CAPD

NEW MODELS OF COMMUNITY-FOUNDATION PARTNERSHIPS:

Lessons from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation Pre-Birth Through Age Three Initiative

S. A. STEPHENS AND SALLY H. LEIDERMAN
SEPTEMBER 1999

INTRODUCTION

In 1997 the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) embarked on a new, multi-year effort to promote the health, positive development and well-being of children, from pre-birth through age three, in communities in the Midwest Great Lakes Region. The Pre-Birth Through Age Three Initiative was designed to be the next step in improving child outcomes for children through community-foundation partnerships, based on new research and compilation of lessons learned. It took a deliberately experimental approach in its early design phase, working in partnership with community sites to glean lessons from their experiences and to design an initiative that would be a true "next generation" collaborative effort.

Initiative Goals and Strategies

A key feature of the initiative was its vision of a partnership with communities in a collaborative design process. The goal of this partnership was to ensure that the initiative incorporated what is known in communities about how to facilitate locally-driven initiatives for children and how to further strengthen and advance existing community agendas. The collaborative design process was a specific example of an "asset" model approach to working with sites, which recognizes their strengths and aims to build on them.

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation implemented the first phase of this initiative by inviting and assisting communities to participate in cross-site collaboration with the Foundation in development of an overall initiative design. The individual communities were selected to have a base of pre-existing work on behalf of young children. Collectively they brought diversity to the initiative based on location, size and population characteristics. In addition, the sites differed among lessons they brought to the discussion of the initiative, including:

- the nature and focus of that work and the extent to which a community "table" had already been established where a broad spectrum of stakeholders considered issues related to the well-being of young children,

- experience in involving parents and community residents, particularly those of color, in community assessment and planning processes, and

- unique historical and political dynamics affecting issues related to "turf," race and culture, and power.

A total of nine community sites[1] received grants of $30,000 each to facilitate community discussion and reflection activities and support site participation in the design work. In addition, funds were provided to the Center for Assessment and Policy Development to act as the Foundation's intermediary during the design phase and to provide technical assistance to the sites.

Initiative Activities

Early on, CAPD worked with WKKF staff to outline the initiative's goals, expectations, and strategies and to identify and select community sites. Each selected community was provided with a framework for the design that incorporated the Foundation's parameters

---

1 *There were nine sites participating in this phase of the Initiative, including Athens, Ohio; Battle Creek/Calhoun County, Michigan; Cass County/Leech Lake Reservation, Minnesota; Sault St. Marie/Chippewa County, Michigan; two neighborhood areas in Detroit, Michigan; Marquette/Alger County, Michigan; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and St. Paul, Minnesota.*

New Models of Community-Foundation Partnerships (continued)

and with guidance on how to conduct its own self-assessment and design recommendation process. Sites also received technical assistance on implementing community discussion and reflection activities that would bring a broad and diverse set of voices to this process.

The collaborative design process began with site-specific self-assessment and design recommendation discussions, conducted within the overall framework provided by the Foundation's parameters for the Initiative. Although these discussions were carried out in various ways across the sites, in all cases teams of local stakeholders were assembled, bringing together individuals and organizations with an interest in the issues raised by the Initiative. These teams carried out the self-assessment and design recommendation work, including planning and beginning the implementation of broad-based community discussion and reflection activities.

Cross-site design teams with representatives from each community were then convened in several topical areas critical to the initiative's design. Each team held conference calls to review preliminary recommendations from the sites in its area and to set the agenda for its work at a two-day collaborative design conference. A document summarizing the design work and the recommendations from the collaborative design process was produced was prepared by CAPD.

LESSONS LEARNED

This phase of the initiative was truly an experiment in "doing business differently" in community-foundation partnerships. There are a number of valuable lessons to be learned from this unique and innovative effort that can be organized around several major issues:

- designing an initiative in collaboration with communities;

- paying attention to race as a factor affecting children's outcomes;

- talking about race and racism within multi-racial groups;

- building sustained community dialog processes; and

- incorporating parent voices.

