008-2009
Partnership Planning Grants**

*“When the Literacy Volunteers and
Adult Education lost their space
at the same time, it created
a perfect storm of opportunity
to move into a new space
under new collaborative arrangements.”*

*“We are facing a perfect storm
between community needs
and the fiscal environment –
we have to work together.”*

Introduction

Conversations held in Fall 2010 with groups in two communities in the Discovery Initiative used the same term – “perfect storm” – to describe how their planning work had prepared them to take advantage of changing circumstances and do so in ways that turned these “storms” into opportunities for positive community action. This paper describes how participation in the Discovery Initiative developed the capacities that supported community collaborative groups in these and two other Discovery communities in moving from plan into implementation and how the community planning process has been a tool in mobilizing community resources and responding to new opportunities and challenges. Exploration of this symbiotic relationship between collaborative infrastructure and planning within communities is based on reflections by participants in an in-depth group interview process.

The paper begins with a brief description of Discovery and the role of community planning in the initiative and continues with perspectives from the four study communities on factors that prepared them for success in supporting the development and implementation of community-wide plans for young children. The paper ends with a summary of lessons learned and advice for other communities, again from the perspective of the study communities.

Community Planning in the Discovery Initiative

Since 2001, the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund has supported community collaborative groups and regional and statewide organizations through the Discovery Initiative with the goal of building community and state capacity to:

- Increase the supply of high quality early care and education services
- Improve the quality of existing early care and education services
- Strengthen connections between early education and elementary education
- Improve students' social-emotional development and school success

Guiding the Initiative, as described on its website,¹ is “the belief that the best practices in education and child development result from encouraging and listening to all voices of the community. Essentially [Discovery] helps communities establish collaborative structures for inclusive local decision-making in which parents are engaged as full partners. Discovery communities are creating comprehensive birth to age eight local action plans. These plans enable communities to remain focused and to measure their progress toward school success for every child.”

From the beginning of Discovery, one role of the collaborative groups was to work toward systemic changes in how young children and their families are supported within their communities. The Memorial Fund was explicit in its expectation that the work of the collaborative groups was to:

- “Influence how programs and services are delivered
- Engage a broader group of stakeholders in owning the solutions

¹ See <http://discovery.wcgmf.org/about.html>.

- Change who is involved in decision making
- Change how a community responds and acts on issues related to the well-being of young children.”²

The Discovery community collaborative groups were also expected to gather information on local early childhood education services and young children’s well-being and use this information in developing their action plans and for engaging the broader community.³ Communities were provided technical assistance for local needs assessments during Discovery’s planning period, and some communities also worked with statewide grantee organizations (generally Connecticut Voices for Children) to develop reports on child well being. Therefore, precursor activities to broader community-wide early childhood planning had been carried out, while the collaborative groups were building their own capacities to lead such efforts. In fact, by 2007 several Discovery communities had developed community plans or blueprints for children, including Meriden, one of the communities included in this study.

The expectation that the Discovery collaborative groups would stimulate and guide the development of broad-based community plans for young children was increasingly highlighted over time. In 2007 the Discovery communities were introduced to guidelines for a formal planning process with the goal of producing a written document representing broad community-wide input and commitment. Beginning in 2008, in a jointly funded and managed effort, the Memorial Fund and the State Department of Education provided grants and technical assistance in community decision-making and results-based accountability for communities to develop broad plans for young children. In that year, twenty-one (45 percent of the original 47) Discovery collaborative groups applied for and were awarded partnership grants to begin comprehensive local planning.⁴

The Partnership Community Planning Grants – 2008-2009

² As described in the Discovery Renewal Packet for 2007, page 3.

³ During 2008, the Memorial Fund funded the development of standard community-specific Early Childhood Community profiles and fiscal scans (see http://discovery.wcgmf.org/profile_index.html). The profiles cover child and family demographics, and child well-being and community service data in the areas of health, early childhood education, and child welfare; the fiscal scans include community-level information on federal, state, and philanthropic expenditures in areas of child welfare, early care and education, family support, health, behavioral health, and K-3 education.

⁴ Another 19 collaborative groups, representing 21 communities, applied for and were awarded similar grants beginning in 2010.

