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**THE DISCOVERY INITIATIVE: 2004-2009  
FINAL SUMMATIVE EVALUATION REPORT**

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This report was prepared by the Discovery Initiative Evaluation Team for the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund in late 2010 and early 2011, using data collected between 2005 and 2010. Further details on data sources and methods are presented in Appendix A of this report.

We 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 and regional organizations receiving Memorial Fund grants, and other individuals in the Discovery communities and at the state level who completed surveys, were interviewed, or participated in focus groups during the course of the evaluation. Our work especially benefitted from the guidance of Angela Frusciante, Knowledge Development Officer at the Memorial Fund. The analyses and conclusions in this report solely reflect the perspective of the Evaluation Team.

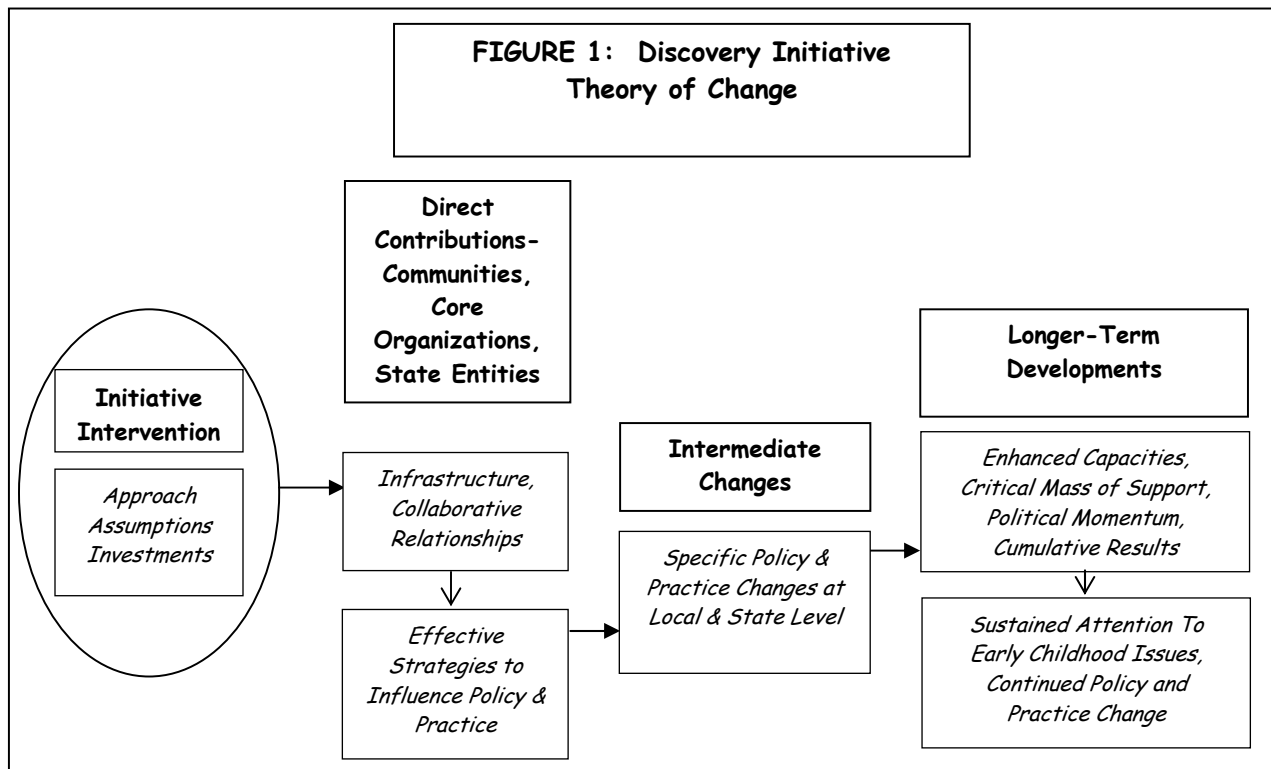
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Memorial Fund designed the Discovery Initiative with the goal of strengthening the capacities of communities and state advocacy organizations to influence actions and decisions that affect early childhood policy and practice. The initiative's theory of change, developed by the evaluation team in consultation with program staff, (Figure 1) linked the supports the Memorial Fund provided through the Initiative with expected changes at the community and state levels. The theory of change assumed that the supports provided to communities, state organizations, and public entities would contribute to changes in Connecticut's early care and education system and ultimately improve children's development and early school success.

The Discovery *initiative intervention* encompassed the Memorial Fund's approach to working with its partners, the assumptions or principles that underlie Discovery, and the specific investments made in capacity building, which include grant support and technical assistance. The *direct contributions* of the Discovery Initiative were expected to be strengthened infrastructure and relationships within and among communities and state-level organizations and groups. These enhanced capacities would enable stakeholders to implement *effective strategies* to bring about *specific intermediate changes* in local and state early childhood education policies and practices. The strengthened capacities, effective strategies, and specific policy and practice changes at the community and state levels were then expected to contribute to the *longer-term development* of sustained attention to early childhood issues and continued policy and practice change.



Beginning in 2005 the evaluation addressed the following questions derived from the Discovery theory of change:

- Have the supports – grant funding, technical assistance, sustained commitment, and the visibility and credibility associated with being part of a state-wide, foundation-supported initiative – contributed to collaborative infrastructure and relationships at the community and state levels?
- Has the development of collaborative infrastructure contributed to the implementation of effective strategies to bring about early childhood policy and practice change?
- Has the development of relationships, particularly those needed for parent engagement, contributed to the implementation of effective strategies to bring about early childhood policy and practice change?
- Have the Discovery strategies contributed to the adoption of specific policies and practices in communities and at the state level?
- As a result of the initiative, has public and political interest in and support for early childhood issues increased in Connecticut?

This final summative report reviews the evidence accumulated over the course of Discovery pertaining to these questions, with a special focus on the 2007-2009 period.

***The evaluation team observed the increasing effectiveness of capacity-building supports that evolved from key learnings developed during Discovery – 1) the importance of relationships in supporting both learning and change, 2) the need to practice skills and apply new knowledge in situations of interest and importance to the learners, and 3) the value of supporting groups in learning how to stimulate and support community change.***

The decision to focus on building community and state capacities as a central Initiative strategy resulted in mixed experiences through 2007, both among the Discovery communities and with the statewide and regional grantee organizations. While communities generally valued opportunities to learn from their peers and community liaisons and many made use of Discovery's website and weekly e-newsletter to access information, individual workshops appeared to be less helpful. The Discovery technical assistance approach shifted in 2008-2009 to working over multiple sessions with community teams, focused on key capacities necessary to lead community planning. This approach, accompanied by individualized consultation and ongoing support from the community liaisons, appeared to be more successful than single-session workshops in helping community members absorb new information, develop new skills, and use both to move their work forward.

In the early years of Discovery, grant funding and staff support for the statewide and regional grantee organizations were more focused on individual organizational capacities and activities. Providing a core set of statewide advocacy organizations with external technical assistance on organizational development and collaborative work, along with grant opportunities for joint

work, appeared to have set the stage for more coordinated advocacy and broader engagement of key constituencies and stakeholders in the 2008-2009 period.

***The evaluation team observed an increase in collaboration within communities in the early years of Discovery with a plateau in the 2008-2009 period. Cross-community activities and collaboration among the core state advocacy organizations and between these organizations and communities increased sharply after 2007.***

By 2007, after a planning period and four years of funding and capacity-building support, many of the 47 Discovery collaborative groups appeared to be organized and functioning at moderate levels based on ratings made by consultants working with the communities and on analysis of collaborative group membership and structure. Between 2007 and 2009 overall levels of collaboration within communities had remained at a similar level, although a number of communities had either increased or decreased on measures of collaborative strength and community support. As more communities undertake community planning and develop governance and accountability structures to support implementation of their plans, further strengthening of collaboration may occur. However, it appears likely that community collaboration will remain “a work in progress,” requiring ongoing attention.

Collaborative activities among the statewide advocacy organizations were just beginning to be developed and implemented by 2007. These activities became more numerous, more formalized, and arguably more effective in 2008 and 2009. Their successes demonstrated the value of collaboration to the core statewide organizations and they appear poised to continue similar activities going forward.

***The evaluation team observed ongoing attention to building relationships with and engaging parents during Discovery, both at the community and state level. The community collaborative groups and the statewide parent advocacy organization expanded their parent engagement strategies between 2004 and 2009.***

By 2007 the overall level of support that many Discovery collaborative groups provided for parent participation and the extent of parent membership and leadership on the collaborative groups had grown in most communities. At the same time, members of many Discovery collaborative groups commented on the challenges and difficulties in engaging parents in their work, often citing the desire of parents to be involved in activities that have a more direct impact on children’s experiences. A frequently made comment was that parents found much of the collaborative groups’ work abstract and sometimes intimidating. The Discovery communities reported similar levels of parent participation and leadership on the collaborative groups in 2009 as in 2007. However, in 2009 they also reported engaging in a broad range of activities to support parent input, engagement, and leadership on issues affecting young children, beyond participation on the collaborative group.

In 2007 interviews, legislators reported that they did not perceive parents as demanding attention to early childhood issues, even though Connecticut Parent Power was recognized as an influential advocacy organization. By 2009, Parent Power had expanded its membership and supported more opportunities for parents to become engaged in efforts to change policy and practice, both locally and at the state level. Parent Power, in collaboration with the other core

statewide organizations, carried out strategies to engage and inform legislators, particularly those in leadership and on key committees. Legislators interviewed after the 2009 session who were on committees dealing with children's and education issues reported hearing from parents on these issues.

Parent engagement and leadership, measured primarily by their involvement in the community collaborative groups, appears to have reached a steady level in most Discovery communities, although one that requires ongoing attention. The Discovery communities have developed a broad array of opportunities for parents to share their ideas and opinions and exercise leadership that go beyond participation in the collaborative groups.

While relatively new, Parent Power has become an important ally in work on early childhood issues. The fact that the Universal Health Care Foundation has funded Parent Power to build grassroots supports in several Discovery communities for universally available, affordable, high quality health care is an indication of the value of its work for Connecticut's children.

***The evaluation team observed the development and implementation of increasingly coordinated and effective strategies to build public and political support and influence policy decisions, locally and at the state level.***

After the 2007 legislative session, legislators reported that communities and parents had not played an active role in state policy work and that advocacy on early childhood issues did not have a unified message or coordinated approach. Over the course of the initiative, the Memorial Fund increased its support and encouragement for partnerships between the core statewide advocacy organizations and communities for mobilization and advocacy. By 2009 Discovery collaborative groups had become more active in local advocacy, in advocacy with other communities, and in advocacy-related events and projects with the core statewide grantee organizations. In addition, these organizations increased their own collaborative strategies to engage, inform, and present recommendations on early childhood issues with legislators.

Strategies to bring about systemic and sustained change in early childhood policies and practices became more focused and effective throughout the course of Discovery. These strategies appear to have raised visibility of early childhood issues and increased the political capital needed to support them among political leadership at both the community and state levels. During the 2004-2009 period, the initiative was less focused on developing public support state-wide. However, as noted above, more parent and community input was received by key legislators during the 2009 session. Further, during the 2010 election season a broader voter-oriented campaign – "I Care about Kids and I Vote" – was launched by the Early Childhood Alliance.

***The evaluation team observed progress in broadening and deepening public and political interest and support for early childhood issues within communities and at the state level.***

By 2007 many of the Discovery collaborative groups had reported improvements in their community's early care and education services. For these communities in particular, but others as well, these improvements continued through 2009, indicating continued local support for

early childhood. The 2009 state legislative climate was more favorable for early childhood issues than in the previous session. Even during the economic downturn and shift in gubernatorial priorities during the budget crisis in 2009, funding for early care and education services was maintained and support for the community planning and parent leadership training continued. The work of Discovery – communities, core statewide organizations, and the Memorial Fund staff – was recognized by participants and observers as critical in the progress seen throughout the initiative from 2004 through 2009.

While continued work will be needed to fully develop a system of early care and education that, closely linked with elementary education, fosters children’s early school success – progress is being realized. Momentum and broadened political and public support were evident, even in the very difficult economic and fiscal environment of 2008-2009. Further evidence that early childhood issues are increasingly politically relevant is the fact that they were among the topics addressed in candidate debates during the 2010 gubernatorial election.

***Based on the evaluation team’s observations, the pathways for change expected from the Discovery theory of change were confirmed. The Memorial Fund’s long-term commitment to capacity building at both the community and state levels has contributed to progress toward the initiative’s long-term goal.***

The initiative’s intervention strategy – focusing on building the capacity of communities and core statewide organizations to collaborate and to engage parents – laid the foundation for efforts to influence early childhood policies and practices at the local and state levels. This foundation, when combined with increasingly focused opportunities and support as the initiative matured, contributed to the development and implementation of effective mobilization and advocacy strategies. These strategies then contributed to improvements in community early childhood programs and services; to increased state investment in early education, community planning, and parent leadership; and to sustained commitment by state legislators and community leaders, even in dire economic times, to early childhood issues. At the same time, collaboration and parent engagement – cornerstone capacities in the Discovery theory of change – remain “works in progress,” subject to fluctuation as circumstances in communities and across the state change. To the extent that these two capacities are critical to continuing progress toward building a strong early childhood system, ongoing attention to collaboration, particularly at the community level, and to parent engagement, particularly at the state level, may be necessary. The Memorial Fund’s long standing commitment to putting these principles at the core of its work appears to have laid a foundation on which all stakeholders can continue to build.

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE DISCOVERY INITIATIVE

*The term “Discovery” is at the heart of what we are doing. The Memorial Fund went into this process fully open to uncovering, along with its grantees, what works on a practical level...The Memorial Fund continues to have an interest in strategies that support community change, school change and policy change to improve outcomes for young children. We are most interested in ways that communities can integrate these strategies into comprehensive, broadly supported solutions that make sense at the local level and can garner long-term commitment at both the state and local levels. The Memorial Fund aims to work with community collaboratives that share an interest in these four objectives and with organizations that can support this work locally, regionally and statewide.*

2001-2003 Triennial Report of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, January 2003.

The Discovery Initiative, supported by the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, seeks to affect community change and policy change that will improve early school success. Though the Discovery initiative was launched in 2002, the Memorial Fund has been working in partnership with Connecticut communities and statewide and regional organizations toward this end since 1993. More than just affecting short-term change, however, the Discovery initiative is 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. To do this, the Memorial Fund supported three main strategies:<sup>1</sup>

- **“Engaging Connecticut communities** in building and implementing an early care and education agenda...
- **Developing a statewide and regional network** that supports the local communities and seeks state level change in policy and practice...
- **Fostering instructional leadership**, a strategy implemented by the Connecticut Center for School Change...” (emphasis in the original<sup>2</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> The Discovery evaluation team focused on the first two strategies. While the Center has provided valuable technical assistance to the Discovery communities on kindergarten transition practices and planning, the focus of its work has been primarily with school superintendents, fostering broad school reform.

<sup>2</sup> See the Discovery website, [discovery.wcgmf.org](http://discovery.wcgmf.org).

## **The Environment for the Discovery Initiative**

The work of the Memorial Fund, and of the Discovery community and state level grantees, is affected by the broader social, economic, and political environment. The economic and, as a result, the policy environment have changed drastically over the course of Discovery. Since 1993, the Memorial Fund has been supporting community collaborative groups and statewide and regional organizations with the goal of improving outcomes for young children.

In 1997, the Memorial Fund and several community grantees contributed to the passage of the School Readiness Act, which provides grants to fund preschool slots in accredited or approved programs for eligible children<sup>3</sup> in school districts<sup>4</sup> with substantial numbers of children eligible for the federal free or reduced price lunch program and children receiving low scores on the state standardized achievement tests. The School Readiness Program 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.

A key piece of the 1997 school readiness legislation was the creation of School Readiness Councils (“SRCs”) in each community that receives school readiness funds from the state. The SRC is responsible for making recommendations on issues relating to school readiness including the application for school readiness grants. Members of the local School Readiness Councils are to include the chief elected official or designee, the superintendent of schools or management level staff person, parents, a representative of a community health care provider, representatives from programs such as Head Start, family resource centers, nonprofit and for profit child-care centers, group day-care homes, pre-kindergarten and nursery schools and

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<sup>3</sup> Children ages three and four are eligible if they live in a priority school district or go to a school that has 40% or more children eligible for the federal free or reduced price lunch program. Priority school districts, which are automatically eligible to receive School Readiness funding, are determined based on population and percentage of children receiving federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) benefits. Funding for high poverty schools that are not in priority school districts is awarded on a competitive grant basis and is much more limited. The Connecticut Department of Education requires that at least 60% of children enrolled in a School Readiness program have family incomes at or below 75% of the state median income. A program may also reserve 5% of its slots for children who are five and have been in the program for a year but are determined not to be ready for kindergarten.

<sup>4</sup> “Three types of towns qualify as priority school districts: (1) the eight towns with the largest populations, based on the last census; (2) in the first year of each biennium, the 11 towns with the highest numbers of children on welfare plus the largest numbers of children scoring below the remedial level on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT); and (3) in the first year of each biennium, the 11 towns that rank highest in the number of children on welfare divided by the “grant mastery percentage.” The grant mastery percentage is the number of students in the district scoring below standard on CMT divided by the number taking the test...[Transitional school districts are the 21 other districts that are lowest on one of two criteria.] One is the number of children on welfare plus the district’s “mastery count,” which is the number of students in the district scoring below state standards on mastery tests divided by the number who take CMT, multiplied by the number of the district’s regular education students. The other is the ratio of students on welfare to all the district’s students plus the mastery percentage...[Priority schools are schools] located outside of a priority, former priority, or transitional district where 40% or more of the lunches served are served to students eligible for free and reduced-price lunches under the federal school lunch program.” From *Priority and Transitional School Districts and Districts with Priority Schools*, Judith Lohman, CT State Department of Education, March 3, 2004, <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2004/rpt/2004-R-0289.htm>.

family day care home provider representatives from the community who provide services to children.

When M. Jodi Rell became Governor in 2004, she sought legislation to establish the Connecticut Early Childhood Education Cabinet (“the Cabinet”), which began its work in July 2005. The Cabinet was charged with conducting a statewide longitudinal evaluation of the School Readiness program in consultation with the Departments of Social Services and Education, developing budget requests for the early childhood program, promoting consistency of quality and comprehensiveness of early childhood services, and advising the Commissioner of Education on policies and initiatives to meet school readiness goals. In 2006, *Ready by 5 and Fine by 9*<sup>5</sup>, an early childhood investment framework with ten priorities for the state, was released by the Cabinet.

To support the work of the Cabinet, Governor Rell established the Early Childhood Research and Policy Council (“the Council”) in February 2006. The Council was charged with developing a multi-year investment plan based on the work of the Cabinet. The Governor appointed Memorial Fund Executive Director, David Nee, as one of three co-chairs to the Council. The Council provided research, policy papers, and policy analysis, and the work culminated in the development of the state's first Early Childhood Investment Plan<sup>6</sup> based on the Investment Framework provided by the Early Childhood Education Cabinet. This work informed budget discussions during the 2007 legislative session.

The 2007 legislative session saw an increase in new funding for early care and education—more than \$50 million for fiscal years 2008 and 2009. Funds authorized for the School Readiness program were expected to create 2,000 to 2,400 new slots in 2008 and 2009. The state legislature also authorized funds for community early childhood planning grants and to continue parent leadership development through the Parent Trust Fund.