Designing an Initiative in Collaboration with Communities

The early work of the initiative clearly demonstrated that it was possible to engage diverse communities in collaborative design work. At the same time, the experience of the initiative reinforces the need to support communities in carrying out the internal work necessary to prepare them to contribute to collaborative design work.

- It takes time and repeated messages to help communities understand and trust that foundations want a true collaboration in designing an initiative.

  – Many communities' prior experiences with foundation initiatives suggest that there is usually an implicit if not explicit agenda in their dialogs with potential sites. It can appear risky to argue that specific elements be included in the initiative's design, particularly to help the community overcome a barrier or limitation recognized from their past efforts, if this might weigh negatively in later funding decisions.

  – It was the opportunity to have direct dialog with foundation rather than intermediary staff that finally gave some community representatives confidence that the goal was to work collaboratively to craft a design for the initiative .

- In trying to engage communities in this kind of collaboration it is important that the foundation and its agents have a clear sense of the expected processes and outcomes as well as initial agreement on the basic parameters or framework for the initiative.

  – The community organizations responsible for assembling teams for this initiative to carry out the self-reflection and design activities reported that it was difficult to keep people involved when messages and timetables changed.

New Models of Community-Foundation Partnerships (continued)

– As the number of people involved in the initiative, both at the foundation as well as in the communities, expand, it is necessary to spend time orienting new participants. Sometimes this means that messages and decisions need to be reconsidered and occasionally reframed.

• It can be difficult to communicate a complex framework and new terminology to communities so that their representatives and foundation staff can engage in collaborative discussions using the same concepts and language.

– is hard to bring ideas from the worlds of research and policy analysis into local communities in a meaningful way. The ideas are complex, often presented in "jargon" not used in everyday language. It is often helpful to distill the key concepts and main points and present in a simple format to stimulate real community ownership.

– At the same time, simplistic presentations lose the richness of the ideas and the complexity of possible connections within communities.

– Similarly, breaking up an initiative that is broad in scope and long in overall time horizon makes it easier to focus on manageable sets of activities and requirements. But this also tends to make the effort more of a program or project than an initiative with system change and community capacity building goals.

• Individuals and groups working in communities seldom have the opportunity to reflect on what has worked locally and what needs to be done differently to makesure young children thrive, yet this is recognized as valuable for broadening the agenda and thinking creatively about new approaches.

– This initiative's requirements for and foundation support of self-reflection activities were welcomed by the communities.

– Self-reflection and lessons learned help communities celebrate what has worked well and identify what has been missing, not just in terms of programs and services but also in perspectives and strategies.

– A short time frame and deadlines for products makes it difficult to build the necessary relationships and establish trust within the community to have frank and open discussions.

• It can be uncomfortable to try to add new voices, especially those of parents and persons of color, to the process of self-reflection on community efforts.

– In particular, it is sometimes threatening and certainly disheartening to look critically at whether what the community has invested is actually working for children of color.

– This makes it all that much more important to have multiple voices from these groups at the table so that racial and cultural issues raised are seen as structural, rather than personal or idiosyncratic, factors in explaining outcomes for children of color.

Paying Attention to Race as a Factor Affecting Children's Outcomes

It is broadly recognized that children of color do not fare equally well, even early in life, as white children. An emphasis in the WKKF initiative on ensuring that all children thrive called attention to the need to understand how race and related factors actually make a difference in children's outcomes and to make sure that these factors were explicitly incorporated into community planning. For a number of reasons, this is a difficult focus to sustain.

• The field of child development provides only sparse information on what programs, services, supports, and interventions are particularly effective for children of color, and in general the level of investment in learning what works is low.

– There is considerable research indicating that race and associated factors such as poverty, segregation and social isolation are correlated with children's outcomes. However, the literature documenting effective interventions to address these factors is not as well developed.