In 2007, the Board of Directors of the Memorial Fund approved allocation of foundation resources to enter into a partnership with the State of Connecticut to support the development of comprehensive early childhood plans. In January 2008, twenty-three (23) communities⁵ were funded through a public-private partnership of the Graustein Memorial Fund, the Early Childhood Education Cabinet, the Children’s Fund of Connecticut and the State Department of Education to develop or enhance a comprehensive community plan for young children from birth through age eight and their families.

In addition to grant funding, which in most cases was used to hire a consultant to facilitate the community planning process, these 23 communities, along with the other Discovery communities, were encouraged to take advantage of technical assistance institutes offered in three areas: facilitative leadership (provided by the Interaction Institute for Social Change), community decision making (provided by the Center for the Study of Social Policy), and results-based accountability (provided by the Charter Oak Group). All Discovery communities continued to receive support from their community liaison⁶ through 2009.

The plans were to address children’s social, emotional, behavioral, and physical health and development and to strengthen early care and education and other services in the community in alignment with the Early Childhood Cabinet’s “Ready by 5, Fine by 9” goals.⁷ These goals were to support children achieving development milestones from birth to school entry; being prepared to enter kindergarten with the knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed for school success; and having experiences in the early grades that build on their early learning and support progress toward mastery of reading. The plan documents were to include a statement of the community’s vision for children, an analysis of community assets and needs, identification of measurable results to track

⁵ The 23 communities included: Bridgeport, Bristol, Colchester, Danbury, East Hartford, Greenwich, Hartford, Manchester, Mansfield, Meriden, Middletown, New Britain, New Haven, Norwalk, Norwich, Stamford, Stratford, Shelton, Thomaston, Torrington, Waterbury, Windham, and Windsor.

⁶ Each Discovery community was assigned a consultant, under the direction of the Memorial Fund staff, whose role was to act as an information link between the Memorial Fund and the community and across communities by collecting and sharing lessons learned. The liaison was also a resource for and in some circumstances, a facilitator of assessment and action planning by the collaborative groups. The liaison provided feedback to the community on strategies, progress and challenges.

⁷ The plan, published in 2006, can be found at:
http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Early/Ready5_Fine9.pdf.

progress on the plan, selection of specific strategies to achieve those results, and description of the community's approach to ongoing data analysis, governance and financing.

After eighteen months of work, the 23 communities submitted their plans on June 30, 2009. Later that year these communities were invited, along with the other 31 Discovery communities, to apply for further grants from the Memorial Fund, including grants to support implementation of their plans or of specific projects. Communities that had not received planning grants in the first round were offered the opportunity for this support; an additional 19 grants were awarded with 21 Discovery communities participating.⁸

Study Goals

As in all planning processes, the challenge of moving from developing a plan document to implementing the strategies called for in the plan is real and sometimes formidable. This challenge was especially difficult for the 23 Discovery communities in putting their plans into action, given the drastic changes in the economic and political climate of the state and the nation during 2008 and 2009. During that time, the ongoing financial crisis took a tremendous toll on state resources and focused political attention to a large extent on dealing with a series of state budget cuts. It is a testimony to the tenacity of the Memorial Fund, the Discovery communities, and the statewide advocacy organizations that state funding for additional community planning and for other early childhood investments, including the Parent Trust Fund and Care4Kids, continued.

The initial cohort of communities that had just produced their early childhood plans faced similar challenges at the local level, as government agencies, school districts, and service providers felt the impact of the economic downturn. There was some initial concern that these plans would now be put on the shelf, to gather dust while “waiting out” the current conditions. Many participants in the planning process had had similar experiences in the past and recognized the risk of this happening again, particularly in such uncertain times. At the same time, observations by Memorial Fund staff and liaisons were that communities were beginning to move forward as best they could on

⁸ The communities receiving GMF-State partnership planning grants in 2010 were: Ansonia, Bloomfield, Branford, Chaplin, Coventry, Derby, Enfield, Griswold, Groton, Hamden, Killingly-Plainfield-Putnam (a three-community collaborative), New London, Plymouth, Stafford, Vernon, Wallingford, West Hartford, Wethersfield, and Winchester.

implementing their plans. In fact, even in the face of economic uncertainty and scarcity of resources, there was optimism.