The fiscal crisis that swept the nation during the 2008-2009 period left Connecticut with a several billion dollar budget shortfall. Though many programs were severely cut during this period, as of 2009, core funding for early childhood programs was maintained and the increased funding from 2007 continued. However, pieces of the infrastructure were cut back or eliminated during the 2009 session, particularly the Early Childhood Cabinet and the Research and Policy Council.<sup>7</sup>

### **History of the Discovery Initiative**

The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund has been investing in the well-being of Connecticut's young children, particularly in the area of education, since 1993. As such, the

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<sup>5</sup> See the Connecticut Early Childhood Education Cabinet website [http://tearlychildhood.org/images/customer-files/ready5\\_fine9.pdf](http://tearlychildhood.org/images/customer-files/ready5_fine9.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Connecticut's Early Childhood Investment Plan (Part 1) is available on the Connecticut Early Childhood Education Cabinet website, [http://ctearlychildhood.org/Content/Connecticutand\\_39\\_s\\_Early\\_Childhood\\_Investment\\_Plan\\_Part\\_1\\_.asp](http://ctearlychildhood.org/Content/Connecticutand_39_s_Early_Childhood_Investment_Plan_Part_1_.asp).

<sup>7</sup> For more details, see *Discovery Initiative Contributions to State Policy Change* (in review).

Memorial Fund is part of the environment affecting early childhood issues in Connecticut and also a lever for change in that environment.

Between 1995 and 1999, with continued funding 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. During that period, the Memorial Fund's work contributed to the passage of the School Readiness Act. Legislative staff putting together the Act met directly with Children First communities, seeking information on the probable need for and projected cost of early care and education in their communities. With research and communication support provided by the Memorial Fund staff, the CFI communities produced this information.

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. Discovery initially engaged 49 Connecticut communities and a number of statewide and regional advocacy, research, and policy organizations in pursuing four specific objectives:

- 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 Memorial Fund invited 49 communities to participate in an initial funded planning process during 2002 and 2003, followed by implementation beginning in 2004. Eventually, all 49 communities joined Discovery, organizing themselves into 47 collaborative groups, with 3 of the communities forming a single collaborative group. 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.

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.

The Discovery Initiative investment was to conclude at the end of 2007. However, in 2006, the Memorial Fund Board of Trustees invited the staff to develop a proposal for extending Discovery and increasing funding for Discovery to take advantage of a favorable policy climate and momentum around early childhood issues in Connecticut. As a result, the Discovery Initiative was extended through 2009 and grew from an original investment of \$16 million over 6 years to a total of more than \$28 million over 8 years. Called "Positioning for Future Success," this phase of Discovery had three goals:

- Sustaining the momentum of Discovery
- Leveraging expanded State commitment to early care and education
- Building the capacity of community and statewide organization grantees and other partners to lead and advance an early care and education agenda

Discovery during this period included additional funding for core statewide organizations to collaborate, for Discovery communities to engage in regional work, and for the Memorial Fund to intensify capacity building efforts, engage in funding partnerships, and provide matching funding to the State to expand and support parent engagement and community planning.

Additionally, new Discovery communities were added. Over the course of Discovery, sixteen more communities became eligible for the State Department of Education's School Readiness Program. In the fall of 2007, the Memorial Fund invited all sixteen to a forum to discuss options for participating in Discovery. Five communities expressed interest and readiness to participate in Discovery and were subsequently added to the original 49, for a total of 54 Discovery communities.

## FRAMING THE DISCOVERY INITIATIVE EVALUATION

The Initiative evaluation, begun in 2005, was originally designed to assess Discovery through 2007. The evaluation was extended through 2009, when the Memorial Fund decided to extend Discovery.<sup>8</sup> This report summarizes the major evaluation findings detailed in the interim report that covered the 2004 through 2007 period of Discovery and builds on those findings to assess progress during the 2008-2009 period. As in the interim report, the findings presented in this report are organized around key questions suggested by the Discovery theory of change. This chapter outlines the theory of change, which was developed by the evaluation team to guide its work, and the evaluation questions. The chapter also includes a brief summary of evaluation data and methods and a guide to the remainder of the report.

### **The Theory of Change Guiding the Discovery Initiative Evaluation**

The theory of change (see Figure 1), developed by the evaluation team and reviewed with Memorial Fund staff, links what the Memorial Fund does to support Discovery with expected changes at the community and state levels at different stages of Discovery. The theory of change assumes that the supports provided to communities, state organizations, and public entities will contribute to changes in Connecticut's early care and education system and ultimately improve children's development and early school success.<sup>9</sup>

The evaluation team used the theory of change to frame evaluation questions and to guide data collection and analysis. Discovery intended to strengthen the capacities of communities and state advocacy organizations to sustain attention of policymakers and citizens on early childhood issues and to influence their actions and decisions to bring about policy and practice changes. Therefore, the focus of the evaluation is on these results and the contribution that Discovery strategies appeared to make in realizing these results.

The Discovery *initiative intervention* encompasses the Memorial Fund's approach to working with its partners, the assumptions or principles that underlie Discovery, and the specific investments made in capacity building, including grant support and technical assistance.

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 evaluation's Discovery theory of change, these enhanced capacities will enable stakeholders to implement *effective strategies* to bring about *specific intermediate changes* in local and state early childhood education policies and practices.

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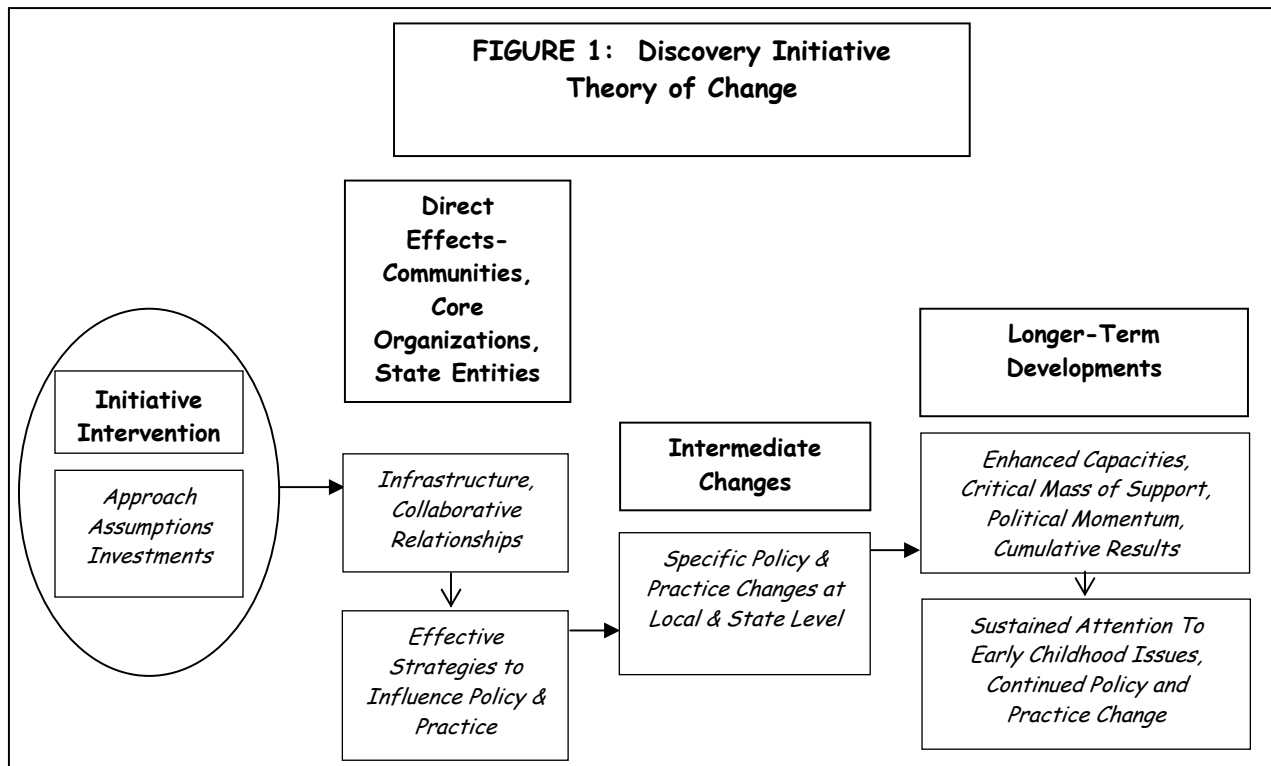
<sup>8</sup> In addition to this summative report and informal memos and briefings, the evaluation team has produced a series of more focused reports (see Appendix A for a full listing).

<sup>9</sup> While the theory appears to be linear and uni-directional, in actuality ongoing work is needed to renew and strengthen the results at each stage.



The specific policy and practice changes at the community and state levels are then expected to contribute to cumulative benefits for young children and to the development of 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 following section provides additional details about each stage of the theory of change.



### The Discovery Initiative Intervention

The Memorial Fund approaches its partnerships with communities, organizations, and state entities in a distinctive way. The ways in which the Memorial Fund’s **approach** has been described by grantees includes:

- Engaging in respectful listening and responding to what is heard
- Being consistent in focus (early childhood) and underlying principles (parent and community engagement and collaboration) and transparent in its messages
- Being willing to modify strategies, reflecting learning and changing conditions
- Fostering relationships and establishing personal connections with and among grantees

These characteristics are seen by grantees and outside observers as hallmarks of the Memorial Fund’s approach and ways in which the Memorial Fund may differ from other funders.<sup>10</sup>

Decisions regarding Discovery strategies and capacity-building supports were guided by a set of assumptions at the Memorial Fund about what it takes to support meaningful and sustained change. As observed by the evaluation team, these assumptions include:

- **Parent engagement and collaboration** will ensure that plans and policies reflect diverse interests and experiences, bring a wide range of resources and expertise to the table, and create the foundation for sustained work.
- Having the **commitment of elected political officials and school leadership** is essential to getting and sustaining public support and funding for critical components of a community’s early care and education system.
- Focusing on **communities with large numbers of low-income children** will have the greatest impact on disparities in children’s outcomes.
- Engaging a **large number of communities** will build broad-based sustained public support and leadership commitment across the state.
- Working **simultaneously in many communities and at the state-level** will ensure that the necessary policies and investments will be put in place to support effective practice changes on the ground.
- Focusing on providing **capacity-building** supports will enable communities and state-wide organizations to be responsive to emerging needs, opportunities, and conditions. Specifically, these supports will help:
  - Enable individuals and groups to work together to make early childhood a priority.
  - Develop mechanisms to ensure that the voices of diverse parents are heard and their interests are met and that community experiences and needs are considered in developing policy.
  - Develop the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to craft and implement effective policies and practices.
  - Increase attention to and broaden support for changes in early childhood policies and practices.

The Memorial Fund has made substantial **investments**, in both monetary grants and staff time, in a variety of supports for its grantees – communities and state-wide and regional organizations. It also invested in other state entities such as the Early Childhood Research and Policy Council and in partnership with state agencies.

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<sup>10</sup> See *Observing Values In Action: Stories and Lessons from the Work of The William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund*, Sally Leiderman, Center for Assessment and Policy Development, August 2010 at [http://www.wcgmf.org/pdf/publication\\_56.pdf](http://www.wcgmf.org/pdf/publication_56.pdf).

## **Direct Effects of the Discovery Initiative Intervention**

Based on the theory of change developed by the evaluation team, Discovery was expected to support the development of collaborative groups in the Discovery communities to manage and lead a community change process with capacities to analyze, reflect, organize and act in support of young children. These groups were expected to be broadly inclusive of diverse stakeholders in the community, pay particular attention to engaging parents and community leaders, and connect with other efforts in their community working on behalf of young children. Over time, it was expected that the community collaborative groups would link with others in their region and across the state to work toward early childhood policy and practice change.

Discovery was also expected to support the development of organizational capacities – such as staff skills and technology – of state-wide and regional organizations involved in research, advocacy, and program innovation related to early care and education. These organizations were expected to build stronger relationships with each other and with communities and carry out collaborative projects. Similarly, the support of the Memorial Fund was expected to support the work of specific state entities (the Governor’s Early Childhood Education Cabinet and Research and Policy Council), activities (the Parent Trust Fund), and agencies (the Department of Education and its community planning grant program).

Organizational capacities, collaborative infrastructure, and stakeholder engagement -- particularly parent engagement -- were expected to provide the foundation for effective strategies for policy and practice change at the community and state levels.

## **Intermediate Changes in Policy and Practice**

According to the Discovery evaluation theory of change, the capacities and relationships at the community and state levels that are expected to be strengthened through Discovery will enable stakeholders to mobilize and implement effective strategies for specific changes in local and state policies and practices. These changes include in decision-making affecting young children and their families are made, in the delivery and quality of early childhood programs and services, and in the adoption and implementation of local and state policies that affect the development and learning of young children.

## **Longer-Term Developments**

According to the theory of change, specific policy and practice changes at the community and state levels will 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 support the longer-term development of public commitment and political momentum on early childhood issues in Connecticut.

## **Overview of the Discovery Initiative Evaluation**

Since 2005, the evaluation team has addressed the following questions derived from the Discovery theory of change:

- **Effects of the Discovery Initiative Intervention Strategies:** Have the supports provided through the Discovery Initiative – grant funding, technical assistance, sustained commitment, and the visibility and credibility associated with being part of a state-wide, foundation-supported initiative – contributed to collaborative infrastructure and relationships at the community and state levels?
- **Effects of Initiative Focus on Collaboration:** Has the development of collaborative infrastructure contributed to the implementation of effective strategies to bring about early childhood policy and practice change?
- **Effects of Initiative Focus on Parent and Other Stakeholder Engagement:** Has the development of relationships, particularly those needed for parent engagement, contributed to the implementation of effective strategies to bring about early childhood policy and practice change?
- **Initiative Contributions to Intermediate Changes in Specific Policies and Practices:** Have the capacities and strategies supported through the Discovery Initiative contributed to the adoption of specific policies and practices in communities and at the state level?
- **Initiative Contributions to Longer-Term Development of Support for Early Childhood Issues:** As a result of Discovery, have public and political interest in and support for early childhood issues increased in Connecticut?

Throughout the course of the evaluation, the team<sup>11</sup> gathered information, conducted observations, given presentations and briefings, and prepared reports about the Discovery Initiative, addressing these questions.

### **Evaluation Data Sources and Methods**

A key feature of the evaluation approach was the use of data from multiple sources and perspectives in addressing the research questions. Data sources included Memorial Fund staff who participated in evaluation interviews, informal discussions, and group reflection sessions; the Discovery community grantees through evaluation interviews, surveys, and focus groups with various collaborative group members, staff, and community stakeholders; the community

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<sup>11</sup> Between 2005 and 2006, the evaluation team included Manuel Gutierrez, at that time with OMG and now with Metis Associates, Sally Leiderman of CAPD, and Donna Studdiford of On Point Consulting. In 2007 Sam Stephens joined the team, when Gutierrez and Leiderman left. Since 2007 the evaluation team has consisted of Stephens and Studdiford.

liaisons and technical assistance providers who worked with the Discovery community and organizational grantees; applications, reports, self-assessment instruments, and other documents submitted by grantees to the Memorial Fund; Discovery events and activities including the annual Stone Soup conference, technical assistance workshops, and other meetings observed by the evaluation team; and representatives of state-level organizations, staff of state agencies, and state legislators who were interviewed by the team. Appendix A provides additional information on the methods used throughout Discovery to collect information used in the evaluation.

The evaluation team used its observations, in-depth interviews with various stakeholders, and review of narrative reports from grantees to guide the development of structured survey instruments and other quantitative data collection protocols. This approach resulted in data collection and analysis categories that were grounded in the ways Discovery participants and community and state-level stakeholders described and reflected on their own perspectives and experiences.

### **Interim Summative Report through 2007**

Since 2005, the Discovery evaluation team has prepared a number of presentations, papers, and other documents on specific topics. Appendix B provides a list of these evaluation products.

An interim summative report, covering the initial phase of Discovery – from 2004 through 2007 – assessed the extent to which the initiative was “on track”<sup>12</sup> in several areas:

- Improvements in the Discovery objectives
- Movement toward sustained attention to early childhood policy issues
- Collaboration within and across Discovery communities and among the state-wide grantee organizations
- Parent engagement in the community collaborative groups and in state advocacy activities
- Implementation of strategies to make changes in early childhood policies and practices
- Use by and value to communities and state organizations of Discovery capacity-building supports

Throughout this report, key findings from the interim report are summarized as the basis for assessing progress in the 2008-2009 period.

### **Evaluation Focus for 2008-2009**

As described in the introductory chapter of this report, significant shifts in both the environment and the Initiative occurred in 2008 and 2009. These included the economic downturn and subsequent state budget crisis, which diverted the Governor’s attention from

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<sup>12</sup> As in this final summative report, the interim report contained the evaluation team’s definitions of “on track” indicators in each of the analysis areas. The interim report is available at <http://discovery.wcgmf.org/toc.html>.

early childhood issues. This period also saw changes in the Discovery technical assistance focus and approach with communities and state-wide advocacy organizations. As will be demonstrated in this report, this period also saw an increase in the effective use of strategies to maintain investments in early care and education and to continue building the infrastructure and support needed for a sustained commitment to early childhood issues. For that reason, the report uses interim findings at the end of 2007 as a benchmark against which to measure the overall progress of the Initiative.

### **Organization of the Report**

The first two chapters of this report described the Discovery Initiative and its political and economic context and outlined the theory of change framework and methods used in the evaluation. The following five chapters examine evidence related to each of the evaluation questions, starting with the intermediate and longer-term goals of Discovery and moving “backwards” through the theory of change.

The next chapter summarizes observations about “intermediate changes” seen during the course of Discovery related to the specific policy and practice objectives of the Initiative and about the “development of longer-term capacity” within the state to influence early childhood policies and investments. This chapter addresses evaluation questions related to the contributions made by Discovery to these intermediate changes and longer-term developments.

The subsequent three chapters examine progress on elements of the Discovery theory of change that were considered critical to these changes and developments. These elements fall under the theory of change category of “direct effects:” the strengthening of collaboration among key stakeholder groups, the broad and ongoing engagement of parents in policy considerations and decisions, and the implementation of effective change strategies.

The next to last chapter examines the use of capacity building supports by the Discovery communities and grantee organizations, which falls under the theory of change category of “initiative intervention.” This chapter addresses evaluation questions about the role of these supports in promoting collaboration, engaging parents, and encouraging the use of effective change strategies.

In the final chapter, the evaluation team presents a series of questions, based on its observations and analysis, that relate to sustaining and building on the work and the accomplishments of Discovery between 2004 and 2009.

Appendix A provides detail on the evaluation’s data collection methods and the measures used in this report and Appendix B lists the evaluation’s other reports and products.

## **CHANGES IN POLICY AND PRACTICE AND DEVELOPMENT OF LONGER-TERM CAPACITY TO INFLUENCE POLICY AT COMMUNITY AND STATE LEVELS THROUGH 2009**

The Discovery Initiative seeks to influence community and state practice and policy change in early childhood education that will improve young children's school success. Discovery is also intended to contribute to community and statewide focus on early childhood issues and policies that would be sustained beyond the initiative. This chapter focuses on evidence related to the following evaluation questions:

- Have the Discovery strategies contributed to the adoption of specific policies and practices in communities and at the state level?
- As a result of the initiative, has public and political interest in and support for early childhood issues increased in Connecticut?

Later chapters present evaluation findings related to how strengthening collaboration and parent engagement capacities at the community and state levels supported the implementation of effective strategies leading to these changes.

### **What Do “Changes In Policy And Practice and Development of Longer-Term Capacity to Influence Policy” Mean in the Discovery Initiative?**

The Memorial Fund set out four specific policy and practice objectives<sup>13</sup> for the communities and organizations it partnered with in the Discovery Initiative. These were to:

- 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 Memorial Fund also intended Discovery to support sustained community and statewide focus on early childhood issues and the capacity of parents, communities, and advocacy groups to influence policy on behalf of young children at the local and state levels.