New Models of Community-Foundation Partnerships (continued)

– Communities and individuals working in the field recognize that there are efforts and strategies that are particularly effective for children of color. But in general these efforts are not rigorously evaluated or even documented. The results remain "fugitive" knowledge, not part of the mainstream knowledge base.

  – Support for communities to engage in self-reflection and to contribute the results of their analysis to a collaborative design is one way to recognize the value of this knowledge.

• There are competing theories about the best ways to ensure that all children thrive and that children from all population groups will benefit from community efforts

  – From a color or race blind perspective, one theory suggests that universal efforts are the most effective. These efforts are generally easier to sell within and garner resources from the broader community. They also avoid stigmatizing, marginalizing or patronizing communities of color.

  – Another theory of change, one that is gaining greater credence as more evidence accumulates that outcomes for children of color are continuing to lag behind those for white children, suggests that universal efforts will not effectively address the full range of factors, including racism and institutional oppression, that affect these children. According to this theory, unless targeted strategies that explicitly address these factors are included in the array of approaches addressing the needs of children, children of color will not benefit from a community's investments.

  – Since which theory guides community decision-making will affect choice of community strategies and investments, it is important to ensure that these issues are opened up to discussion and analysis. However, dealing with race and racism is a difficult conversation to have, especially in diverse broad-based groups.

• Certain community capacities are critical to sustaining a focus on improving outcomes for children of color within a broad agenda for children. These include specific capacities to advocate for and develop programs effective in helping children of color access services, meet their unique needs, and address cultural and other issues of special concern.

  – However, if community advocates are in the mainstream or aspire to be taken seriously within the mainstream, they find it difficult to raise racism as a factor affecting children's outcomes. And if they do, they are often marginalized.

  – Therefore, when foundations and communities look for organizations, groups and individuals whose work is actually making a difference for children of color and who are accepted and valued within those communities, it is often hard to find many who also have broad acceptance in the mainstream academic, political, and cultural arenas.

  – Because of this, foundations and communities are often concerned that they may be bringing into or "anointing" within communities people or organizations who are unqualified or too narrow, strident or dogmatic in approach, without the necessary credentials, reputation and experience to make them broadly acceptable. This can seem too big a risk, resulting in reliance on the perspectives, knowledge and experience that have traditionally been available.

  – This dynamic is itself an example of institutional racism, reinforcing the lack of acceptance of persons and organizations of color who may have special expertise and knowledge and denying them access to the resources and experiences offered by foundation-supported community-wide initiatives.

  – Having an explicit goal of broadening the diversity of those involved in the self-reflection and collaborative design work can put the spot-light on individuals and groups working on behalf of children of color. This can give special impetus to efforts to engage these advocates and champions in dialog with those already more broadly recognized in the community.

New Models of Community-Foundation Partnerships (continued)

Talking about Race and Racism within Multi-Racial Groups

One capacity communities need to have in order to ensure that *all* children thrive is broad support behind a set of common messages about the need to attend to young children's outcomes and to put in place fundamental strategies to improve those outcomes. This requires that a diverse group of people representing different institutions, organizations and community groups "hold hands and go public together" with these messages. However, it is often difficult for a diverse group of people to address difficult issues, especially those of race.

- There is no general societal consensus on whether and how race matters in the lives of young children and their families, and the divergent experiences of people of different races affect individuals' perspectives. Without being able to assume that most people share an initial common framework, opening up the discussion more and more broadly becomes difficult.

  – Generally the addition of new people into discussions made it necessary to review the decision to explicitly address race and racism within the initiative.

  – Even when the need to incorporate race and racism into the initiative was accepted, it was difficult to come up with broadly acceptable language to communicate and discuss these issues, both within and between the foundation and the intermediary organization and within and among participating communities.

- There are important dimensions of race and racism that are especially difficult to raise in broad community discussions. These include privilege and power, oppression and internalized oppression, and denial. Exploring how these are related to outcomes for children requires precise language, rigorous thinking and careful analysis.

  – Race as a catch-all phrase is so "loaded" that it can make dialog and decision making about community agendas and strategies for children of color very difficult.