To better understand the contributions of earlier collaborative capacity-building support provided to community groups in the early years (2002-2007) of Discovery, the evaluation team, with Memorial Fund staff, developed a study to address the following questions:

- What was the interaction between Discovery collaborative infrastructure and the planning process?
- How did the community make use of the capacity-building workshops and technical assistance in the planning process?
- What infrastructure now exists and what strategies are underway in the community as a result of the planning process?
- What was learned from planning and early implementation?

The evaluation team proposed an intensive interview process that would bring together as many participants and stakeholders in the planning process as possible in four of the initial planning communities to discuss these questions. Site visits were made between September and November for these group interviews.

Study Communities

In order to learn as much as possible about the process of moving from plan to action, the study intended to include communities that had successfully completed the planning process, developed detailed plans, and had begun implementation of those plans. Memorial Fund staff, community liaisons, and consultants who had provided technical assistance during the planning process were asked to nominate up to three of the 2008-2009 planning communities for the study and to describe how they thought the nominated communities' experiences might provide insight on the study questions.⁹

⁹ Two of the 23 planning communities were not included in the nomination process. Colchester entered the Discovery Initiative in 2008 as a result of receiving a partnership planning grant and had not

Based on the nominations, four communities were selected for the study and agreed to participate: Meriden, New Britain, Torrington, and Waterbury.¹⁰ Each was provided with a \$500 honorarium upon completion of the site visit interview.

The four study communities included three that were priority school districts designated by the Connecticut State Department of Education based on high levels of family poverty and student achievement rates – Meriden, New Britain, and Waterbury) and one that was a competitive district in which individual schools, but not the district as a whole, met the Connecticut State Department of Education criteria for high poverty and low achievement. Among the four, all developed plans with strategies addressing issues in early childhood (Ready by 5), early grades in school (Fine by 9), and early health and development. Two – Meriden and Waterbury – also included family support strategies. A summary of the plan focus areas and strategies for the four study communities compared to the 23 planning communities as a whole is included in Appendix A.

The study communities reflected different community cultures, collaborative history and infrastructure, and prior experience in community planning. Meriden was a Children First Initiative¹¹ community, enjoyed a long history of community collaboration, had an incorporated collaborative body with a full-time coordinator, and had already developed a community plan prior to receiving a partnership planning grant. New Britain had included work on children’s health issues in its earlier work in Discovery and had a full-time coordinator as well as dedicated school district staff. Torrington had made substantial strides in its Discovery work after hiring a coordinator, was recognized as successful in engaging parents, and had a culture of close collaboration among agencies and programs in the community. Waterbury also benefited from its collaborative experiences and was unique among the study sites in its focus from birth through 21.

participated in the capacity-building work of the Initiative prior to that point. As such it represented a unique situation among the Option 1 communities, so that it would be difficult to interpret its experiences in an evaluation of the Initiative. Norwalk had recently participated in another intensive evaluation study focused on school engagement in kindergarten transition policies and practices, and the evaluation team wanted to include as many different communities as possible in the intensive work.

¹⁰ New Haven was asked to participate as well, but declined due the press of their work.

¹¹ Children First was an initiative of the Memorial Fund between 1994 and 2000 that supported the development and work of community collaborative groups in seven Connecticut communities to improve the life and education outcomes of children from birth to age 8. Like Discovery, the Children First Initiative focused on parent leadership and collaboration.

At the same time, the four study communities had much in common in their assessment of their planning and early implementation experiences, the contribution of the Discovery work to planning, and lessons they believed would be valuable for other communities. Members of the planning and implementation teams who participated in the site visit interviews had similar reflections on their own experiences and similar advice to communities undertaking planning in the future.¹²

What were Discovery Contributions to Successful Planning?

“Everything we did with Discovery prepared us to go through this process.

*Discovery pushed us to think about who we are, why we are doing it,
and where we are going.”*

The four communities’ experiences in the Discovery Initiative up until 2007 – and in the case of Meriden, in the earlier Children First Initiative – contributed to the success of their community planning work and laid the foundation for moving from plan into action. Based on responses from community participants, as categorized by the Discovery evaluation team, the specific ways in which the collaborative work during the earlier years of Discovery supported planning and implementation included:

- **Building or strengthening a culture of working together**

“It was tough at first – changing the mindset of people – that Discovery wasn’t a program grant with funds to be divvied up among agencies to fund services. It was a whole different way of operating...”