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<sup>13</sup> Practice changes refer to design and implementation of activities, services, and programs intended to contribute toward the objectives; policy changes refer to the adoption and implementation of legislation, regulations, requirements, standards, and funding streams that encourage or mandate the development and ongoing implementation of practice changes. An example of a practice change would be the scheduling of professional development workshops for both preschool and kindergarten teachers that focused on shared understanding of developmentally appropriate learning goals and strategies. An example of a policy change related to this practice change would be the school district's decision to use professional development resources to offer such workshops and to provide substitutes so that preschool and kindergarten teachers from both in-district and community-based programs could attend.

The Discovery theory of change guiding the evaluation posits that what the Memorial Fund does to support communities, state organizations and public entities will contribute to changes in Connecticut's early care and education system and ultimately improve children's development and early school success. Within and among communities, between communities and state-wide organizations, and with state entities like the Early Childhood Education Cabinet and executive departments, the Discovery Initiative's grants and capacity-building would be expected to promote:

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

### **How Has the Memorial Fund Supported Policy and Practice Changes and Development of Longer-Term Capacity to Influence Policy?**

At the beginning of Discovery, the community collaborative groups were asked to select one or more of the four Discovery objectives as the focus of their work and to develop annual plans for actions designed to contribute to those objectives. The 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 early childhood community report cards that included data related to the Discovery objectives.

Beginning in 2008, in partnership with the State Department of Education, the Memorial Fund supported 21 of the original 49 communities<sup>15</sup> in Discovery in undertaking the development of community-wide comprehensive plans for young children.<sup>16</sup> This support included funding for

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<sup>14</sup> 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](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.

<sup>15</sup> Another 19 collaborative groups, representing 21 communities, applied for and were awarded similar grants beginning in 2010.

<sup>16</sup> In a few cases, the age range covered by the plans went beyond age 8 and as far as age 21.



planning activities and facilitation consultants and intensive technical assistance on facilitative leadership, community decision-making, and results-based accountability.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond the individual communities, the Discovery Initiative was interested in amplifying community voice across geographic boundaries, creating what was called the “50<sup>th</sup> community.” The “50<sup>th</sup> community” concept represented the coordinated collective voice of a sufficient number (“critical mass”) of Connecticut communities with experience of local efforts and success in early childhood issues, and working in collaboration with state advocacy organizations, to build momentum for change in early care state-wide and at the state-level. To this end, the Discovery communities were encouraged to connect with and learn from each other. Peer relationships and exchange were promoted through Initiative-wide and regional meetings and via the listserv. Three communities formed a regional Discovery collaborative group from the outset,<sup>18</sup> and a number of others, while organizing separately, identified projects and strategies that made sense to carry out regionally. 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.

To further both work within communities and to support the development of the “50<sup>th</sup> community,” two of the Memorial Fund’s core set of state-wide grantees – the Early Childhood Alliance and Connecticut Parent Power – provided information and training on advocacy with elected officials. An initial orientation to advocacy for community representatives was held in 2006 and an Advocacy Toolkit produced by the Early Childhood Alliance in 2007. Beginning in 2008 CT Parent Power and the Alliance provided more intensive advocacy trainings and organized events at the state capital for community representatives and parents to meet with their legislators on early care issues and attend public hearings and committee sessions.<sup>19</sup> Provider and community caucuses were convened to develop messages and plan strategies for coordinated work on early childhood issues and events organized in local communities across the state to give legislators the opportunity to see and be seen in early education settings.

With support from the Memorial Fund, Connecticut Voices for Children (Voices) and the Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS) produced policy research, analysis, data and commentary on early care and education issues and distributed them widely via their websites and listservs.<sup>20</sup> By the end of 2007, these two organizations, along with the Alliance

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<sup>17</sup> The technical assistance provided during the 2008-2009 period is described in more detail in a later chapter.

<sup>18</sup> In another instance, a Discovery collaborative formed between two communities at the beginning of Discovery soon decided to separate and organize independently.

<sup>19</sup> While detailed information was not available for 2008, the following are examples of the activities and participation for similar events in 2009: March 18, 2009 Early Childhood Advocacy Day at the Capitol attended by almost 400 parents, children, and childcare providers from 16 communities across the state; August 25, 2009 Early Childhood Alliance press conference involved about 200 participants and included a grassroots phone-in campaign focused on the governor, and was covered by the Capitol press corps; mid-2009 communications campaign included over 200 early childhood advocates and dozens of early childhood care providers in calling and emailing legislators and attending advocacy events.

<sup>20</sup> Among the other ten statewide and regional grantees, work was carried out to promote best practice models, expand early education facilities, and facilitate peer technical assistance.

and Parent Power became the core of the Discovery Initiative's statewide strategy. In addition to each organization's grant for its own policy and advocacy work, the Memorial Fund provided supplemental funding for 2008 and 2009 for both organization capacity building and cross-organization collaboration. The four organizations developed collaborative strategies and joint projects that included activities to enhance parent and early education provider participation in state policy development, build Discovery community capacity for local and state advocacy, provide annual forums for informing and educating local and state public leaders on early education issues, monitor and report on state commitment to policies and investments in early childhood education, and continue to develop and implement coordinated advocacy strategies.

### **What Would "Making Progress" Look Like with Regard to Changes in Policy and Practice and Development of Longer-Term Capacity to Influence Policy?**

Individual communities can and do invest local resources and implement strategies that can impact the early education experiences of their young children and influence their success as they enter school. However, local communities have limited resources to expand preschool programs and make substantial broad-scale improvements in the quality of early childhood education. These two factors alone would limit the progress that could be expected for substantial change on these objectives without increased state investment. Further, making substantial improvement in children's development and early school success requires sustained effort and is dependent on an array of family, school, and community factors.

Given the recession that began in 2008 and its impact on state revenues and budgets, expecting substantial increases in Connecticut's investments in early care and education in the immediate term would be unrealistic. Instead, the evaluation team looked for evidence of policies and investments that sustained effective practices, strengthened infrastructure, and increased political and public support of early childhood issues.

### **What Is the Evidence of Progress in Communities on Policy and Practice Changes Related to the Discovery Objectives through 2009?**

By early 2007 almost all of the Discovery collaborative groups were able to report some level of improvement<sup>21</sup> within their communities on one or more of the initiative's four objectives, and to cite specific ways in which the work of Discovery had contributed to those improvements. The improvements most often mentioned by communities in their 2007 applications 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. Between 70 and

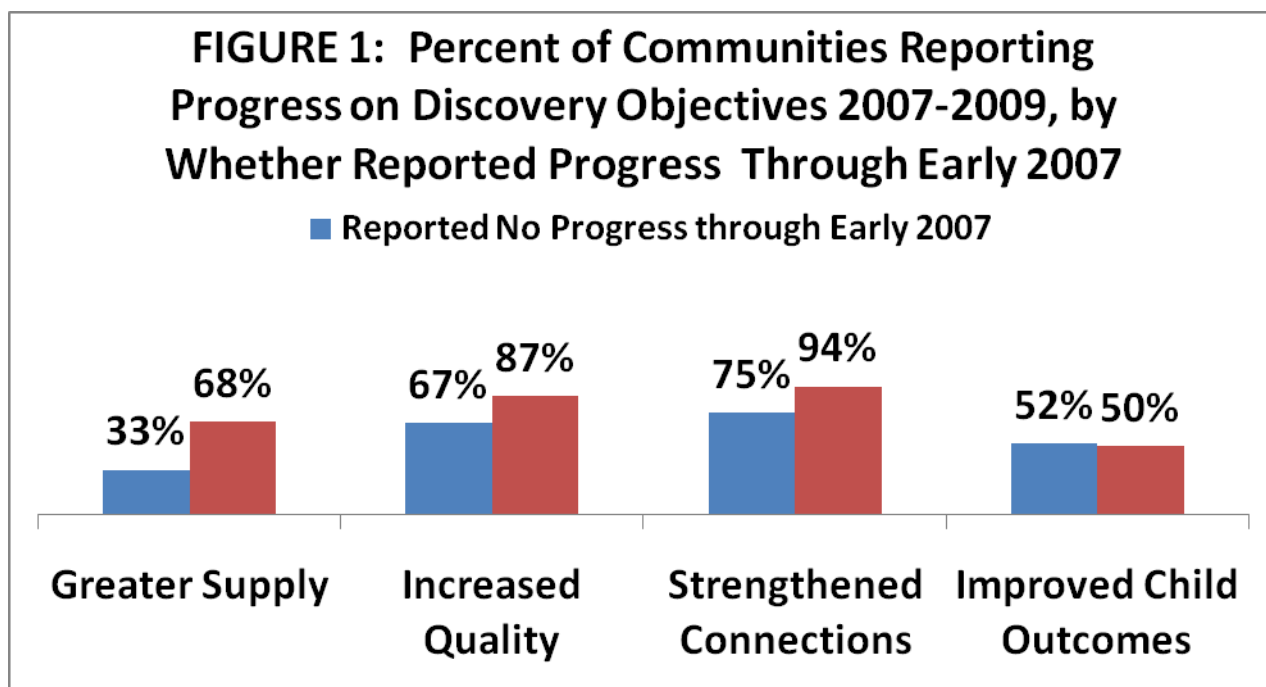
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<sup>21</sup> Community self-reports of changes in these objectives were accompanied by information on the types of information on which these self-reports were based. Depending on the objective and the community, the evidence cited included statistics on increases in early education providers or classrooms, changes in the number of early childhood programs holding national accreditation, higher rates of early kindergarten registration, and improvements in kindergarten entry assessments. In some cases, anecdotal evidence – such as parent or teacher feedback – was mentioned. Cited evidence sometimes included increases in the availability of services – such as early childhood mental health consultation or professional development for preschool teachers – assumed to be related to the objectives. For more details, see "Community Reports of Changes in Discovery Objectives through 2006," June 27, 2007 at <http://discovery.wcgmf.org/toc.html>.

80 percent of communities mentioned progress on these objectives. Improvements in children’s social-emotional development or early school success were noted in approximately one-third of communities. In general, the improvements cited were focused on changes in the preschool period and system, with little if any attention to systemic improvements in the early grades that would be necessary to sustain gains from early education. The Discovery strategies believed to contribute to these improvements, in turn, focused on supporting practice changes with early care and education providers.

***By 2009, most of the Discovery communities continued to report progress on each of the objectives. Greater supply of early care and education was reported in 60 percent of the communities, increased quality in 83 percent, strengthened connections between early and elementary education in 86 percent, and improved child development and school success in 51 percent.***

This progress was particularly noted in communities that had already experienced progress between 2004 and 2007. As can be seen in Figure 1, communities that had begun to see progress by 2007 were more likely than those that had not to continue to report progress on three of the four Discovery objectives. Even so, many of the communities that had not reported progress by 2007<sup>22</sup> – ranging from 33 percent to 75 percent, depending on the objective – were beginning to report positive trends, particularly in increased quality of early care and education and stronger connections between early education and elementary schools. This suggests that, while slower in some communities, improvements in early care and education were widely observed by 2009.

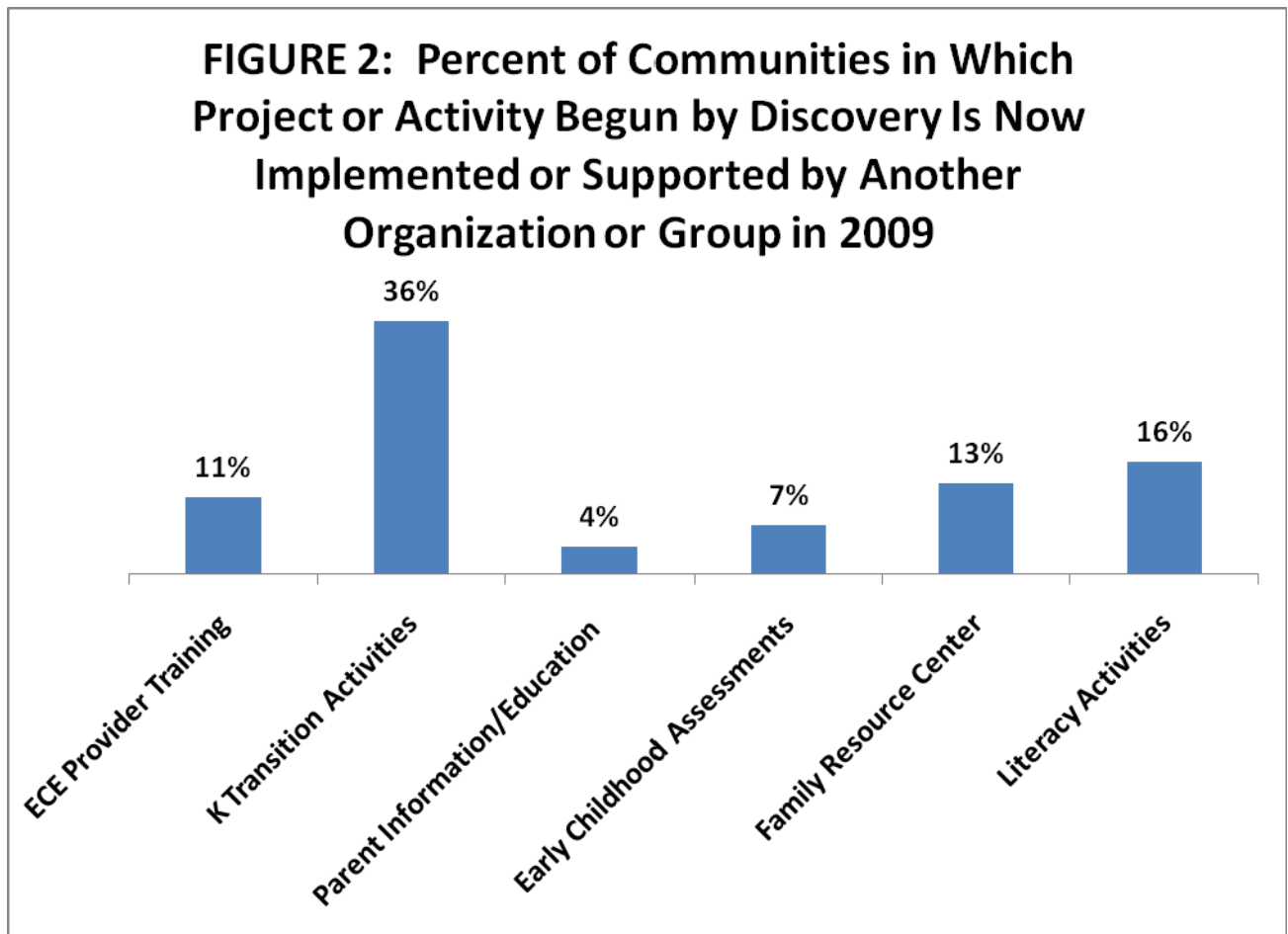


<sup>22</sup> In their grant applications submitted in early 2007, nine communities reported no increase in the supply of early care and education services, the same number reported no increase in the quality of early care and education services, 12 reported no increase in the strength of early childhood-elementary education connections, and 27 reported no improvement in children’s development or school success.

**What Is the Evidence of Progress in Communities on Sustaining Policy and Practice Changes through 2009?**

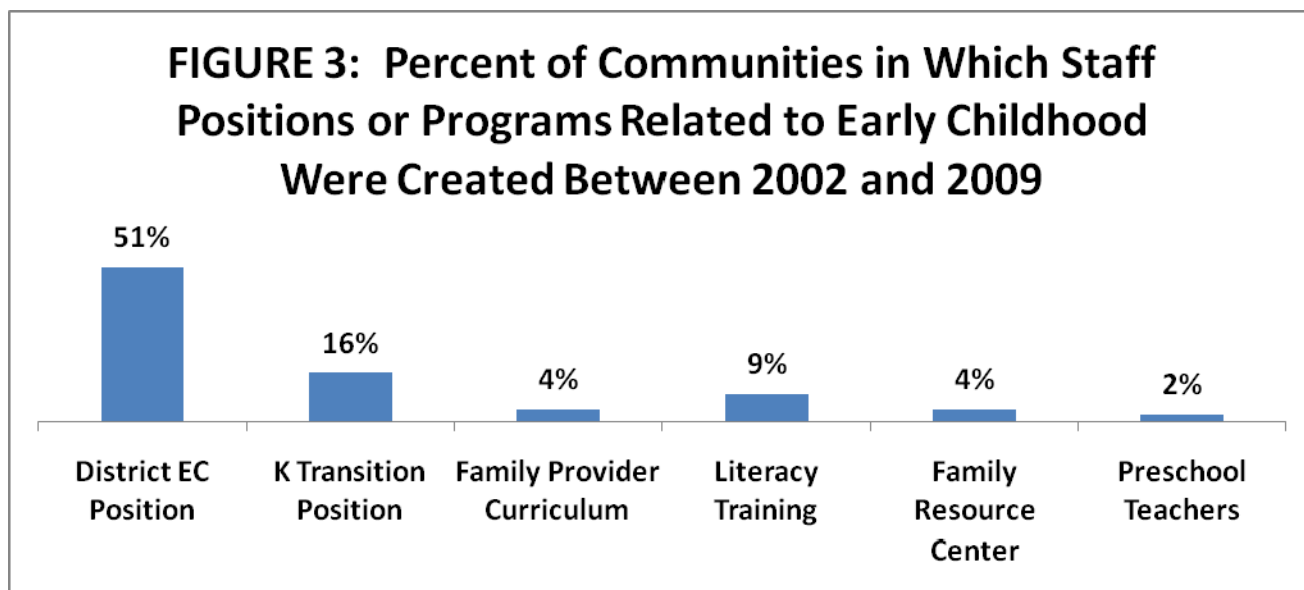
Through the work of local collaborative groups, the majority of Discovery communities experienced sustained, systemic changes in early childhood programs and practices. These changes included the adoption of projects or activities begun by the Discovery collaborative group and the developments within the community consistent with Discovery goals and strategies.

Programs and practices initiated by many Discovery collaborative groups were sustained by other agencies or organizations in the community. **By 2009, 69 percent of the Discovery communities reported that one or more of the programs, activities, or events begun by the collaborative was being implemented or supported on a regular basis by another community organization or agency.** As noted in Figure 2 below, many of these efforts were related to kindergarten transition, a system change strategy associated with one of the Discovery objectives and supported by technical assistance offered in various ways throughout Discovery.



In many Discovery communities staff positions and programs specifically focused on early childhood were established. Over the course of Discovery, the same number – 69 percent – of the Discovery collaborative groups reported that one or more staff positions or ongoing programs specifically related to early childhood. In 60 percent of the communities, a staff

position was created, generally within the school district (see Figure 3) and in 15 percent, an early childhood program or practice was initiated.



### **What Is the Evidence of Progress in Developing Community Plans for Young Children?**

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
- Change who is involved in decision making
- Change how a community responds and acts on issues related to the well-being of young children.”<sup>23</sup>

This expectation of the initiative 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.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> As described in the Discovery Renewal Packet for 2007, page 3.

<sup>24</sup> Another 21 applied for and were awarded similar grants beginning in 2010.

***By 2009, all of the collaborative groups were engaged in one or more activities related to community goal setting, planning, and collaboration.*** These activities included: promoting community goals or targets for young children’s health, development, school readiness, or school success; encouraging, supporting, or leading community goal setting and planning for young children; providing ways for schools, agencies, and community groups to connect, communicate, and work with each other; and giving the community a unified voice on early childhood issues.<sup>25</sup> Based on survey responses, three-quarters (76 percent) of the collaborative groups were involved in all four of the activities related to community goal setting and planning for young children and all collaborative groups were involved in at least one of these activities.