- Not surprisingly, even within various organizations, including foundations, community-based organizations and public agencies, there is not agreed upon language or a reasonable level of comfort in these discussions. Therefore, it is difficult to fully engage in in-depth thinking and analysis and develop intra-group capacity to talk frankly about these issues.

  – This hampers the foundation's and its intermediary's ability to communicate clearly and made it easier for the communities to resist making and acting on decisions about how to address race and racism within the initiative.

- It can be valuable to have an external impetus for communities to undertake the difficult discussions around race and racism. But to have the maximum value external messages must be clear, consistent and comprehensive.

  – Lack of a clear message consistently delivered generated doubt in the communities about the seriousness of the initiative's intent to take on racism as a factor in children's outcomes. Communities were not forced to confront these issues internally, and those who wanted to raise them did not have the "cover" of a clear mandate for this from the initiative.

- In some communities, issues of race and racism may seem irrelevant. These communities may diagnose other factors — such as poverty, ethnicity or language differences — as more critical to children's outcomes.

Building Sustained Community Dialog Processes

Broad discussion and dialog around outcomes and interventions for young children is an important part of community self-reflection. In the WKKF initiative, these activities were intended to feed into the collaborative design process, by ensuring that the community analysis was informed by diverse voices, including those not normally engaged in these conversations such as those of parents. These activities can also be part of a strategy to lay the groundwork for longer-term and sustained work to build public will in the communities on behalf of young children.

New Models of Community-Foundation Partnerships (continued)

- There are many models of community dialog processes, with different objectives and activities, and not all are designed to support long-term public will development or broader system change.

  - There can be different expectations and understandings about the goals of the community discussion and reflection activities. For example, in the initiative, there was general agreement that community discussion and reflection activities should provide opportunities for meaningful parent and community input into the design. However, not everyone understood or accepted role of these activities in long-term community change. These differences in understanding reflected individuals' differing analyses of what works to change outcomes.

- From one perspective, there is recognition of the need to amplify parent voices in order to ensure that system actors receive their input, since most systems are well insulated from hearing directly from parents. However, without an expectation of change based on parent input, such community dialogs may be seen as wasteful and counterproductive.

  - Within the initiative communities, there was some concern that parents are often recruited for focus groups and community forums, yet do not see any tangible benefits based on their participation. Those planning the community discussion and reflection processes were sometimes reluctant to take members of the community, particularly disadvantaged residents and persons of color, through similar efforts without an assurance of change as the result.

  - There was concern expressed that repeating such activities would create unrealistic expectations, potentially further alienating parents and adding to feelings of exploitation among communities of color.

- Another perspective is that community dialogs are not a good vehicle for real change because they are not effective in and of themselves.

  - Within the initiative, some participants believed that dialogs do not lead to action, or are even an effective precursor of change. In fact, for some, community dialogs were perceived as a way of avoiding or delaying real change in power relations by not focusing directly on the tough issues of the distribution of power and control within communities.

  - Those with this perspective often felt that limited resources should not be spent on such activities. Further, they believed that the influence of the Initiative should be used to raise these issues more directly.

- A third perspective is that community discussion and reflection processes are, or can be, a form of community organizing and therefore part of a broader community change process.

  - This perspective suggests that there are a number of potential spin-offs from some initial community dialog work, including drawing in additional people into sustained discussions, identifying natural leaders, creating a "buzz" in the community to give fertile ground for later communication strategies, and hearing specific language to develop communication/social marketing strategies.

- Whenever dialog activities are included in community planning processes, these different perspectives need to be recognized and work needs to be done to develop consensus on how such activities and their intended results fit into the guiding model of change.

- Planning and implementing community dialog processes, particularly if intended to lay the groundwork for broader sustained efforts, takes time and attention.

  - Specifically, without clear communication about expected activities and benefits from these processes, community planners will not recognize how this work might be different from what they had already done in terms of community forums and hearing community voices.