¹² From 4 to 11 community members participated in the site visit interviews. The community coordinators in all four communities participated; other participants in the site visit interviews included parents (3 site visits) and staff from the school district (3 site visits), health agency or program (2 site visits), city agency other than health (2 site visits), early childhood education provider/program (1 site visit), other community service agencies (2 site visits), local library (2 site visits), Family Resource Center (2 site visits), United Way (2 site visits), and local foundation (1 site visit).

Even the study communities that felt they could draw on their community's history of working together noted that the Discovery work took this to another level. The experiences in Discovery helped foster cooperation and collaboration. According to a member of another study community, "no one pushes their own organizational agenda – we start with the premise that children are our first priority...we can put our organizational interests aside when necessary."

- **Engaging residents and groups from across the political or philosophical spectrum**

"Having it [the Discovery collaborative group] take the lead doesn't raise concerns about its own agenda and interests – it takes competition off the table."

Having already established itself as a group unaffiliated with any particular interest but with its focus on the community's children, the Discovery collaborative groups were perceived by community members in the group and those involved in the planning process as a natural convenor and community catalyst. In one study community, this was described as: "being a neutral facilitator that can get people around the table on the issues." In one community, prior work had developed positive relationships with conservative political and religious groups, which made them more receptive to joining the planning process.

- **Requiring attention from city/town government and school district leadership**

"Going together as a set of partners [to the Board of Education] made change in policy possible; we wouldn't have gotten this change if we asked as individual agencies."

Because of the requirements of the Discovery grants for endorsements from the community's chief elected official and the school superintendent, these leaders were

already engaged at varying levels of involvement. The study communities were able to leverage this involvement during the planning process, something that they saw as critical to being able to move forward once the plan was in place. In all of the study communities, the school district and/or the local city government realigned resources with the community plan, either to support overall coordination or specific programs.

- **Involving/supporting/developing parent leadership that prepared parents to participate in community planning**

“The Memorial Fund laid the foundation for parent involvement. Parents were already ready and trained to participate in community planning.”

A major tenet of the Discovery Initiative is that increasing the effectiveness of any community’s efforts to improve outcomes for children requires being responsive to what parents know and families need. The Discovery Initiative consistently encouraged communities to consider how to build and strengthen parent involvement in the community at large, not just at the Discovery collaborative table. The Memorial Fund supported technical assistance on parent engagement and was instrumental in beginning and sustaining state-wide parent leadership training activities. These expectations and supports made parent involvement an ongoing goal for the Discovery collaborative groups, albeit one that presented challenges to achieve and sustain, and built a cadre of engaged and experienced parents for the planning process.

- **Providing opportunities to reflect, analyze, and plan and to think beyond the School Readiness program**

The Discovery Initiative asked communities to go through an annual self-reflection and planning process and provided tools and facilitation support through the liaisons for this process. While generally requiring one or more collaborative group meetings to complete and sometimes perceived as tedious, this experience was reported to have built the skills needed for group analysis and planning. As it was described in one study community, “The annual plan and self-reflection tool have put reflection on the table,” which was valuable in the planning process.

Whether formally merged or not, the collaborative groups in Discovery communities have had working relationships with the local School Readiness Council, and often considerable overlap in membership. The Councils are responsible for planning and overseeing the use of state funds for preschool programs. Work during Discovery was reported to have encouraged the expansion of focus beyond managing program slots to thinking more broadly about children’s needs and community services. This was valuable groundwork for community planning. As members of one study community reported, “Discovery gave more structure to collaboration here – we started to review results from our School Readiness grant four times a year. Also Discovery has a more macro focus than the School Readiness program.”

- **Creating a “neutral” convening entity with staff capacity**

Discovery helped communities establish a “table” where the focus was on children and on collaborating in the use of community resources to support children’s health, development, and school success. In some cases, this “table” became a formal organization with legal status, but in others it has continued to operate “virtually.” As was noted in one of the study communities, “There isn’t a shingle somewhere that says [collaborative name] – much of the work is done by cell phone and e-mail.”