**According to four of the communities that participated in the first cohort of the community planning process funded jointly by the Memorial Fund and the State Department of Education,<sup>26</sup> the prior work of the Discovery collaborative groups contributed to their success** by building relationships with other groups and leaders in the community, creating experience in and the infrastructure for collaborative planning, and giving early childhood issues visibility and importance within the community. According to these communities, the planning process itself then resulted in:

- **Greater shared knowledge of their community**, including potential partners and resources, within a framework for taking a broad community perspective rather than one narrowly defined by program or organizational interests
- **Experience in shared problem analysis and problem solving** that encourage innovation and collaboration
- A cadre of **individuals and groups that continued to be committed to the work** and available for support, even if not involved on a day-to-day basis
- A **guide for strategic resource allocation decisions**, including options for action that required different levels of resources and a framework for community groups to independently pursue opportunities that support the plan

### **What Is the Evidence of Progress at the State-Level in Support from Political Leaders for Early Childhood Policies and Investments?**

Through 2007, political support in Connecticut for early childhood issues grew, with credit widely given by stakeholders to the sustained work of the Memorial Fund in laying the foundation for action spearheaded by the Governor and Legislature. By 2007, representatives of state-level early childhood advocates, funders, and agencies, when interviewed by the

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<sup>25</sup> The response categories given in the survey were based on open-ended descriptions of community strategies in the 2007 grant applications, on evaluation team observations and conversations with community members, and on the apparent or stated goals of technical assistance.

<sup>26</sup> See “Navigating The “Perfect Storm”: Moving From Plan To Action During An Economic Downturn, The Experiences of Four Discovery Communities That Received 2008-2009 Planning Grants” (under review.)

evaluation team, noted that political support in Connecticut for early childhood issues had been growing. These stakeholders identified increased awareness of the importance of early childhood issues and increased focus of political leaders on these issues as evidence, particularly the attention given to early childhood education by Governor Jodi Rell.

In the 2007 legislative session, the Memorial Fund played a key role in encouraging the legislature to authorize funding for parent leadership and for community planning through offers of matching funds. The 2007 legislative session also resulted in substantial increased state investment in early childhood education services and for community early childhood planning. The 2007 legislative session saw an increase of \$56.2 million in new state funding for early childhood education.<sup>27</sup>

***Between 2007 and 2009, political support for early childhood issues continued to grow and investments in programs and infrastructure were sustained in a harsh fiscal environment. The 2007 gains in state funding for early care and education were maintained in 2009, even as most other programs suffered dramatic cuts.*** Additionally, the Memorial Fund’s challenge to the state to match funds for community planning and parent education was taken up in both sessions. Discovery community and statewide grantees shepherded these bills through the legislature and were effective in navigating the committee and legislative processes and building legislator support.

As a result of these advocacy efforts and other developments, particularly the work of the Early Childhood Education Cabinet and its “Ready by Five, Fine by Nine” plan in the state, more of the legislators interviewed in 2009-10 stated that there was a cohesive vision for addressing the needs of young children in the state than did those interviewed in 2007.<sup>28</sup> Interviews with key state stakeholders and legislators and examination of patterns of votes on early childhood issues in 2007 and 2009 also indicated a legislative climate increasingly favorable to early childhood issues.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> These funds authorized for the School Readiness program were expected to create 2,000 to 2,400 new slots in 2008 and 2009, although ultimately these funds were not fully expended.

<sup>28</sup> More than half of the legislators (6 out of 11) interviewed after the 2009 session, in responding to a question on this issue, saw a cohesive vision for young children, or substantial progress toward such a vision, in the state, See “Discovery Contributions to State Policy Change” (under review).

<sup>29</sup> See “Discovery Contributions to State Policy Change” (under review). In that paper, the legislative climate index, which examined legislative voting patterns for bills in committee as well as on the floor, is described.

## **PROGRESS ON IMPLEMENTING COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING POLITICAL AND PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION AT COMMUNITY AND STATE LEVELS THROUGH 2009**

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. Discovery has invested in capacity-building for both Discovery community collaborative groups and a core set of statewide organizations so that they can effectively take on those roles.

This chapter addresses the following evaluation questions:

- Has the development of collaborative infrastructure contributed to the implementation of effective strategies to bring about early childhood policy and practice change?
- Has the development of relationships, particularly those needed for parent engagement, contributed to the implementation of effective strategies to bring about early childhood policy and practice change?

### **What Does “Collaborative Strategies for Building Political and Public Support for Early Care and Education” Mean in the Discovery Initiative?**

The concept of the “50<sup>th</sup> community” emerged as an aspiration from the very beginning of Discovery.<sup>30</sup> This phrase generally referred to an organized, coordinated network of communities, early childhood champions, local and statewide organizations and agencies working together to focus their individual early childhood goals and strategies into a cohesive state policy agenda. The 50<sup>th</sup> 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.

Discovery intended to assist in the development of coordinated and collaborative work among and between statewide and regional grantee organizations and the Discovery communities. If collaborative strategies were in place, this would mean that early childhood champions from communities and advocacy organizations would be working together on a policy agenda that addressed both local and state-wide issues and that used community and parent voices to give weight to early childhood issues in state policy debates. Parents, community leaders and citizens and those who are affected by the policy decisions being made would be represented and participate in the debates, keeping the needs of children and families at the forefront of decision-making.

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<sup>30</sup> This concept was introduced by the Memorial Fund at its annual kick-off meeting with communities and statewide and regional grantees in 2008.



## **How Has the Memorial Fund Supported the Development of Collaborative Strategies for Building Political and Public Support?**

The goal of creating the “50<sup>th</sup> community” became more explicitly articulated to community and statewide and regional grantees and partners over the course of Discovery. However, from the beginning the Memorial Fund's strategies to strengthen community, organizational and state level capacities (infrastructure, skills, and processes) and relationships (networks and partnerships) were expected to bring together stakeholders to mobilize broad political and public support for changes and investments in early childhood education policies and practices on the local and state levels. These strategies, as categorized by the evaluation team, included:

- **Providing the Discovery collaborative groups with specific tools, resources, and technical assistance** to help establish themselves in their community as the group focused on early childhood issues and to engage stakeholders in working on those issues. Some of these tools were generated by the Memorial Fund staff and consultants, such as the Strategic Communications Toolkit<sup>31</sup> and the Advocacy Toolkit,<sup>32</sup> and materials used in the Community Decision Making<sup>33</sup> and Results-Based Accountability<sup>34</sup> institutes. Other tools were developed and delivered by statewide grantee organizations, such as the Advocacy Toolkit prepared by the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance and the community mobilization and advocacy trainings offered by Connecticut Parent Power and the Alliance.
- **Supporting the dissemination of early childhood policy research and the collection of community-level data.**<sup>35</sup> These had been key areas of focus for the Memorial Fund grantmaking prior to the start of the Discovery Initiative. Through Discovery, the work became more focused on and responsive to the information needs in communities and to educating policy-makers and leaders at the state level about issues affecting children and families.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See [http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps\\_resource\\_1080.pdf](http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps_resource_1080.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> See [http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps\\_resource\\_858.pdf](http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps_resource_858.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> The Center for the Study of Social Policy used its series of learning guides on community decision making in offering technical assistance workshops in 2008. See [http://www.cssp.org/publications/documents/constituents-co-invested-in-change?type=constituents\\_co\\_invested\\_in\\_change\\_community\\_decision\\_making&title=Constituents%20Co-Invested%20in%20Change:%20Community%20Decision-Making](http://www.cssp.org/publications/documents/constituents-co-invested-in-change?type=constituents_co_invested_in_change_community_decision_making&title=Constituents%20Co-Invested%20in%20Change:%20Community%20Decision-Making).

<sup>34</sup> The Charter Oak Group provided tools and both group and individualized technical assistance on results-based accountability during 2008 and 2009. See <http://charteroakgroup.com/index.shtml>.

<sup>35</sup> For relevant publications from Connecticut Voices for Children see [http://ctkidslink.org/pub\\_issue\\_9.html](http://ctkidslink.org/pub_issue_9.html). The Connecticut Association for Human Services publishes the state’s annual KidsCount report (see <http://cahs.org/publications-kidscount.asp>).

<sup>36</sup> The Memorial Fund has also directly supported work to broaden public and policymaker understanding of and commitment to early childhood education issues, including two public will building communications campaigns through Connecticut Voices for Children in 2003 and currently the Early Childhood Alliance; a statewide public

- **Providing opportunities for Discovery community grantees to engage in peer learning and building relationships.** Communities were provided peer learning opportunities through the annual conference, the listserv and website, and support for cross-site visits. These were in addition to the peer exchange opportunities that naturally occurred at workshops and meetings. The technical assistance institutes were explicitly designed to develop and support community teams and to provide the venue for both within-community and cross-community team dialogue.
- **Providing support for statewide and regional grantees** to build their organizational capacities, further their individual and collaborative state-level research and advocacy work, and engage in advocacy activities, at both the state and local levels, with the Discovery communities.

Although these strategies were employed from the beginning of Discovery, starting in 2006, the Memorial Fund began to give more explicit messages to statewide and regional grantees about their role in building a common voice, involving communities, across the state. The Memorial Fund also organized opportunities for the statewide grantee organizations to describe their work to the communities and request their input and involvement.<sup>37</sup>

### **What Would “Making Progress” Look Like with Regard to Collaborative Strategies for Building Political and Public Support?**

When the Discovery Initiative began in 2002, few collaborative groups in communities were ready to take on the work of Discovery and there were few regional structures in Connecticut on which to build cross-community work. The organizations receiving grant support from the Memorial Fund did not routinely collaborate among themselves at the beginning of Discovery and in fact, two of the four organizations – Connecticut Parent Power and the Early Childhood Alliance – that have become the core of the Memorial Fund's statewide strategy did not exist before Discovery. Given the capacities and relationships of the communities and the core statewide organizations when Discovery began, a fully articulated shared agenda and collaborative strategies would have been an unrealistic expectation by 2007.

By 2009, the Discovery communities had gained experience in local collaboration and developed relationships with each other through Initiative activities. This was also true for the

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opinion poll on early childhood issues in 2006; a public television special on early childhood education, *Closing the Gap: Our Children, Our Destiny*, in 2007; a grant to the United Way of Connecticut to design a series of Early Childhood Listening Forums held in the fall of 2006 to provide public input into the state's first Early Childhood Investment Plan, *Ready by Five and Fine by Nine*, based on the Investment Framework provided by the Early Childhood Education Cabinet; and a collaborative effort with several foundations, advocacy organizations, state departments and others to produce and distribute *Seven Simple Things Connecticut Needs to Know about Early Childhood*.

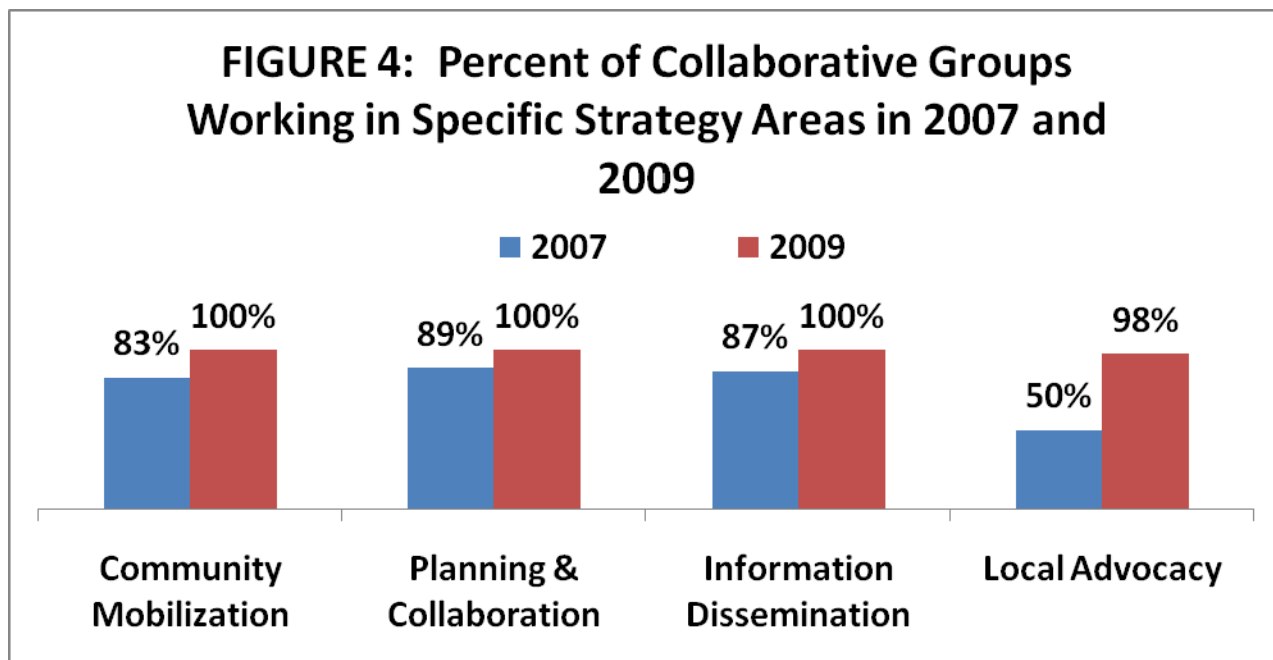
<sup>37</sup> Seeking community input has been part of the ongoing work of the state organizations funded by the Memorial Fund. For example, Connecticut Parent Power conducts an annual survey to help establish priorities for the coming year and Parent Power and the Early Childhood Alliance use membership meetings, e-mail updates, and other methods for getting guidance and feedback from stakeholders.

four core statewide organizations. Both communities and statewide organizations had received technical assistance and other support, specifically intended to support broader collaboration, implementation of more coordinated approaches to practice and policy change being the hoped-for result.

**What Is the Evidence of Progress on Community Strategies for Building Political and Public Support through 2009?**

By 2007, the most common activities of the Discovery Initiative communities engaged providers and parents in increasing access to and improving quality in early care and education. When asked to describe the ways in which they were working on early care and education issues in their applications for 2007 grants, the Discovery collaborative groups reported a number of strategies. Almost universally, the groups were involved in activities to provide parents with information on early care and education and related issues and to facilitate changes in practice through professional development and other activities with early care and education providers and the schools. Somewhat less frequently mentioned (in the range of 80 to 90 percent) were activities related to public awareness and only half of the collaborative groups were involved in local advocacy.

*By 2009, compared with 2007, the Discovery communities were engaged in more activities related to community mobilization and advocacy. While practice change, support for parents, and community awareness remained important strategies, work on community mobilization, local planning and collaboration, information dissemination, and grassroots advocacy became a universal part of the Discovery group’s activities, as illustrated below.*



Each of these strategy areas included responses to a list of specific activities, developed for the survey based on evaluation team observations and interviews conducted earlier in the initiative, as shown in the table on the following page.

<b>STRATEGY</b>	<b>ACTIVITY</b>	<b>SINCE 2006</b>
Community Awareness & Mobilization	Hold informational or discussion meetings for the community on issues related to young children	96%
	Conduct voter registration and turnout drives in elections on issues related to children and education	22%
	Mobilize citizens and voters around issues related to young children and early education	59%
Planning & Collaboration	Promote community goals or targets for young children's health, development, school readiness, or school success	98%
	Encourage, support, and/or lead community goal setting and planning for young children	89%
	Provide ways for schools, service agencies, and other community groups and organizations to connect, communicate, and work with each other	98%
	Give the community a unified voice on early childhood issues	67%
Data Collection & Dissemination	Publicize information on children, such as data on children's health and school performance	85%
	Collect evidence of community support on issues related to young children and early education	74%
	Provide information on young children and early care and education issues	98%
Local Advocacy	Meet one-on-one with community leaders to provide information and encourage interest in issues related to young children & early education	96%
	Hold forums for candidates or elected officials to discuss issues related to young children and early education	50%
	Present policy or program recommendations to town council or school board	57%
	Participate in community advocacy events sponsored by Parent Power or the Early Childhood Alliance	57%

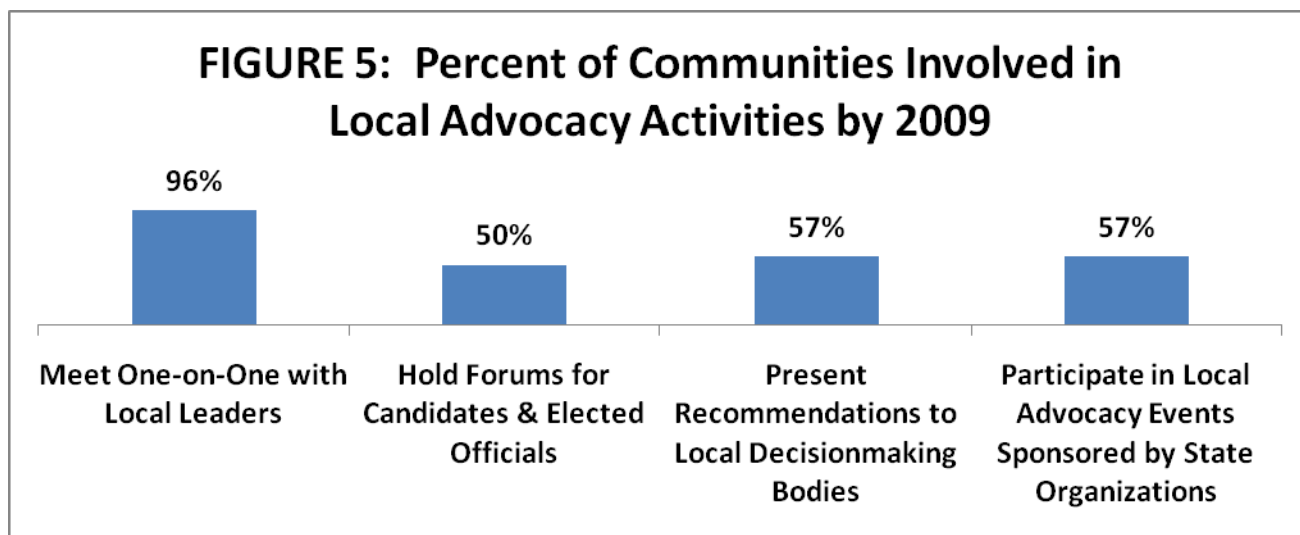
Communities with experience in these activities by 2007 generally were more active, but even those who had not reported these activities earlier in the initiative were doing so by 2009. Discovery collaborative groups, engaged in similar numbers of specific activities under each strategy by 2009, regardless of whether they had begun using these strategies by 2007 or not. However, communities with experience in local advocacy by 2007 engaged in a somewhat

wider array of such activities by 2009 than those that had not engaged in local advocacy earlier. Collaborative groups that reported being engaged in local advocacy on their 2007 applications indicated an average of 3 activities in this strategy area in the 2009 survey, compared with 2.2 activities indicated by communities that did not engage in this strategy in 2007. It appeared that, as communities gained experience in this area, they expanded their repertoire to include more local advocacy activities.

**What Is the Evidence of Progress on Community Participation in State-Level Advocacy Activities through 2009?**

While most Discovery collaborative groups sponsored activities to inform their local legislator of their community’s interest in early childhood issues, by 2007 these had not yet become part of a state-wide advocacy strategy. The Discovery communities generally recognized the need to reach out to state level leadership. By 2007 most (81 percent) were hosting events that introduced their local legislator to their community’s interest in early childhood issues. However, these activities were generally carried out individually and not as part of a state-wide strategy.