New Models of Community-Foundation Partnerships (continued)

– Sufficient time and resources are needed to ensure that the results from community dialog processes can be incorporated into planning for change. While this does not necessarily mean that there is a specified sequence for dialog and planning activities, sufficient community dialog activities and analysis must be completed early in planning for there to be meaningful input.

  – At the same time, seeing community dialog processes as one-time events, whether as input to or ratification of community planning, does not take into account the contribution such processes can make to stimulating substantial community change.

Incorporating Parent Voices

The proximate decision maker about conditions, relationships and actions affecting young child health and development, including access to formal services and informal supports, is the parent. This assumption builds on the body of research indicating that children benefit when their parents know and recognize that they have control over what happens to their children. However, system change initiatives often do not build in parents as a major constituency or parent engagement as a strategy to build broader based ownership for investments in children.

• It is widely recognized that engaging a broad and diverse group of parents and representing their interests and experiences in community planning and decision making in meaningful ways are difficult. Identifying a few parent-activists and getting them involved has some value and is generally easier.

• There are practical, social, and cultural barriers to broader parent engagement.

  – Bringing parents to the table without recognizing and attempting to address these barriers has negative effects, including adding to parents' feeling of discouragement and cynicism.

  – Initiatives that take seriously broad parent engagement as a goal need to acknowledge that these barriers exist and there have been few unqualified successes to draw upon as models.

Therefore, what can be provided in technical assistance in this area is often speculative or theoretical rather than experience-based.

– At the same time, parents themselves can find ways to overcome barriers when they see real opportunities to make a difference — to change things they really care about and that make a real difference to them and their children.

• As in other areas, lack of clarity about goals and expectations for broad parent engagement can hamper an initiative's efforts to make real change within communities.

  – Unclear messages to the communities about fundamental issues such as who counts as an authentic parent voice and the expected or desired kinds and levels of parent engagement can lead to tokenism in terms of parent representation or involvement.

• New experience and thinking looks at placing the responsibility for an initiative directly with a parent-led group or organization. This gives a different message about seriousness of being parent-driven and, by making a parent group the convener, other community stakeholders must come to the table willing to accept that premise.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SIMILAR COMMUNITY-FOUNDATION PARTNERSHIPS

Based on our experience, we suggest several strategies that might be used in foundation-sponsored initiatives that seek to form partnerships with grantee communities.

• Take the time to *build strong internal consensus and common language among the initiative leadership,* both within the foundation, its staff and board, and with external partners such as an intermediary organization.

• Even in an experimental approach, *certain basics must be agreed upon up front,* for example, solid funding commitments, jointly agreed upon markers of progress for success at each phase of work, criteria for continuation, and clear articulation of roles.

New Models of Community-Foundation Partnerships (continued)

Although flexibility and responsiveness are important, written guidelines provide a solid base for discussion and feedback.

- Site selection and engagement can be time-consuming and expensive. Use these processes as a way to *learn more about opportunities within communities* to build on their particular assets, address their specific challenges, and refine and expand their agendas. Do not expect site selection, no matter how carefully designed or extensive, to guarantee consensus on the goodness-of-fit between what various constituencies in the community perceive as their agenda and that of the initiative, nor of long-term success even among those communities that elect to participate.

- To *maximize the value of working collaboratively with communities* to design initiatives, recognize that communities generally have considerable work to do and issues to be identified and addressed to lay the groundwork for their effective collaboration with the foundation. Provide specific supports designed to help prepare communities to be more comfortable and effective as partners.

- Broaden and deepen community understanding of the initiative by *spending more time early and on-site providing information and orientation and supporting a longer time frame to help communities prepare for collaborative design work.* Support communities to carry out necessary internal activities, including community dialog and self-reflection, prior to bringing them together.

- *Build in more direct contact between the foundation and initiative communities,* both initially and on an ongoing basis. This will increase the comfort level of both with a new and potentially risky venture, ensure more direct communication, and build greater understanding of community issues and opportunities within the foundation and of foundation parameters and operating constraints within the communities.