Even so, the importance of infrastructure to support collaborative work was highlighted in all the study communities. A major part of that infrastructure is the collaborative staff or coordinator – someone whose job is to support the collaboration and help implement its work plan – someone with a single focus on that work. In two study communities, a blending of grant and local resources support a full-time coordinator. In one of the other communities, the school district allocates a percent of a central office administrator’s time to the Discovery work, which supplements the part-time coordinator. Staff are seen as critical to supporting ongoing collaboration and plan implementation by the community teams, although supporting this position was seen as an ongoing challenge.

- **Building community capacity through technical assistance, particularly training and consultation on results-based accountability**

The Discovery Initiative capacity-building technical assistance approach was enhanced and the offerings more targeted during 2008-2009. One community group noted that they had begun work on a community plan before the Discovery technical assistance

for planning was in place. However, their assessment was “without the technical assistance and support from the Memorial Fund, it [community planning] would have been too big a job. The technical assistance helped us learn how to ‘chunk it out’.”

The four study communities all noted the particular value of results-based accountability (RBA) in bringing people together around goals for children, in structuring the plan, and in providing a framework for implementation decisions. The specific ways in which RBA was reported to contribute to both plan and action included:

- ***Requiring a community process that explicitly engaged stakeholders beyond early care and education***

The Discovery work had been successful in creating collaborative groups that included early care and education providers and consumers, school leadership and staff, and other community “educational” institutions such as libraries and museums. Coming up with broad community results and strategies through the RBA process required bringing other groups to the table, especially in the area of health (although not all the communities included a focus on health in their plans), and engaging everyone in looking at community needs and resources in a new way.

- ***Learning how to gather and use data collectively***

One of the most valuable features of RBA was the process of looking at data together in a planning framework. One community group described this as “showing us how to gather and use data to answer the question ‘how do we know’ something works – we learned that being measurable makes the invisible, visible.” Another group found analyzing data in the process of defining results and selecting strategies freed them from looking at data in a blaming or ‘finger-pointing’ way. This experience then supported collective problem solving – “we think about how to work together to change what the data show.”

- ***Changing from “doing more of the same” regardless of the results***

The RBA data analysis process stimulated consideration of new ways of using community services and resources. One study community noted in its application for a follow-up grant that continued data collection has informed their understanding of the story behind the baseline, which in turn led them to refine their strategies. In some communities, careful analysis revealed that the root causes of key problems or concerns were different from what had been assumed, which led to developing more appropriate strategies.

- ***Keeping the focus on “is anyone better off?”***

A hallmark of RBA is ongoing accountability for results. Not only did the focus on results provide a valuable structure to the planning process, the community groups see it as keeping their “eyes focused.” Members of one community group noted, “As we implement things, we check on results. We align our strategies with the results we want.”

- ***Providing a framework for being selective about pursuing opportunities***

The RBA process required analysis of data on how children are faring in the community to identify factors behind those trends and to select strategies targeted at addressing those factors and improving results. This analysis is expected to continue beyond initial planning. The study communities all believed that this was helpful in deciding how to respond as new opportunities arise. As one study community group put it, “be flexible in responding to opportunities, but keep a sustained focus on the goals.”

- **Being in a long-term partnership with a funder that offered support and opportunities beyond grants**

The study communities also believed that the way in which the Memorial Fund has worked with the Discovery communities over the years had not only built their capacity

to undertake community planning, but also strengthened the value of the capacity-building supports during the planning process. Three aspects of the Memorial Fund's approach stood out:

- ***Being in partnership relationships with the communities***

In the words of one community member, "The Memorial Fund is like a good parent – it offers us opportunities, lets us play, and gives us feedback." As an example, one study community noted that it was the Memorial Fund's assessment report that spurred them to invest in hiring a coordinator, which the group described as "huge...it really got things going...we needed someone to hold things together."

- ***Providing opportunities for sharing and learning with other communities***

As in other areas of the Discovery Initiative, the planning communities appreciated the opportunities offered "for sharing what had been accomplished, highlighting successes." These opportunities included the technical assistance institutes themselves as well as other meetings and electronic media such as the Discovery listserv.

- ***Offering access to information and expertise***

In addition to the specific content of the technical assistance offered by the Memorial Fund and its support for "coaching" through the community liaisons and planning facilitation consultants, the foundation's direct engagement was seen as valuable. "The Memorial Fund was right there with us at every training. We were never left on our own – there was always someone to call on with expertise."