***By 2009, the four core statewide advocacy organizations were working more closely with communities in planning and carrying out advocacy events at the local level. In the community survey conducted in the fall of 2009, all but one Discovery collaborative group reported being involved in at least one advocacy activity at the local level and more than half (50 percent) held local events in collaboration with the state advocacy organizations.***

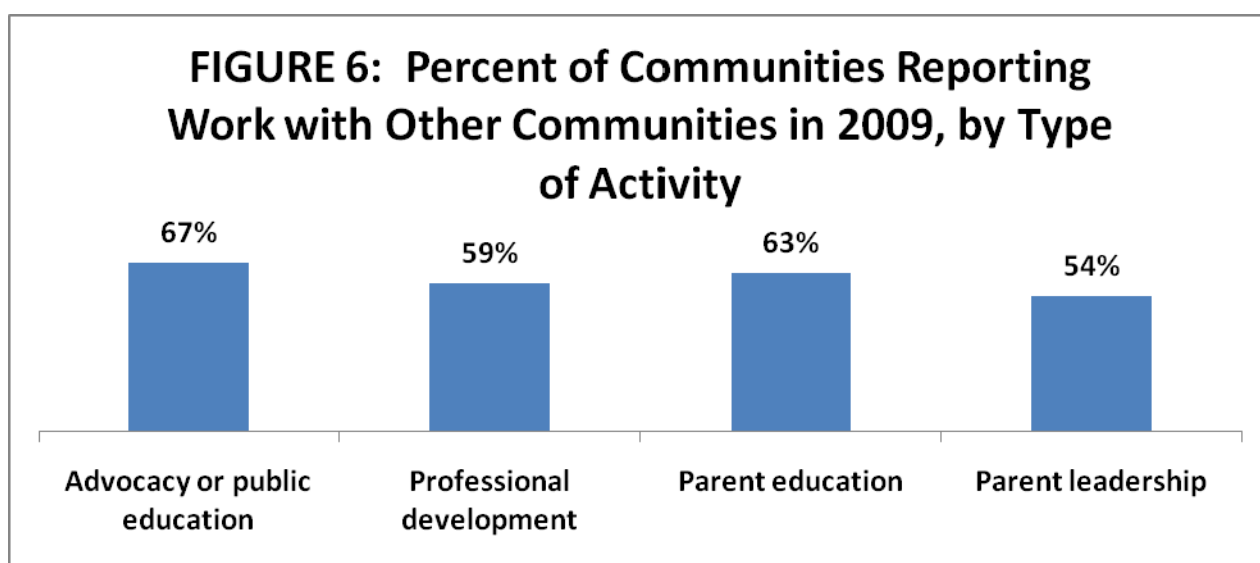


**What Is the Evidence of Progress on Cross-Community Activities through 2009?**

By 2007, some work among communities or regionally was being organized, but only some of the Discovery communities were involved and much of the work was programmatic in nature. Less than one-third (30 percent) of the Discovery communities requested funding to carry out activities with other communities in their region in 2008. 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.

***By 2009, most Discovery communities were involved in work with other communities, and these activities were as often related to local advocacy and leadership development as they were to program and practice. In addition, many communities were involved in state advocacy activities organized by the statewide grantee organizations.*** In surveys completed in the fall of 2009, many more (in total, 87 percent) were engaged in one or more activities or projects with other communities. These activities included advocacy or public education, professional development or training for educators, parent information or education, and parent leadership. As shown in Figure 7 below, advocacy and leadership development were as frequently the focus of the cross-community work by 2009 as activities related to parent education and professional development.



During the 2008-2009 period of Discovery, the Early Childhood Alliance and Connecticut Parent Power involved communities in a number of advocacy-related activities, both at the state and the local levels. In late 2009, 72 percent of the Discovery collaborative groups had participated in an advocacy event in Hartford organized by these organizations, 73 percent had attended one of their policy or research briefings, and 59 percent had received training from these organizations on mobilization and advocacy.

### **What Is the Evidence of Progress on Coordinated Advocacy among the Core Statewide Organizations through 2009?**

Although relationships between statewide grantees were stronger than they had been at the start of Discovery, by the end of 2007 the statewide grantees had not yet become a strong coalition, presenting a consistent shared message. During the 2007 legislative session, the advocacy organizations funded by the Memorial Fund were able to come to consensus on an “Advocates Budget” which was presented to the legislature and largely adopted by the Appropriations committee. These statewide advocacy organizations were credited by

stakeholders interviewed after the session with contributing to increased early education funding during the 2007 legislative session, the first increase in several years.

Even so, after the 2007 legislative session, state-level stakeholders – who included other advocates, funders, and legislators – reported that they 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 present a shared agenda for action, perceiving that advocates for children and families were not promoting a common agenda, in part because they represented multiple perspectives (focus on infants and toddlers versus preschoolers, targeted versus universal services, early education versus health versus family support). Legislators perceived a competitive dynamic that made it difficult for advocates to promote a common policy agenda for young children.

***In 2008 and 2009 statewide grantees worked together to develop a common agenda and messages, execute advocacy strategies, and engage a broader group of communities.*** By the end of the 2009 legislative sessions, the core statewide organizations had effectively executed a number of collaborative strategies, including:

- An Advocacy Day event that brought legislators and their community constituents together to meet and talk;
- Dozens of legislative tours that provided legislators with a “photo op” while they toured early childhood facilities and learned more about the challenges early childhood providers are facing;
- Providing technical assistance and financial support for communities around planning activities and events related to the annual Week of the Young Child celebrated nationally;
- Providing opportunities for communities to attend leadership training sessions on community organizing;
- Engaging legislators using the same agenda and messages—weekly meetings with a long-standing legislative champion and organization of a joint hearing with Human Services and Education Committees; and
- Promotion of each other’s events and activities.

In addition to these activities, the state advocacy organizations participated in, and in some cases organized, various opportunities for presenting information and policy options to legislators. These included the membership on the Task Force on Children in the Recession, testimony at hearings before legislative committees, a series of scheduled meetings to share stakeholder group perspectives (including those of parents) with legislators, and participation on groups developing policy recommendations for the incoming governor.<sup>38</sup>

During interviews in 2009, the statewide grantees expressed their belief that they are much more intentional, unified, coordinated and aligned in their advocacy efforts than they were

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<sup>38</sup> See “Discovery Contributions to State Policy Change” (under review).

even a few years ago.<sup>39</sup> Their experience working together clearly demonstrated the value of collaboration in advancing their strategies and goals and they reported that collaboration had become an essential element of their work, taking advantage of their individual strengths and capacities.

State-level stakeholders who were interviewed in 2009 commented on the increased effectiveness of statewide advocacy organizations' efforts to organize and mobilize constituencies in support of early childhood issues. These efforts were tied to the outcome of the 2009 legislative session, which included stable funding for early childhood education in spite of the fiscal crisis. There was a sense among stakeholders, both legislators and other advocates and those working in early childhood, that elected officials better understood the importance of early childhood education and how it is connected to a child's academic performance.

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<sup>39</sup> As described in the previous chapter, the legislators interviewed in 2009 had similar assessments of the increased cohesiveness of advocacy on early childhood issues.



## PROGRESS ON COLLABORATION AT COMMUNITY AND STATE LEVELS THROUGH 2009

### What Does “Collaboration” Mean in the Discovery Initiative?

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.”<sup>40</sup> Collaboration at the community level was a principle of the Children First Initiative. In the Discovery Initiative, this principle also became an explicit part of the Memorial Fund’s strategy at the state-level.

The Memorial Fund’s emphasis on community collaboration comes from two assumptions about the process of change:<sup>41</sup>

- “Community/parents can and must be part of any effort designed to affect the lives of children. If they are not, the probability for success is seriously diminished.”
- “Local collaborations possess the greatest potential to engage and sustain such engagement over time and require dedicated staff support and leadership to foster and facilitate collaborative behaviors among individuals and systems.”

As a requirement for participating in Discovery, the Memorial Fund asked participating communities to identify an existing collaborating group, or assemble a new collaborating group, defined as:<sup>42</sup>

- “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.”

Collaboration among the statewide and regional grantee organizations was not strongly emphasized in the early years of the Discovery Initiative. As Discovery evolved, Memorial Fund staff, liaisons and some statewide and regional grantees felt that statewide grantees could be more effective advocates if they were working together toward a common agenda and more

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<sup>40</sup> From the glossary on the Discovery website [http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resource\\_426.html](http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resource_426.html) .

<sup>41</sup> Both quotations are from the 2004-2007 community application instructions.

<sup>42</sup> Included in the 2004-2007 community application instructions and in the glossary on the Discovery website.

attention was paid to applying the concept of collaboration to the work of the four statewide advocacy grantee organizations.

### **How Has the Memorial Fund Supported Collaboration?**

The Memorial Fund approached communities for the initiative in a way that encouraged the identification or formation of a group to become the hub of Discovery activities that went beyond the public and non-profit agencies usually “at the table” around early childhood. The 2004-2007 Discovery application required the signature and commitment of the community’s chief elected official (the mayor in most communities), the superintendent of schools, a representative of the local School Readiness Council (if one existed), a representative of the Discovery collaborative group, and a parent. Each grantee community also needed to designate a non-profit existing organization to receive the grant funds. However, this organization – described as the “collaborative agent” rather than “fiscal agent” – was expected to go beyond fiscal oversight and play an active role in supporting the collaborative group and in linking the group with community stakeholders and resources.

The community collaborative groups were assumed to need an 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.”<sup>43</sup> Discovery provided small community grants intended to be used primarily to support these infrastructure functions. It also offered a wide range of technical assistance opportunities and tools to build the capacity of the collaborative groups to act as catalysts for community change.<sup>44</sup> (See the chapter on Capacity-Building for more details on the supports provided to community grantees.)

By 2006 almost all of the statewide and regional grantees interviewed commented on the Memorial Fund’s efforts to encourage contacts and relationships with the Discovery communities, each other, and other organizations, including state agencies and school districts. Beginning in 2007, the Memorial Fund focused technical assistance and other resources on four core statewide organizations with the goal of encouraging greater collaboration in their advocacy strategies and messaging. The Memorial Fund provided technical assistance and additional funding to support the development and implementation of collaborative projects in 2008 and 2009.

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<sup>43</sup> From the glossary on the Discovery website [http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resource\\_426.html](http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resource_426.html) .

<sup>44</sup> As described in the 2004-2007 application instructions, “[e]ssentially the work of the collaborating group is to be a catalyst for change – to promote interdisciplinary **processes, practices and policies** [emphasis in the original] that directly impact the status of children. The work is not to directly implement programs but to influence how programs and services are delivered; engage broader stakeholders in owning the solutions; change the culture of who is involved in decision making; change how community responds and acts on issues related to the well-being of young children.” [Bullets deleted from the original.]

## **What Would “Making Progress” Look Like with Regard to Collaboration at the Community and State Levels?**

The grants and capacity-building supports provided by the Memorial Fund were expected to help collaborative groups in the Discovery communities to develop the following characteristics of successful collaboration:

- A shared vision for young children and clarity of purpose with resources aligned with goals;
- Broad-based participation, including key stakeholders, reflecting the diversity of the community and expanding over time;
- Priority given to engaging parents in collaborative membership, leadership, and feedback;
- Mechanisms to facilitate the community engagement process including clear roles for collaborative members and community partners, skillful leaders and staff, adequate resources, effective communication strategies, and visibility and credibility created through successfully tackling increasing complex projects;
- Public visibility and accountability for the well-being of young children, fostered through community champions, media campaigns, and other communication strategies; and
- Flexibility and the capacity to adapt to changing conditions, based on periodic assessment of community needs and strengths, evaluation of the results of collaborative strategies, and information from other communities and from research.<sup>45</sup>

These community collaborative groups were then expected to manage and lead a community change process that would increase the supply and quality of early care and education, strengthen the linkages between early childhood programs and schools, and improve the development and early school success of young children. It was also hoped that community collaborative groups would, over time, link with others in their region and across the state to pursue policy and practice change at those levels.

The Memorial Fund's expectations about how the statewide grantees would work together and 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 originally 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.

Similarly, the support of the Memorial Fund was expected to contribute to the capacities of specific state entities (the Governor’s Early Childhood Education Cabinet and Research and

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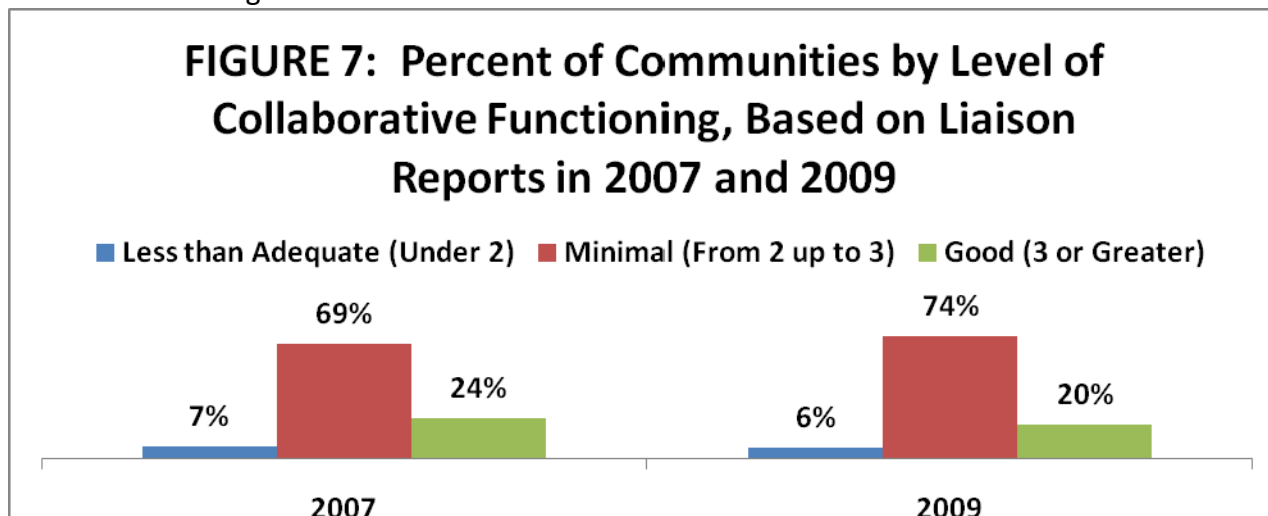
<sup>45</sup> From the 2004 Community Planning and Assessment Tool, used annually as part of the process of developing the coming year’s action plan. This tool was only slightly revised in the years between 2004 and 2008. In 2009 it was replaced with the Discovery Community Self-Assessment Tool, which covers the same dimensions in a somewhat different format. See “Constructing Collaborative Success for Network Learning: The Story of the Discovery Community Self-Assessment Tool, A. Frusciante and C. Siberon, in *The Foundation Review*, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2010.

Policy Council) and agencies to strengthen connections between state policy and community work. These strengthened capacities and relationships are expected to enable stakeholders to mobilize for specific changes in local and state early childhood education policies and practices.

### **What is the Evidence of Collaboration within Communities in the Discovery Initiative through 2009?**

By 2007 Discovery collaborative groups were at a level of structure and functioning between minimal and good, on average, based on an assessment tool developed in 2007 jointly by Memorial Fund staff and the community liaisons.<sup>46</sup> This tool included 12 indicators each with 4 levels (inadequate, minimal, good, and ideal) and associated rubrics. The indicators covered community collaborative functioning, structure, leadership, staffing, and community support. In 2007, the average collaborative rating was 2.6 (both mean and median), indicating a level of collaboration about midway between “minimal” (level 2) and “good” (level 3), with a range between 1.4 (just above “inadequate” or level 1) and 3.8 (just under “ideal” or level 4). Most (69 percent) of the community ratings were from 2 up to (but not including 3) and another 24 percent were 3 or above. (See Figure 7 below.)

Collaboration within the Discovery communities in 2009 was very similar, on average, to that in 2007. In 2009, using the same tool and again administered by the community liaison who had been working with the community, the average Discovery community was given an average rating of 2.6, with a range from 1.7 to 3.7. While the 2009 overall average and range are very similar to those from 2007, somewhat fewer were 3 or above at “good” or above (20 percent) and more were between 2 up to 3 or between “minimal” and “good” (74 percent).<sup>47</sup> However, as described in the next section, between these two years more than one-third of the communities changed levels.

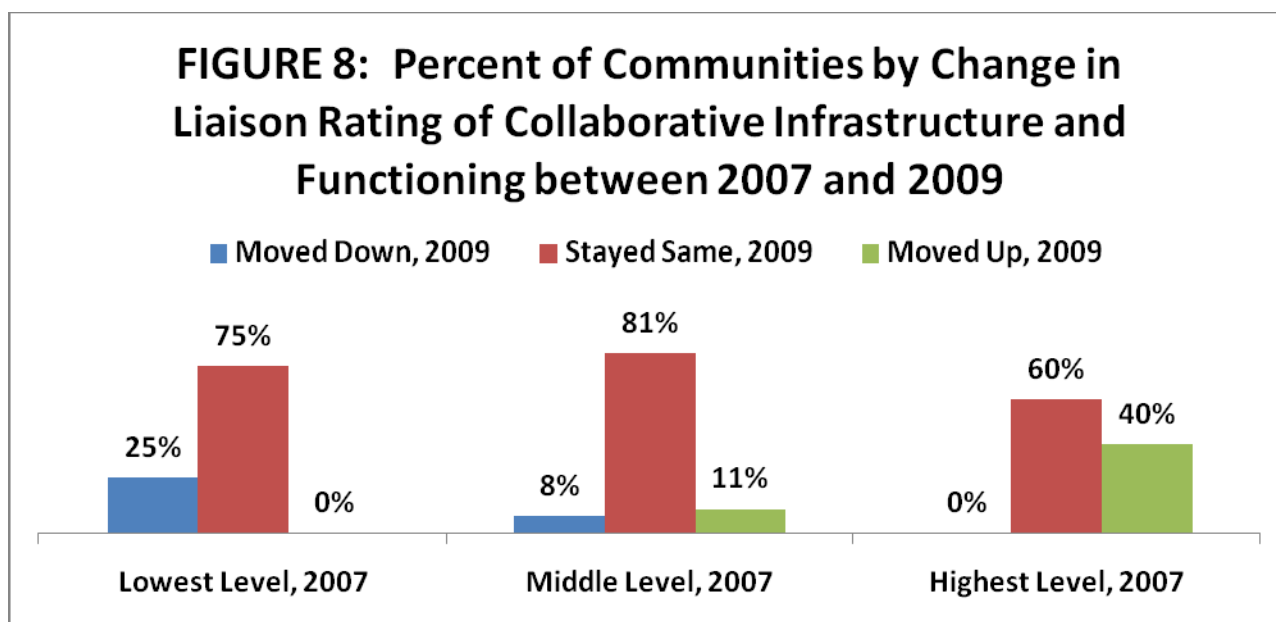


<sup>46</sup> See footnote 30 above.

<sup>47</sup> In 2009 the Discovery communities were asked to use the same tool in their annual self-assessment. There is a statistically significant and moderately strong (+.58) correlation between the community’s self-rating and the rating of their liaison, where a perfect correlation would be 1.0. Five communities rated themselves at a lower level than their liaison and six rated themselves at a higher level.

Developing strong and stable collaboration in communities required time to build relationships and put in place mechanisms for communication and decision-making. Between 2004 and 2007 many communities (25 of the 47 Discovery groups) strengthened their collaborative infrastructure and functioning.<sup>48</sup> 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 moderately successfully. That is, as described above, by 2007 most were given an overall rating between minimal and good by their community liaison.