What Contributions Did Community Planning Make to the Work of Discovery?

"Planning helped us broaden our Discovery message."

*People didn't really understand what Discovery is about
and the planning process gave visibility to the Discovery work.
It created an opportunity to pull the pieces of Discovery together."*

Just as the Discovery experience and collaborative infrastructure helped support the planning process, so did the planning process strengthen the Discovery work. The study communities highlighted five ways in which this happened, as described below.

- **Broadening the community stakeholders involved**

As noted above, the planning process brought health care providers to the table in a new way, even if they had had previous involvement with the Discovery collaborative groups. In particular, the planning work groups provided an opportunity to engage people who were not involved in the Discovery work. Planning communities in focus groups conducted in 2009 had similar experiences. One reported, "We had people call and say, 'I hear this is going on, how can I join what you are doing.' Many of the people involved...were not typical early childhood people." Another noted, "We were having difficulty trying to engage the entire community. Applying for this [planning] grant leveraged new people."

- **Making the Discovery work more concrete and recognized**

As the quote at the beginning of this section illustrates, the planning process broadened the Discovery work and brought the collaborative group to the forefront in the community. As one community pointed out, "it [the planning process] gave us [the Discovery group] credibility because of who was at the table."

- **Examining community needs and community resources in a fresh light**

The "aha" moments that come from looking at the same issues from different perspectives were a common experience among the planning communities. In one of the study communities, the planning process raised questions about who in the

community is providing specific services and uncovered the lack of shared knowledge of community resources among agencies providing similar services. This led to a monthly meeting among outreach workers from these agencies and a resource fair for the agencies to make their services more widely known in the community. In another study community, the planning process highlighted underutilized oral health facilities that were directed toward dental care for pregnant women.

- **Offering a framework for taking a broad community perspective rather than one narrowly defined by program or organizational interests and encouraging collaborative strategies that blend expertise and resources**

The development of a Family Literacy Center in one of the study communities is an example of how the planning process contributed to turning a challenge (two literacy programs losing space) into an opportunity. As described, “previously [before the planning process] the willingness was there, but now there was more information and a specific plan to follow. We received some funding from a community grant and space and staff were provided as in-kind contributions. This is a good example of collaboration replacing competition.”

One focus group participant noted that “the planning process helped to create synergy... People were doing related work, but may not have been at the table before. This process helped us to increase our connections and look at what needs to be done.” An example of this synergy that led to the development of collaborative strategies is the development of the Family Literacy Center described above.

What Were the Contributions of Planning Within a Collaborative Infrastructure to the Capacity to Move into Implementation?

“It may actually be good to have a broader agenda in tough economic times.

We used to be focused only on increasing slots...that is not going to happen right now, but we can work on other aspects of our plan. We were surprised by the low-cost/no-cost things we can work on. We will use these things to stay engaged.”

One of the challenges of any planning process is how to convert the engagement and energy that went into developing the plan into commitments and actions to turn the plan

into reality. This can be particularly true in situations when the economic circumstances changed for the worse after planning was well underway, a situation that confronted the first group of partnership planning communities.

The study communities noted that the planning process developed key capacities that were needed to move from plan to action. These capacities were:

- **A cadre of individuals and groups that continued to be committed to the work and available for support**

One community noted that, while some participants in the planning process have dropped out, “we know that we can still call on them...it’s ok if they don’t come to meetings, we still consider them supporters...they will step forward when needed.” In others, the ongoing work groups draw from beyond those who meet regularly.

- **Greater shared knowledge of their community, including potential partners and resources**

The planning process stimulated new conversations and connections among agencies and programs. Further, compiling information on community programs and services revealed gaps in knowledge about these resources, not just among families, but also among agency staff. Referring to one collaborative project, a community group noted that its success was “fed by the planning process, which brought out how much was already going on and what could be done with what we have.”

- **Experience in shared problem analysis and problem solving that encourage innovation and collaboration**

As was pointed out in one study community, “we now think about how to solve problems together – across agencies and programs. This is new although it built on prior relationships.” One example of an innovative collaboration has been the creation of the Meriden Family Zone, which was described as “the creation of a system, not new programs or services.” This project evolved from the community’s goal of not letting any child “fall through the cracks” while allowing attention and resources to be focused as a first step in making this happen. This effort has drawn in city commitment of neighborhood improvement efforts to complement the human services side originally envisioned in the plan.