***Between 2007 and 2009 the rating of collaborative infrastructure and functioning in most communities remained at the 2007 level. However, in seventeen or 38 percent of the 45 communities with ratings in both years, the level of collaboration was different – 5 moving up one level and 11 moving down one level. This suggests that, on this measure, the robustness of collaboration within communities sometimes fluctuated.***



**What Is the Evidence of Support for Collaboration within Communities in the Discovery Initiative through 2009?**

Available measures of local leadership and organizational support for the Discovery collaborative groups included:

- Community leaders championing the work of the collaborative group on early childhood issues;<sup>49</sup>

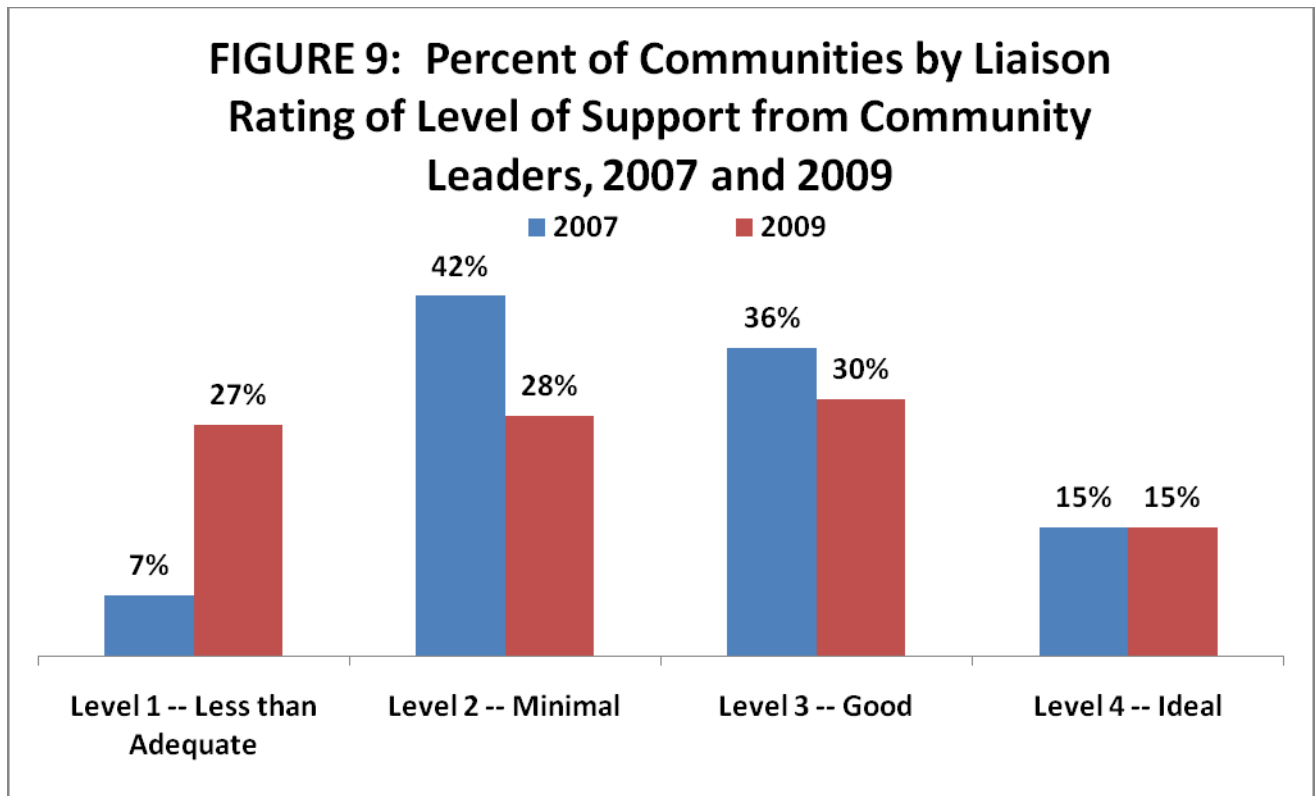
<sup>48</sup> Change in collaborative infrastructure and functioning was measured by comparing the three-level rating given to each community in 2004 with a similar three-level rating for 2007 based on the liaison’s rating of the collaborative infrastructure and functioning.

<sup>49</sup> This measure and the next measures were assessments on a four point scale (from “less than adequate” to “ideal,” made annually by the consultant assigned as liaison to the community.

- The community organization acting as the discovery collaborative (fiscal) agent providing a broad range of support to the collaborative group;<sup>50</sup> and
- The percent of the collaborative group’s budget that came from local public and private sources.

Each of these measures represents a different aspect of local support for the work of the Discovery collaborative groups, from political leaders adopting early childhood as a priority, to community organizations offering substantial in-kind support, to the allocation of local public and private funds.

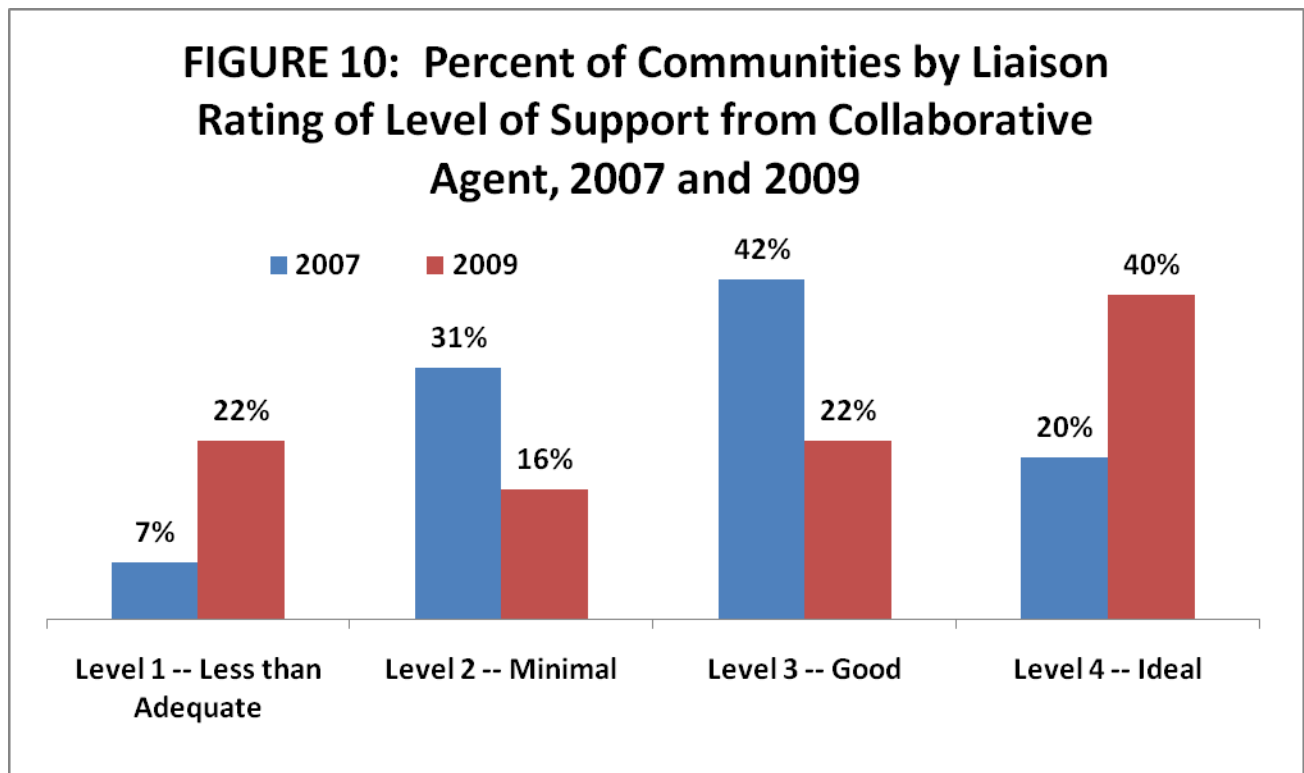
**Overall, by 2007 the work of the Discovery collaborative groups received moderate levels of support from their communities, based on the ratings given by their liaisons.** The extent to which community leaders, including the chief elected official and the school superintendent, actively championed an early childhood agenda, based on the liaison’s ratings, averaged 2.6 (midway between “minimal” and “good”) across all Discovery communities in 2007. **However, in 2009, the mean rating was similar at 2.3, suggesting that a number of communities continued to struggle to find active early childhood champions.**



In 2007, 20 percent of the Discovery collaborative groups had strong (“ideal”) support from their collaborative agent, according to the community liaison, while only 7 percent had “less than adequate” support. Though there were variations in the level of support from

<sup>50</sup> See “Collaborative Agents in the Discovery Initiative as of 2007” [http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps\\_resource\\_1159.pdf](http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps_resource_1159.pdf).

collaborative agents from community to community, on average, collaborative agent support for the Discovery group and its work on early childhood issues was rated as 2.9 in 2007 and 2.8 in 2009, just under “good.” However, the similarity in average ratings in the two years masked some striking changes. While there was a substantial increase (20 percentage points) in the number of communities in which support from the collaborative agent was rated as “ideal” between 2007 and 2009, there was an almost equal increase (15 percentage points) in the number rated as “less than adequate.” **On this measure, the collaborative groups also appeared to struggle with sustaining a consistently high level of support from local organizations and leaders.**



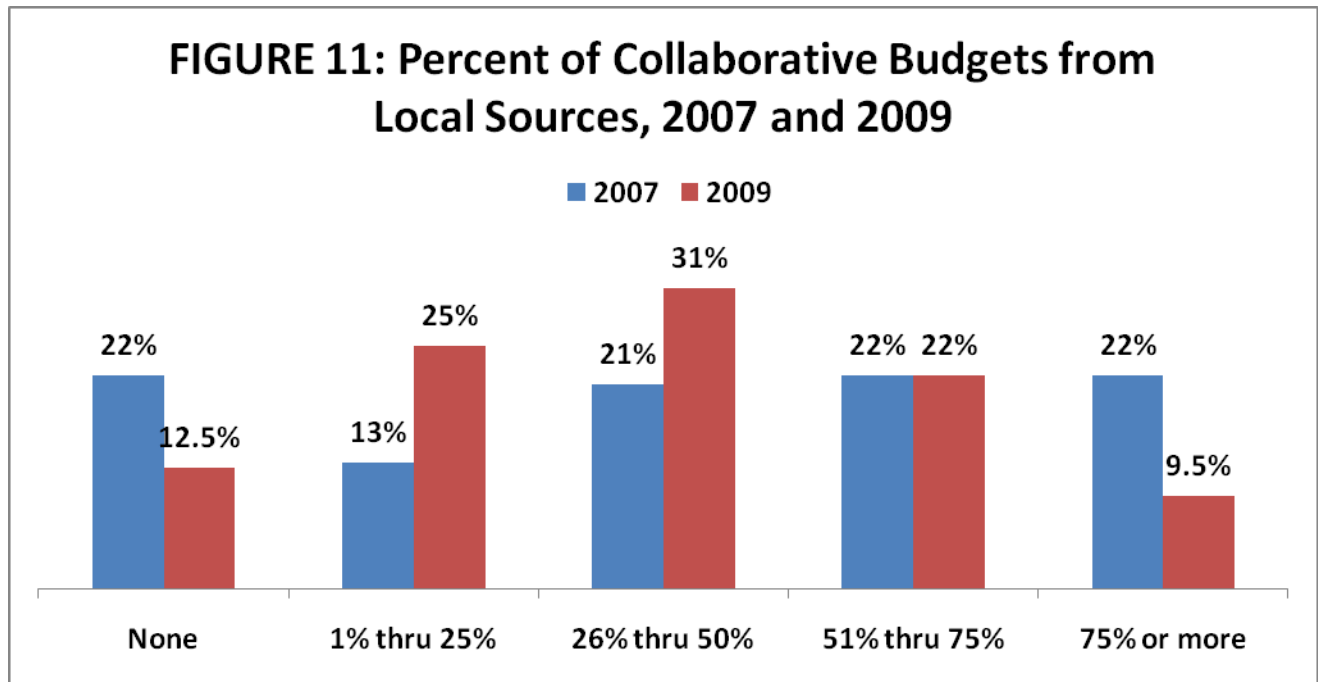
The collaborative groups in the Discovery Initiative communities varied a great deal in the amount of locally generated resources<sup>51</sup> provided for their work. On average in 2007, communities<sup>52</sup> provided 39 percent of the resources in their local Discovery budgets, with a median value of \$24,475 coming from local cash and in-kind sources. In the 2009 Discovery collaborative group budgets<sup>53</sup> included local cash and in-kind resources with a median value of \$28,950, representing about 38 percent of their budgets. Eight of the 37 communities (22 percent) for which 2007 budget data were available had no locally generated resources. In

<sup>51</sup> Local resources included cash or in-kind contributions from local public entities, the local United Way, businesses, foundations, fundraising, fees, and other miscellaneous sources. Total revenues included resources from these sources and from the Memorial Fund; they did not include state funds, which were primarily for School Readiness program or Family Resource Center services.

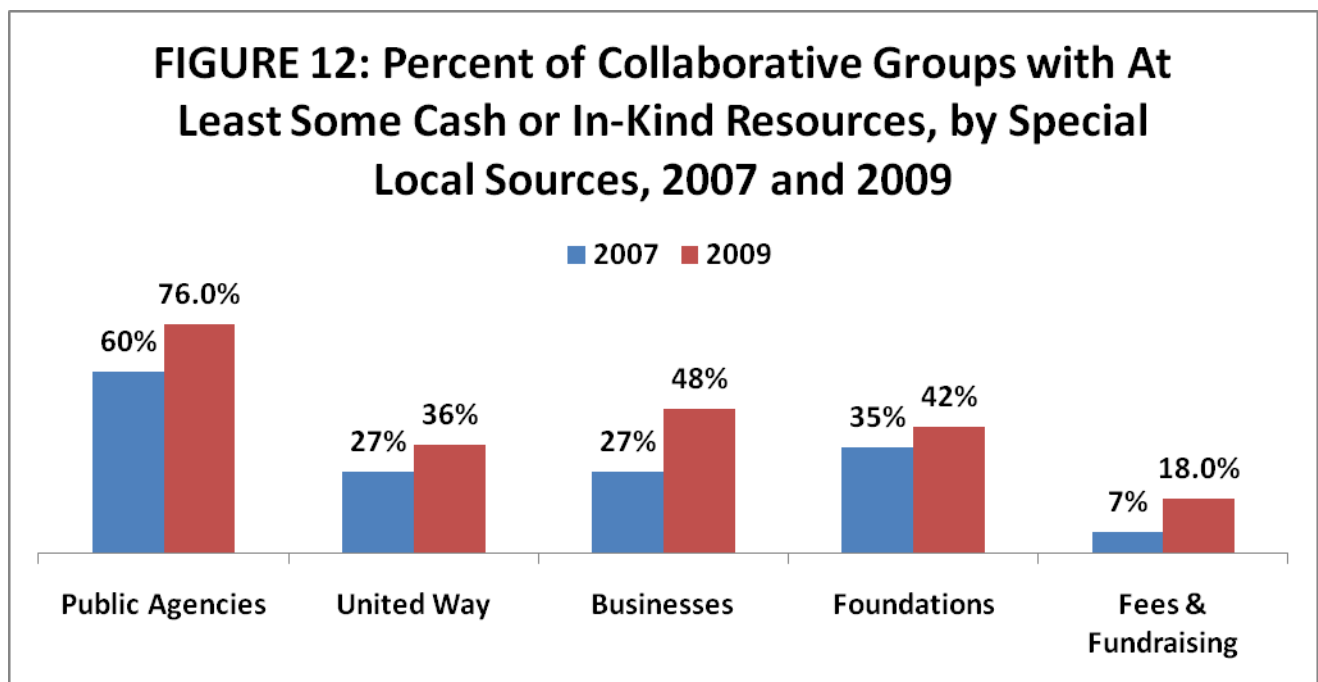
<sup>52</sup> In 2007 budget data were available for 37 of the 47 Discovery collaborative groups.

<sup>53</sup> In 2009 budget data were available for 32 of the 47 Discovery collaborative groups.

2009, all but 4 of the 32 communities (12.5 percent) for which 2009 budget data were available had local resources.



The percent of community collaborative groups with at least some cash or in-kind budget resources from each specific local source increased between 2007 and 2009.



Not surprisingly, given the decline in local and state revenues between 2007 and 2009, a number of collaborative groups experienced a decline in the percent of their budgets from local sources during this period. Of the 26 collaborative groups for which budget data in both years are available, 12 or 46 percent had declines of 15 or more points in the percent of their budgets coming from local sources, while equal numbers (7 or 27 percent each) experienced either an



increase of more than 15 points or stayed within 15 points of the 2007 share of the budget coming from local sources. However, of the 8 groups with no local sources of support in 2007, three-quarters or 6 included some local cash or in-kind contributions in their 2009 budget. (Two collaborative groups with local contributions to their budgets in 2007 had no such revenue in 2009.) Collaborative groups with strong infrastructure and functioning in 2007, based on liaison rating, were more likely to have greater local resources in their 2009 budgets than groups rated lower; strong collaborative groups were also more likely to have experienced less change in the percent of their budgets coming from local sources between 2007 and 2009.

**Overall, the level of support from community leadership to many Discovery collaborative groups fluctuated between 2007 and 2009, suggesting that consistent support can be difficult to sustain. However, during the same period, in one of the worst fiscal environments in recent times, the collaborative groups were generally able to maintain and in some cases increase local contributions to their operating budgets.**

### **What Is the Evidence of Collaboration among Statewide Advocacy Grantee Organizations in the Discovery Initiative through 2009?**

By 2007, with encouragement and opportunities provided by the Memorial Fund, the four statewide advocacy organizations reported stronger connections in their work on early childhood issues and they crafted a joint agenda that contributed to the successes of the 2007 legislative session. At the same time, the core statewide organizations acknowledged that more work was needed to coordinate their message to policymakers and to develop the capacity to mobilize for action as a group. This was echoed by the state-level stakeholders interviewed at the end of the 2007 legislative session; legislators in particular identified a need for advocacy groups to present a shared agenda for action.

The statewide advocacy organizations took advantage of the Memorial Fund's offer of funding and technical assistance and developed several joint projects. In addition, they engaged in projects with a number of Discovery community collaborative groups. During the 2009 legislative session, the four core statewide advocacy organizations, working through the broader membership of the Alliance, carried out a number of collaborative activities with each other and with the Discovery communities (see the previous chapter).