- **Ability to clearly articulate the connections between strategies and community goals for children**

One focus community group described how it was now possible to “connect the dots,” to understand how different “problems” were related and how they impact the child . The example given was of teen smoking, which is linked to low birth weight for children of teen mothers, which is associated with reading difficulties early in school and predicts school leaving without a diploma. Understanding these connections helped develop a framework in which many programs and organizations that target specific groups or offer specific services can see themselves contributing to the overall community goals for children.

Certain characteristics of the planning process itself were cited as important in building these capacities. These included:

- **The legitimacy and urgency of the work associated with the involvement of specific funding entities**

Having a state grant was seen as giving urgency to completing the planning process and the Memorial Fund was applauded for its efforts to secure public funding to match its philanthropic investment. Being part of a statewide process also made planning seem more likely to result in action. In one focus group, a participant noted “It [planning] was easier to sell in the community because the state wanted it. Plus other communities were doing it...this gave it a higher level look that went beyond our own community.” In another study community, receiving funding from a health foundation and from the State increased credibility of the planning process for the health community and their interest and engagement.

- **The broadening of stakeholders involved associated with the areas the plans were to address**

In particular, explicitly including health as a key component of the plan by itself brought in new groups of stakeholders, as mentioned in several of the study communities. In addition, the focus on health strategies engaged these stakeholders in thinking differently about their own work in addition to how they could coordinate with early care and education.

- **Openness in communication and decision-making based on recognition of shared commitment to children**

One characteristic in the study communities that contributed not only to the success of the planning process but also to laying the foundation for ongoing collaboration was transparency. As one community group described it, “there were no secrets...the goal was to improve our community for children and this was recognized as the real motivation for everyone involved.”

- **Time with colleagues and other stakeholders, away from daily responsibilities, looking at data and reflecting on experiences**

In one study community, the health services planning workgroup had an ‘aha’ moment in its thinking about strategies to “turn the curve” on children’s health results – in the press of their daily work they had not had the time to think about partnering. This was the case even though the individual members of the workgroup and their organizations had known each other prior to the planning process.

Once the plan was in place, there were changes in how “business was done” in each of the four study communities. These changes included:

- **Using the plan to guide resource allocation decisions**

There are numerous examples in the four study communities in which the plan is being used to make funding decisions. In one community the School Readiness Council has directed the quality enhancement funds to support the plan’s strategies. In two of the communities, local funders – a community foundation and/or the local United Way – have adopted the plan’s priorities to guide their grantmaking decisions. In another, city government has coordinated its investment in physical improvements with the plan’s focus on a specific neighborhood.

- **Having options for action that required different levels of resources and that can engage a broad range of stakeholders**

As the group in one community noted, “With the plan, it makes it [seeking funding] an ‘easy ask’ – there are no cost/low cost strategies to support.” This same observation was made in the focus groups with planning communities conducted in 2009, as quoted at the beginning of this section.

- **Providing a framework for community groups to independently pursue opportunities and develop strategies that support the plan**

Having a comprehensive community plan created a way for agencies, organizations, and groups in the community to pursue grants and develop projects on their own that would align with the priority strategies and contribute to the community’s results goals. There are many examples just in the four study communities.

One community that received a Child First grant noted that the project “didn’t come directly from our plan but represents connections now built in our community. Because our plan is known, community partners see opportunities to pursue pieces that fit in the plan.” This community group then proceeded to name several other grants and projects by agencies or coalitions that were developed independently of any oversight from the governance group but were intended to contribute to the plan’s implementation. As it was described, “the plan allows organizations to put on a lens based on the plan’s goals.”

The meeting with another study community team, at which the plan’s action steps were reviewed after a hiatus in meetings over the summer, provided other examples. As the action steps for the plan’s strategies were being reviewed, there were several where the groups as a whole believed that no progress had been made when in fact funding had been secured and projects were being implemented. Two examples were an application from the school district to provide parent education, home visits, and case management to young mothers without high school diplomas and a federal grant to a community organization to provide nutrition education for parents and their preschool to third grade children. This illustrates how the plan guided organizations in the community in evaluating and responding to opportunities on their own.

What Lessons Did the Study Communities Learn that Might Be Useful to Other Communities?

Members of the planning and implementation teams in the four study communities highlighted a number of lessons from their own experience as advice to other communities working on moving from planning into action.

- **Build strong relationships that establish trust and engage the passion and commitment of many stakeholders**

One community group mentioned this as necessary for carrying their plan forward as well as a product of the planning work itself: “You need partners that trust each other, that feel comfortable collaborating.” Other group observed, “In the end following the process and building the relationships paid off in ongoing support.” Another gave this succinct recipe for success: “Build on passion and trust,” while another advised, “Build on people’s commitment to the community and its people.”

- **Ensure that there is infrastructure and staff to support both planning and implementation**

Having a “table” where problems can be analyzed and strategies evaluated without blame was believed to be critical to both planning and to successful implementation. This infrastructure doesn’t need to be formally organized, but all the study communities noted the necessity of having paid staff whose job it was to focus on moving the work along.

- **Make it worthwhile for community leadership to become invested in making the plan work**

As one study community group urged, “get people at the table who can make things happen.” In all of the study communities the engagement of the chief elected official and the superintendent of schools was important in implementing the plan. One community group described the relationship as a “partnership – the city realizes that government can’t do it all.” Specific plan strategies were able to amplify the work of local public agencies at the same time it drew upon their resources. One example was the Meriden Family Zone where moving the plan forward by concentrating efforts in a particular neighborhood not only leveraged city resources for physical improvements but contributed to the power of those investments in improving residents’ quality of life by bringing in coordinated social services.

- **Reinforce awareness of the plan and expectations for action in the community**

“Be able to tell a unified story as a community – present the pieces as part of a whole agenda – connect the dots among the pieces of the plan,” was the advice of one community group. Getting this message out using “multiple layers sending the same message” was the strategy suggested by another, using both “formal and informal ways to communicate.” One community group believed that their most immediate challenge “will be to get the community to believe that change will happen.”

- **Demonstrate success to build momentum**

One of the study communities had been focused over the past several months on reorganizing and streamlining overlapping collaborative groups; this group was especially aware of the need to show concrete progress in implementing the plan in order to sustain support. This group noted, “People need to be personally touched by our work – they need to see something visible, concrete.” Another group put it succinctly, “Build on wins.”

- **Build partnerships and connections with other community initiatives**

One community advised “using the expertise and connections with other groups but developing a common language.” One marker of progress that this community group is working toward is “having everyone saying ‘I represent the children and youth of my

community,' not 'I represent my organization'." As noted earlier, the examples of independently generated projects guided by the plan are one result of making these connections.

- **Take advantage of opportunities to integrate efforts and share resources**

In addition to the plan being a guide for organizations and groups in the community to focus their individual efforts toward common community goals, it also provided a focus for one community group described this as becoming more "intentional – when opportunities come up, we meet around the table to figure out who needs to be engaged and how to proceed."

- **Continue to use data to track progress and take time to assess and refine strategies**

All of the study communities believed that using data was critical to the success of their planning effort and provided them with ways to tell whether implementation of the plan's strategies was yielding the expected results. "Take time to stop, reflect, assess what is going well and what hasn't been attended to" was the advice of one of the study communities.

- **Use the plan to stay on course and set priorities**

Using the plan to evaluate opportunities was what the four study communities believed would be the long-term contribution of the planning effort. As one group put it, "Don't let outside influences direct the work – be flexible in responding to opportunities but keep a sustained focus on the goals."

- **Have patience but keep a sense of urgency**

As the study communities looked back on their years in the Discovery Initiative and in earlier efforts like Children First, they recognized that developing the capacity to successfully develop a community-wide plan for children and then put it into action was a process that extended over many years. Recognizing this, the groups recommended

patience but with conditions. “Be patient and take small bites” and “have patience but generate a feeling of urgency at the same time” was what these communities recommended as the combinations that would help avoid disillusion and keep the work going.

The experiences of these four communities in undertaking community planning and beginning to move from plan into action validate the Discovery Initiative’s ongoing attention to building collaborative capacity. As one community member summarized,

“In the end, following the process and building the relationships paid off in ongoing support. Here’s the lesson – don’t get caught up in the product [the plan], spend time building relationships.”