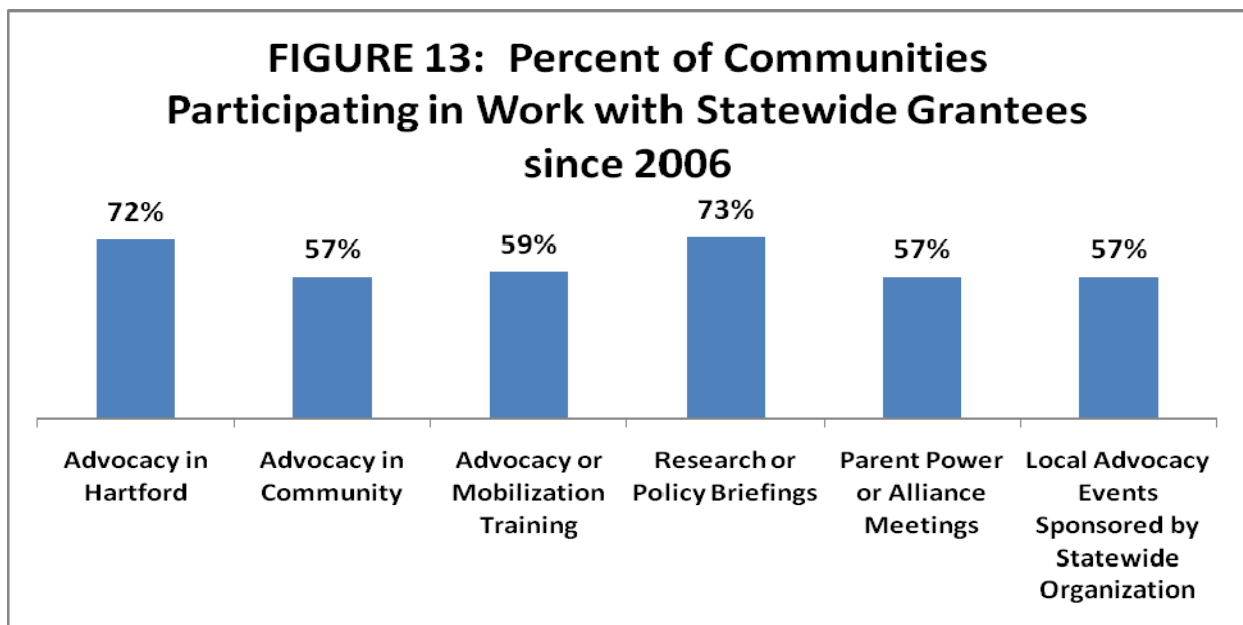
Staff of the core statewide organizations valued the Memorial Fund's support, in providing technical assistance and facilitation consultation and in funding their joint projects, and reported that these supports strengthened their collaboration. As noted in the earlier chapter, this collaboration has proved its effectiveness and was expected to continue.

### **What Is the Evidence of Collaboration between Communities and Statewide Advocacy Organizations in the Discovery Initiative through 2009?**

Early in the Discovery Initiative, while work at both the community and state levels was acknowledged as critical to success in achieving its goals, the connections between the local collaborative groups and the statewide and regional grantee organizations were limited. There were cases in which a grantee organization assisted an individual community on a specific project, such as a community "report card" or statistical profile on its young children. However,

in most cases, the community groups did not perceive a connection with their work, and the statewide grantee organizations did not see their own work as requiring community engagement. In late 2006, most statewide and regional grantees reported some connection with Discovery community grantees. Typical connections involved statewide and regional grantees providing workshops, technical assistance or training, preparing research or data that was used by the communities or presenting at Discovery conferences. These activities did not generally involve receiving information or taking direction from the communities. By mid-2007, many communities (82 percent) were reported to be connected with at least one of the statewide or regional organizations in some way, either through individualized contact with the organizations, using the organizations' materials, or partnering with an organization.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, just over one-half of the community collaborative staff (community coordinators) interviewed in mid-2007 mentioned some barrier to connecting with statewide organizations.

By 2009, the core statewide organizations had provided a wide range of opportunities for community involvement in both local and state advocacy. In a survey completed in the fall 2009, more (89 percent) of the Discovery communities reported being involved in activities with the statewide grantee organizations. The activities indicated at this time more often directly involved advocacy. These included participating in advocacy events held in Hartford or in their local community, training on advocacy or community organizing, and membership meetings, all activities of Parent Power or the Alliance; it also included participating in briefings organized by any of the four organizations on research or policy. The Early Childhood Alliance, in its mid-year report to the Memorial Fund, identified nearly twenty Discovery communities that regularly engaged in state-level advocacy efforts.



<sup>54</sup> In 2007 Connecticut Parent Power was the most frequently mentioned organization with which communities had formed connections, followed by Connecticut Voices for Children and the Early Childhood Alliance. The Alliance and Parent Power had engaged communities in public will building projects, worked with communities on regional candidate forums, and provided mobilization and advocacy training and tools. Connecticut Voices for Children was frequently mentioned for its data and policy work, which it provided through regular public statewide reports and customized, community-level data projects for communities.

## PROGRESS ON PARENT ENGAGEMENT AT COMMUNITY AND STATE LEVELS THROUGH 2009

### **What Does “Parent Engagement and Leadership” Mean in the Discovery Initiative?**

Parent engagement is a core value of the Memorial Fund and of the Discovery Initiative. As noted in the 2007 community tool kit, the Parent Voice and Action Resource Guide, “[t]he William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund and the 49 Connecticut communities participating in the Discovery initiative have explicitly committed to promoting the participation of parents<sup>55</sup> at every level of decision-making, within the home as well as the organizations and networks that touch the lives of young children.” 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 all 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. In the Discovery glossary, parent engagement is defined as “[t]he process of intentional and ongoing outreach to all parents with young children as equal partners in planning and decision making about programs, policies and practices that impact their children.” Materials prepared by the Discovery Initiative characterized parent engagement as having multiple dimensions that can be developed separately or simultaneously. They also asserted that increasing parent engagement takes explicit and sustained attention from organizations, communities and others.

### **How Has the Memorial Fund Supported Parent Engagement and Leadership?**

The Memorial Fund’s strategies to promote and support parent engagement in communities and at the state level began well before the launch of the Discovery Initiative. The Memorial Fund has been a strong funder of the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) in Connecticut and the Children First communities incorporated the PLTI model into their work early on. The state-wide parent mobilization and advocacy organization, Connecticut Parent Power, also grew out of the CFI and PLTI experience and its formation was supported by Memorial Fund staff and consultants.

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<sup>55</sup> From *Parent Voice and Action Resource Guide*: “The term “parent”, as used in this guide, refers to children's most immediate caretakers—mothers, fathers and, often, grandparents and other relatives or adults who accept responsibility for their nurturance, safety and well-being. The guide focuses mainly on increasing the involvement, engagement and leadership of people who are operating primarily from their parenting role. That is, while many of the people who work on behalf of children (child care providers, health care providers, and other professionals) are parents, this guide is aimed at helping communities to include parents who are not already in these kinds of positions.”

The Memorial Fund recognized, based in large part on the CFI experience, that supporting parent engagement and leadership would require sustained and comprehensive strategies. Through 2007, the Discovery Initiative's strategies to encourage parent engagement and leadership in the Discovery collaborative groups and communities included requiring a parent signatory on the grant applications, including a section on parent engagement in the community annual self-assessment form, and providing technical assistance and resource materials. Resource materials included a document outlining successful strategies from the Children First Initiative (*Parents at the Center*) and a guide for communities to consider different ways of conceptualizing and supporting parent engagement (*Parent Voice and Action Resource Guide*). The Memorial Fund also required the communities to include information on parent membership and leadership on applications and in evaluation surveys. The importance of this value was reinforced through questions, observations, or suggestions from the community liaison and staff, and the provision of funds through the Parent Trust Fund for community-based parent leadership training classes.

While technical assistance specifically on parent engagement and leadership was not provided during the 2007-2009 period, emphasis on this important Memorial Fund principle continued. In addition to the expectation for parent participation on the collaborative group and the requirement for a parent signatory on grant applications, it was expected that there would be substantial parent input into community planning work. In addition, the facilitative leadership institutes were intended to develop skills that would facilitate the broad involvement of all stakeholders in the work of the collaborative.

To stimulate state investment in parent leadership during the 2007 legislative session, the Memorial Fund proposed to match any new state investments in the Parent Trust Fund, which supports parent leadership training in Connecticut communities, above the State's base of \$250,000 per year up to a total of \$350,000 over two years, with an option for \$250,000 in the third year. This offer was accepted and, as a result, the annual funds for this program rose to \$450,000 for 2007 and 2008. Action by the legislature in 2009 provided \$500,000 for the Parent Trust Fund, again meeting the Memorial Fund's offer of co-funding.

### **What Would "Making Progress" Look Like with Regard to Parent Engagement and Leadership?**

The Discovery collaborative groups and statewide parent organization 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 at the community and state levels. The Discovery community collaborative groups 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. Therefore, one measure of "making progress" would be that the Discovery collaborative groups had representation of parents from various socioeconomic and demographic groups in the community and that these parents had visible roles as leaders in the Discovery work.

However, experience in Connecticut and elsewhere has been that recruiting and retaining parents who do not hold professional positions to serve on groups such as the Discovery collaborative groups can be difficult. There are challenges of competing demands and language

barriers, as well as the desire of parents to spend their limited available time on projects that will immediately improve the lives of young children such as renovating a playground or publishing a community resource guide. Just as challenging are barriers for parents presented by the “professional” culture and jargon of some collaborative groups and insufficient support to make parent participation more feasible. These factors may be expected to make substantial parent membership on the collaborative group difficult to achieve and sustain.

The Memorial Fund has been clear that parent engagement need not and should not be limited to participation on the Discovery collaborative group. The parent engagement honeycomb and the Parent Voice and Action Guide identified six areas in which communities can provide opportunities for parent engagement:

- Accessing information on services and supports for their children and family
- Participating in events and gaining skills that support their child’s own early school success
- Developing skills to benefit a group of children
- Exercising their civic rights as citizens and taxpayers
- Being leaders and making decisions on issues they and other parents care about
- Working to sustain and replenish a continuum of parent leaders.

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. Documenting whether these effects occur, however, is difficult.

At the state-level, Connecticut Parent Power was expected to provide opportunities for parents from across the state to learn about the structure of the 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. As a relatively new organization that had experienced some “growing pains” and changes in leadership, expectations for its engagement of parents across the state during 2004 through 2007 were modest. Continued Memorial Fund support and technical assistance during 2008-2009 were expected to increase its reach and effectiveness in engaging parents in advocacy work.

### **What Is the Evidence of Parent Engagement in the Discovery Communities through 2009?**

Building a parent-led collaborative and engaging large numbers of parents, particularly those who are not involved through their work or who have experience as part of similar groups, is a challenge. From the beginning of Discovery, there was almost unanimous agreement by those involved in Discovery that the demographic and economic diversification of their communities was an issue that needed to be considered in recruiting parents to join the collaborative groups.<sup>56</sup>

By 2007, the Discovery communities had engaged parents as members and offered them leadership opportunities on the collaborative groups in many cases. On average, 20 percent of

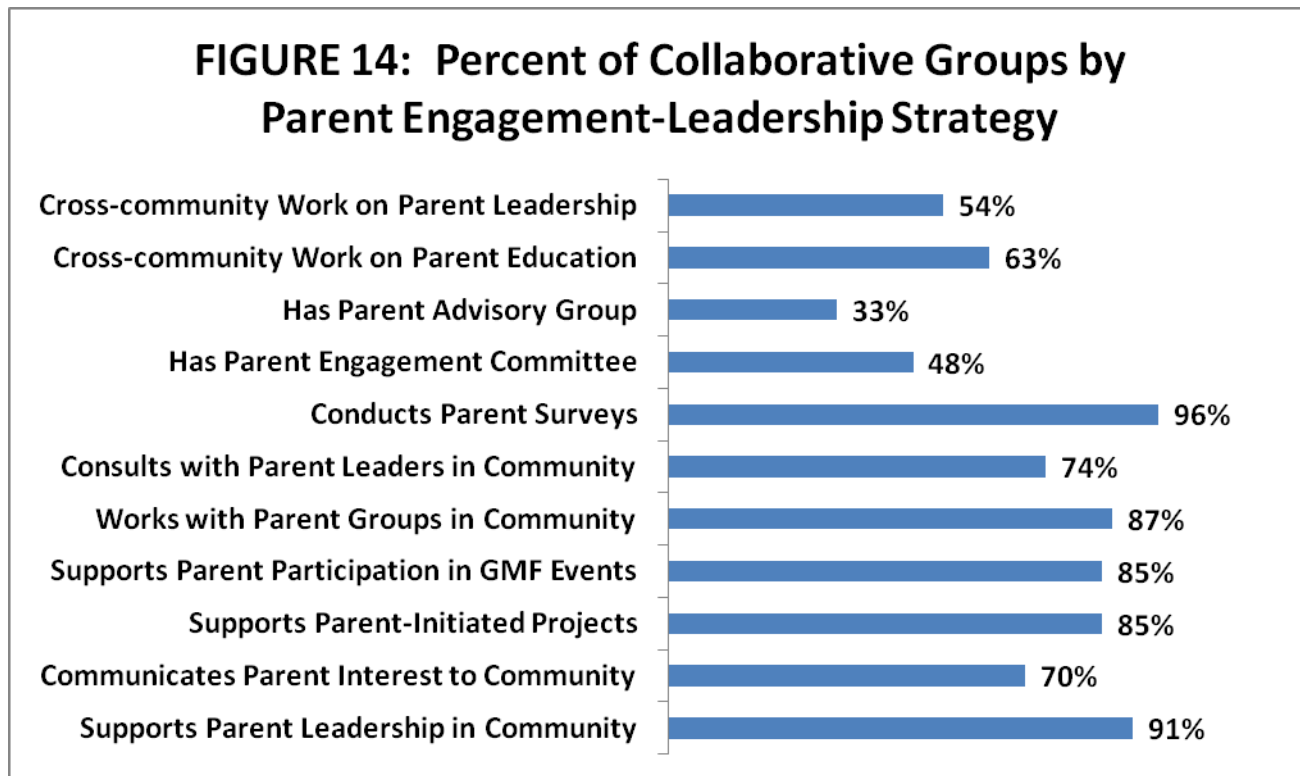
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<sup>56</sup> From *The Discovery Initiative: A Documentation of the Early Stages*, Marcela Gutiérrez-Mayka and Margaret Berkey, The OMG Center for Collaborative Learning, June 2003.

collaborative members were parents, with a range from 4 percent to 70 percent. Just over half (57 percent) of all collaborative groups in 2007 had parents in leadership roles, such as collaborative chair, member of the steering committee, or chair of a committee.

***In 2009 parents on the Discovery collaborative groups were, on average, 15 percent of the total, with a range from none to 50 percent. Parents were in leadership roles in 44 percent of the collaborative groups in 2009. It appears that parent leadership was not a given, even in groups that had had a parent in leadership roles in the past; there was not a strong correlation between parent leadership in 2007 and parent leadership in 2009.***

However, by 2009 the Discovery communities had expanded their repertoire of strategies for engaging parents beyond membership or leadership positions on the collaborative group. All used multiple ways to hear from and support parents in guiding the work and in pursuing leadership opportunities in the community. Out of the various ways that collaborative groups could report engaging and supporting parents (see Figure 13 below), the average number used was 8 and no group used fewer than two ways to engage and support parents.



**What Is the Evidence of Parent Engagement in State Policy Advocacy through 2009?**

During 2007, Parent Power organized advocacy training sessions for parents, field trips to the State Capital, community candidate forums, and a letter-writing campaign in which 500 parents wrote to legislators, that were delivered along with 5,000 pictures from young children. Parent Power was among a small group of statewide organizations that were recognized by state stakeholders (including legislators) interviewed after the 2007 legislative session as well organized to work on early childhood education issues and as key contributors to improving

outcomes for children. Even so, after the 2007 legislative session, state level stakeholders, including legislators, noted that neither parents nor communities had exercised a strong voice on early childhood issues. Legislators believed that a strong parent voice is important, but did not feel they had heard from parents on early childhood issues during the 2007 session.

During 2008 and 2009 the membership and activities of the statewide parent advocacy organization increased. As of the fall of 2007, Connecticut Parent Power had delegates from 5 Discovery communities; by 2008, Parent Power had delegates from 16 communities, 15 of which are Discovery communities, and by early 2011 there was a membership of 2,600 residents from 110 towns and 15 delegate communities, including 2 communities that were not part of the Discovery Initiative.

During the 2009 legislative session, Parent Power and the Early Childhood Alliance organized a number of advocacy activities that had particular emphasis on involving parents and community residents, such as Advocacy Day at the State Capitol, Read Across America, legislative tours of early childhood facilities, Week of the Young Child events, and Children's Champion events to honor legislators who are supportive of children's issues. Individuals, including parents from twenty of the Discovery communities have engaged consistently in these events.<sup>57</sup> ***After the session, legislators who were interviewed by the Discovery evaluation team, particularly those on committees dealing most directly with early childhood, reported hearing more often from parents and parent groups on these issues than was indicated by legislators interviewed in 2007.***

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<sup>57</sup> These communities were Bloomfield, Bridgeport, Danbury, Enfield, Hartford, Meriden, Middlesex, New Britain, New Haven, Northeast School Readiness (which includes Killingly, Plainfield, and Putnam), Southeastern Children First (which includes Groton and Norwich), Torrington, the Valley communities of Ansonia, Shelton and Vernon, and West Hartford. (From the Early Childhood Alliance July 2010 Six Month Progress report.)

## **PROGRESS ON IMPLEMENTATION AND USE OF CAPACITY-BUILDING SUPPORTS BY DISCOVERY COMMUNITIES AND CORE STATEWIDE ORGANIZATIONS THROUGH 2009**

### **What Does “Capacity Building” Mean in the Discovery Initiative?**

The term “capacity” is interpreted very broadly in the Discovery Initiative. It is the overall ability of communities and organizations to engage in activities to foster, lead and manage a community change process and engage in collective action. It is the ability of statewide and regional organizations to work together to foster positive systems change on behalf of young children. It is the ability of both groups to sustain political and public focus on early childhood issues and continue to make improvements over time. “Capacity building” is the general term used to describe the process of developing and sustaining these abilities. Capacity building is the strategy used by the Memorial Fund in the Discovery Initiative to support this process among the Discovery community grantees and statewide and regional grantee organizations.

### **How Has the Memorial Fund Supported Capacity Building?**

The Memorial Fund implemented a strategy for supporting the Discovery Initiative communities that combined relatively small grants with an array of supports and resources focused on building collaboration, encouraging parent engagement, and promoting community change. These supports included workshops, regional and statewide convenings, and an ongoing relationship with a consultant acting as liaison between the Memorial Fund and the community collaborative group. 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. More of the support to these organizations, compared to the support for communities, has come directly from Memorial Fund staff. Support in the form of staff leadership, convening opportunities, and matching funds were provided to the Early Childhood Education Cabinet and the Research and Policy Council.

The capacity-building strategies with communities and with the statewide and regional grantee organizations, especially the four core organizations, are described below.

#### **Capacity-Building Strategies with Communities**

One of the lessons learned in the Memorial Fund’s Children First Initiative was that most communities had 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 in mobilizing community resources and actions to improve the early experiences of all the community’s children.



Since the Discovery strategy is focused on building capacity, rather than funding programs or direct service, 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.

Technical assistance to communities in Discovery has focused on building their capacities to foster, lead, and manage a community change process on behalf of young children. The primary areas of technical assistance<sup>58</sup> that the Memorial Fund sponsored between 2004 and 2007 were in the areas of:

- Collaborative building
- Community assessment
- Strategic planning
- Strategic communication strategies
- Community mobilization and organizing
- Advocacy and lobbying
- Parent engagement, involvement and leadership

Most technical assistance was delivered through meetings or workshops at which communities were introduced to a topic and to available resources. These workshops were initially generally single-session on a given topic, although generally topics were repeated and elaborated upon within and across the 2004-2007 period. Some technical assistance workshops were provided to the full group of Discovery communities together, while in other instances, they were offered to smaller groups of communities organized by region or by cohort.<sup>59</sup> Materials from these sessions were made available on the Discovery website and communities could apply for on-site specialized technical assistance from individual consultants.

In addition to technical assistance workshops and materials, each community was assigned an individual consultant, called a liaison.<sup>60</sup> Each liaison was responsible for between four to ten communities. The liaison acted as the information link between the Memorial Fund and the Discovery 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. In addition, the liaisons participated in identifying community capacity-building needs and developing technical assistance strategies.

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<sup>58</sup> Some workshops and meetings provided information and resources on best practices in early childhood education, for example, related to kindergarten transition and informal care.

<sup>59</sup> See footnote 14 above.

<sup>60</sup> Early in Discovery, Memorial Fund staff attempted to carry out the liaison functions, but an early lesson learned was that this work was too time consuming to be added to their other responsibilities and that it was difficult for foundation staff to provide coaching and feedback without this being interpreted as directive. Therefore, it was determined early on to have this support be provided by independent consultants under the supervision and direction of Memorial Fund staff. See "Supporting Community Change: Lessons from the Discovery Initiative on the Role and Contributions of Community Liaisons" (in review).

In 2006, Discovery communities were introduced to another format for technical assistance via the Kindergarten Transition Institute. The Institute was designed to respond to concerns about the effectiveness of one-time workshops and differed from previous technical assistance in several key ways:

- Communities had to apply to participate and propose a team of people who would attend.
- Applying communities had to have identified kindergarten transition as one of the objectives of their Discovery collaborative action plans.
- The Institute was held over several sessions with the expectation that the community teams would carry out a plan of action between sessions.

The success of the “institute” model for providing technical assistance, combined with the sharpened focus on community planning, led to the capacity-building approach implemented in the 2008-2009 period. During that period technical assistance institutes on community decision making, results-based accountability, and facilitative leadership were offered to community teams.<sup>61</sup> In addition, individualized consultation on results-based accountability was made available upon request to communities and the community liaisons were trained to provide workshops on community decision making.

Communities were also provided specific peer learning opportunities through the annual conference, a listserv, and support for collaborative members to visit other communities. These were in addition to the peer exchange opportunities that naturally occurred at workshops and meetings.

### **Capacity-Building Strategies with Statewide and Regional Grantee Organizations**

The Memorial Fund has been explicit in including support for 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 Discovery, the statewide and regional grantees were provided with support to build their organizational capacities and support the work in communities. Memorial Fund staff worked closely with the grantees to support their work, provide advice, foster relationships among them and with other funders and organizations, and to develop strategies with them for moving their work forward. Grantee organizations were also provided with additional funding for evaluation, technology upgrades, staff training and networking opportunities.

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<sup>61</sup> For more information on the organizations providing technical assistance, see the Center for the Study of Social Policy (community decision making) <http://www.cssp.org/>, the Charter Oak Group (results-based accountability) <http://charteroakgroup.com/>, and the Interaction Institute for Social Change (facilitative leadership) <http://interactioninstitute.org/>.

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 how to increase the capacity of those organizations to do their work more effectively. Since 2007, technical assistance to these organizations, provided by an outside consultant, has focused on both organization capacity building and cross-organization collaboration.

In addition to supporting these statewide and regional organizations, the Memorial Fund provided leadership to other state entities. From its formation in 2006 until it was dissolved in 2009, the Memorial Fund’s executive director served as co-chair of the Research and Policy Council, a broad-based group supporting the work of the Governor’s Early Childhood Education Cabinet. The Memorial Fund offered other in-kind assistance to this group through staff support and convening facilities. The Memorial Fund also provided matching funds for state investments in parent leadership training and community planning grants to communities.

### **What Would “Making Progress” Look Like with Regard to Capacity Building?**

The multi-pronged technical assistance strategy described earlier was intended to meet the needs of the broad range of Discovery communities, most of which did not begin with a history of collaborative activity and parent engagement around early childhood issues. Because more than half (51 percent) of the communities were rated by Memorial Fund staff and consultants as having little or no collaborative infrastructure or experience when Discovery’s implementation period began in 2004, the expectation was that most communities would need considerable support to develop the necessary capacities to be effective catalysts for community change. The primary goal of the capacity building supports provided to communities during the period through 2007 was to support the development of strong collaborative groups and give them the information and tools necessary to build broader community support for early childhood and improve the local early childhood education system. The expectation was that the primary capacity-building supports – the technical assistance workshops, opportunities for peer sharing, individualized support from the community liaisons, and electronic tools for information access and peer exchange – would provide what was needed by the Discovery communities to build collaborative groups and implement local practice and policy changes.

By the end of 2007, the Memorial Fund increased its focus on supporting the Discovery collaborative groups in leading or facilitating community-wide planning for young children. The expectation was that the community planning process would result in a “blueprint” for improving, increasing, and coordinating local programs and services for young children and their families and support children’s health, development, school readiness, and school success. The blueprint was then expected to guide programmatic and policy decisions and resource allocation by public entities, non-profit agencies, and other community organizations and groups.

Though it had supported policy research and advocacy for almost a decade prior to Discovery, it was not until the Discovery Initiative was being planned that the Memorial Fund began to articulate specific expectations about the importance of coordinated agendas and actions

among organizations working on early childhood issues at the state-level. 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 be effective in increasing broad support and public investment in early childhood education.

### **What Is the Evidence of the Use and Value of Capacity-Building Supports for Communities through 2009?**

Overall, communities valued opportunities to learn through relationships with their community liaison and from their peers, but found the technical assistance workshops less helpful. Opportunities to meet with peers and to an even greater degree, the relationship they had with their community liaison, were the most valued vehicles for learning among communities, as reported in 2007. An on-going relationship with the community liaison has been an important way for communities to understand the values and goals of Discovery and receive feedback on their work. In addition, liaisons have often encouraged and supported peer learning by sharing what they know about the other communities with which they work. Through 2007, the Discovery website and listserv were also viewed and used as opportunities for peer learning by the majority of communities taking advantage of this tool.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, the Discovery community collaborative groups generally found the technical workshops and trainings to be of little value, based on assessments of those offered in 2006.<sup>63</sup>

The experience of the Kindergarten Transition Institutes offered in 2006 and 2007 were reported to be of greater value to participating communities than were the single session workshops. The characteristics of these institutes that were most valued included the requirement that a team from the community participated and that time was provided during and between institute sessions for the team to meet and work together. The availability of a detailed planning guide and the opportunities for community teams to share ideas and feedback with each other were also important aspects of this approach.<sup>64</sup> At the same time, communities that participated in the Kindergarten Transition Institute noted that the Discovery Initiative's support for collaboration, parent engagement, and a focus on community change all helped build the capacity for communities to engage successfully in kindergarten transition work.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> See "Electronic Communications in the Discovery Initiative" [http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps\\_resource\\_1225.pdf](http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps_resource_1225.pdf).

<sup>63</sup> See "Community Use of Capacity-Building Supports as of Mid-2007" [http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps\\_resource\\_1158.pdf](http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps_resource_1158.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> See "Kindergarten Transition Institute Model For Providing Capacity-Building Technical Assistance In The Discovery Initiative, 2006-2007" [http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps\\_resource\\_1156.pdf](http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps_resource_1156.pdf).

<sup>65</sup> See "Navigating The "Perfect Storm": Moving From Plan To Action During An Economic Downturn, The Experiences of Four Discovery Communities That Received 2008-2009 Planning Grants" (under review.)

***The institute model of delivering technical assistance was effective in delivering information and building skills for community teams. The increased attention on a few core areas specifically related to community planning was also valued. In 2009, looking back over the course of Discovery but with the recent focus on community planning clearly in mind, the most valuable technical assistance supports were reported to be the institutes offered on results-based accountability and facilitative leadership. These were mentioned by 56 percent and 47 percent of the communities, respectively.***<sup>66</sup>

### **What Is the Evidence of the Use and Value of Capacity-Building Supports for the Statewide Advocacy Organizations through 2009?**

Beyond grant funding, Memorial Fund support was important in building the capacity of statewide and regional organizations to work on early childhood issues, particularly as advocates. By 2006, grantees reported an increase in their internal capacity to do their work due to Memorial Fund support.<sup>67</sup> This included increased numbers of staff with critical skill sets and expertise and enhanced skills among existing staff, as well as improved technological infrastructure and strengthened internal governance and strategic planning. These increased capacities and stronger inter-organizational connections allowed them to work together “at a higher level.”<sup>68</sup> However, despite reporting closer relationships with other grantees and a clearer sense of how their work is connected, grantees saw more work to be done in this area. This was echoed during interviews with legislators and other state-level stakeholders following the 2007 legislative session. They identified weaknesses in advocacy around early childhood issues related to demonstrating a broad base of support and delivering consistent, coordinated messages to policymakers.

***Beginning in 2007, the four core statewide grantee organizations – Connecticut Association of Human Services, Connecticut Voices for Children, the Early Childhood Alliance, and Connecticut Parent Power – were offered technical assistance consulting support to further strengthen both individual and collective capacities for mobilization and advocacy. This technical assistance and funding opportunities for joint projects increased the capacity of the four core statewide advocacy organization to build a stronger base of support and deliver coordinated advocacy messages.*** During interviews in late 2009 and early 2010 Discovery statewide grantees reported increased capacity to pursue collaborative strategies, build

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<sup>66</sup> A number of communities reported that other types of supports were valuable, including the annual Stone Soup conference hosted by the Memorial Fund for all Discovery communities (by 36 percent of communities), the community liaison (27 percent), and the Community Conversations experience (24 percent).

<sup>67</sup> The statewide and regional grantees reported a constellation of supports received from the Memorial Fund beyond funding that have been critical to their work. These supports included the Memorial Fund staff’s advice, knowledge and insight and knowledge of the field and the Memorial Fund’s willingness to facilitate access to individuals and institutions that grantees felt they could not have been able to engage otherwise. Grantees also reported that their connection to the Memorial Fund increased the visibility of their work. See “Discovery Contributions to Early Childhood Policy Results: The View from State-Level Grantees and Stakeholders” <http://discovery.wcgmf.org/toc.html> (under “Intermediate Changes”).

<sup>68</sup> See evaluation report *Discovery Contributions to Recent Policy Results, The View From State-Level Grantees and Stakeholders, April 2008* at [http://www.discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps\\_resource\\_1367.ppt](http://www.discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps_resource_1367.ppt).

coalitions and partnerships, and more actively engage constituents. These capacities allowed them to effectively engage a core group of communities in state-level advocacy activities, create strategic connections with legislators, and position the core statewide organizations as a resource for research and information.

## MOVING FORWARD – QUESTIONS ARISING FROM THE DISCOVERY INITIATIVE EXPERIENCE THROUGH 2009

The Memorial Fund designed the Discovery Initiative with the goal of strengthening the capacities of communities and state advocacy organizations to influence actions and decisions that affect early childhood policy and practice. The Discovery *initiative intervention* encompassed the Memorial Fund’s approach to working with its partners, the assumptions or principles that underlie Discovery, and the specific investments made in capacity building, which include grant support and technical assistance.

The *direct contributions* of the Discovery Initiative were expected to be strengthened infrastructure and relationships within and among communities and state-level organizations and groups. These enhanced capacities were to enable stakeholders to implement *effective strategies* to bring about *specific intermediate changes* in local and state early childhood education policies and practices. The strengthened capacities, effective strategies, and specific policy and practice changes at the community and state levels were then expected to contribute to the *longer-term development* of sustained attention to early childhood issues and continued policy and practice change.

Based on the evaluation team’s observations from 2005 through 2009, the pathways for change expected from the Discovery theory of change were confirmed. The Memorial Fund’s long-term commitment to capacity building at both the community and state levels has contributed to progress toward the initiative’s long-term goal. This chapter outlines the major evaluation findings and suggests some questions for consideration as the Memorial Fund moves forward and as other community change initiatives learn from the Discovery experience.

***Through 2009, the evaluation team observed the increasing effectiveness of capacity-building supports that evolved from key learnings developed during Discovery – 1) the importance of relationships in supporting both learning and change, 2) the need to practice skills and apply new knowledge in situations of interest and importance to the learners, and 3) the value of bringing individuals, groups, and organizations together in learning how to stimulate and support community change.***

- Providing these kinds of supports is labor and resource intensive. How can knowledge and skill building be most efficiently and effectively organized? Is there some threshold of capacity, infrastructure, and/or commitment, beyond the current requirements for participation in the institutes, that should be demonstrated before offering these types of supports?
- How can the “investments” in knowledge and skill building with specific individuals or organizations realize long term results, given changes in personal interests, location, staffing, and assignments? What might increase the likelihood that the knowledge and skills of participants in capacity-building training and technical assistance is broadly shared and embedded throughout the community or organization?
- Much of the Discovery capacity-building supports have been on “process” knowledge and skills. What information, training, technical assistance, or tools might be useful on

best practices and evidence-based models in early childhood systems so that local decisions and investments have the best chance of improving children's outcomes?

- Consistent feedback from community participants in Discovery capacity-building has been that opportunities for peer exchange and learning have been very valuable. In addition to current events and activities that bring communities together, how might the Memorial Fund support the development of more intensive ongoing peer mentoring relationships?

***Through 2009, the evaluation team observed an increase in collaboration within communities in the early years of Discovery with a plateau in the 2008-2009 period, while cross-community activities and collaboration among the core state advocacy organizations and between these organizations and communities increased sharply after 2007.***

- Beyond establishing a collaborative "table" where diverse stakeholders can meet to build relationships, share information and work on a common agenda, what institutional or formal arrangements or agreements are needed to make system-wide and sustained changes?
- Over the course of the initiative in many communities, the Discovery collaborative "table" has merged with other structures or bodies, including the School Readiness Councils, or have become a legally recognized entity such as a 501(c)(3) organization. How can the experiences of these communities be mined to learn more about the opportunities and challenges of such arrangements?
- Given Connecticut's large number of independent towns and cities and its weak county structure, what role might regional collaborations play in establishing a statewide early care and education system?
- What capacities need to be added or strengthened, beyond those among the four core organizations, to increase the effectiveness of statewide advocacy on early childhood issues?

***Through 2009, the evaluation team observed ongoing attention to building relationships with and engaging parents during Discovery, with changes in strategies and results between 2004 and 2009.***

- Parent engagement, particularly from parents who are not accustomed to having a voice in their dealings with institutions and bureaucracies, is an ongoing challenge in many settings and initiatives; Discovery has not been an exception. How can the Memorial Fund help the culture – expectations and behaviors – of important community institutions become more respectful, receptive, and responsive to parent input, involvement, and leadership?
- Parent leadership development and training efforts have been successful in helping individual parents become more confident and effective in local decision-making. The Memorial Fund helps support community parent leadership training programs through its match to state investment in the Parent Trust Fund. How might the Memorial Fund extend the impact of this investment by assisting communities to provide follow-up support and opportunities for alumni parents?
- The Memorial Fund has promoted a broad understanding of parent engagement and leadership, as illustrated in the "honeycomb" from the Parent Voice and Action Guide.



It has also encouraged community collaborative groups to regularly assess how much parents are involved in and guide their work. How might the Memorial Fund help communities reflect on, track, and plan for other aspects of parent engagement and leadership?

***Through 2009, the evaluation team observed the development and implementation of increasingly coordinated and effective strategies to build public and political support and influence policy decisions, locally and at the state level.***

- Cross-community activities and regional collaborations increased during Discovery, but Connecticut is a state with a weak county structure and many independent towns and cities. Would offering additional resources and technical support be a way to encourage and foster more regional collaborative efforts? How would these efforts be expected to contribute to public and political support and policy decisions, given the lack of a regional political structure on which to focus change efforts?
- Leadership in the core statewide organizations acknowledged the value of strong collaborative strategies and messages in influencing policy decisions through 2009. Connecticut along with most other states will continue to face budget problems, at least for the next several years. How might the Memorial Fund help the core organizations form partnerships with groups and organizations working on other important policy issues (e.g., in health care, education, family self-sufficiency, and economic development) to maximize their influence and broaden their base of support?

***Through 2009, the evaluation team observed progress in broadening and deepening public and political interest and support for early childhood issues within communities and at the state level.***

- The focus of activities by the core statewide organizations in collaboration with communities has been on building awareness and support on early childhood issues within the legislature; this effort appears to have been successful, based on analysis of changes in voting patterns between 2007 and 2009. Conducting a state-wide public education campaign would be an expensive undertaking for the Memorial Fund alone to support. What support might the Memorial Fund provide – either directly or through the core organizations – to help the Discovery community collaborative groups carry out ongoing advocacy on local public education issues?
- Local school district policies – especially whether full-day kindergarten is universally available – can have a major impact on the long-term benefits from state and local investment in early care and education. How might the Memorial Fund help community groups craft messages and strategies on this issue with local school boards and voting citizens?

The Memorial Fund's approach to bringing about changes at the community and state level in early care and education focused on building the capacity of community groups and core statewide organizations to collaborate and to engage parents. These capacities laid the foundation for efforts to influence early childhood policies and practices at the local and state levels and contributed to the development and implementation of effective mobilization and advocacy strategies. These strategies then contributed to improvements in community early

childhood programs and services; to increased state investment in early education, community planning, and parent leadership; and to sustained commitment by state legislators and community leaders, even in dire economic times, to early childhood issues. At the same time, collaboration and parent engagement – cornerstone capacities in the Discovery theory of change – remain “works in progress,” subject to fluctuation as circumstances in communities and across the state change. To the extent that these two capacities are critical to continuing progress toward building a strong early childhood system, ongoing attention to collaboration, particularly at the community level, and to parent engagement, particularly at the state level, may be necessary.

## **APPENDIX A:**

### **DISCOVERY INITIATIVE EVALUATION DATA SOURCES AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

The Discovery evaluation utilized a wide range of data sources over the 2005 to 2009 period. The major sources included:

- The annual applications submitted by the Discovery communities for Memorial Fund grants, which included narrative descriptions of progress in their work and budgets
- A more detailed and structured application format, developed by the evaluation team, for the 2007 community application, parts of which were repeated in later surveys
- In-depth interviews with community collaborative group staff and leaders during the summer of 2007
- Community surveys submitted in lieu of interim grant reports in mid- 2006 and mid-2009
- A community survey on kindergarten transition work in 2010
- Site visits and in-depth individual and group interviews conducted in selected communities in 2005, 2007, and 2010
- Individual and group discussions with Memorial Fund staff, community liaisons, and technical assistance consultants at several points throughout the evaluation
- Observation of technical assistance workshops, initiative meetings, and public events associated with Discovery
- In-depth interviews with staff of statewide and regional organizations receiving grants as part of the Discovery Initiative in 2005, 2007, and 2010
- In-depth interviews with state-level “stakeholders” – advocates and policymakers – in 2005, 2007, and 2009

## APPENDIX B:

### LIST OF DISCOVERY INITIATIVE EVALUATION REPORTS & OTHER PRODUCTS

The following Discovery evaluation reports, presentations, and papers are available on the Memorial Fund website at <http://discovery.wcgmf.org/>.

*Collaborative Agents in the Discovery Initiative as of Mid-2007*

*Collaborative Groups, Collaborative Chairs, and Community Coordinators in the Discovery Initiative as of Mid-2007*

*Collaborative Infrastructure, Collaboration, and Parent Participation in Discovery Communities, Fall 2006*

*Community Reports of Changes in Discovery Objectives through 2006*

*Community Use of Capacity Building Supports as of Mid-2007*

*Discovery Contributions to Early Childhood Policy Results: The View from State-Level Grantees and Stakeholders, April 2008*

*Discovery Initiative Progress Report July 2006*

*Electronic Communications in the Discovery Initiative as of Mid-2007*

*Summary Evaluation Findings to Date through 2007 Linked with the Discovery Theory of Change*

*The Discovery Initiative 2004-2007: Interim Summative Evaluation Report and Summary*

*The Kindergarten Transition Institute Model for Providing Capacity-Building Technical Assistance in the Discovery Initiative, 2006-2007*

The following Discovery evaluation documents are under review:

*Discovery Initiative Contributions to State Policy Change*

*Kindergarten Transition Practices: Changing “The Way We Do Things Here” in Discovery Communities*

*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*

*Supporting Community Change: Lessons from the Discovery Initiative on the Role and Contributions of Community Liaisons*