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**THE DISCOVERY INITIATIVE: 2004-2007  
INTERIM SUMMATIVE EVALUATION REPORT**

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**REVISED  
June 23, 2009**

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

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

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**INTRODUCTION –  
FRAMING THE 2004-2007 DISCOVERY INITIATIVE  
INTERIM SUMMATIVE EVALUATION**

*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.

This report summarizes major evaluation findings for the 2004-2007 implementation period of the Discovery Initiative.<sup>1</sup> The Discovery Initiative, sponsored by the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, 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 Initiative also intended to create a legacy of sustained community and statewide focus on early childhood issues and capacity to influence policy on behalf of young children.

To do this, the Memorial Fund supported three main strategies:

- **“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>)

The Discovery evaluation focuses on the first two strategies.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Initiative began in 2002 with a two year planning phase. The implementation phase began in 2004 and was originally scheduled to end in 2007. As noted later in this chapter, the Memorial Fund Trustees extended it through 2009. The Initiative evaluation began in 2005 and was substantially redesigned in 2006. While the Initiative is still ongoing, this report uses the past tense to remind the reader that the information presented here applies to the 2004-2007 period.

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

As the organizing framework for this interim summative report, the evaluation posed two questions, Is the Initiative “on track” in the key elements of the Discovery Initiative theory of change?, and how have these elements contributed to the objectives and long-term goal of the Initiative? The key elements were:

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

This chapter begins with background information on the environment in which the Initiative has been carried out and relevant work of the Memorial Fund leading up to the Discovery Initiative. The Initiative’s theory of change is described in some detail. The following chapter summarizes observations about progress on the Discovery objectives and capacity to influence policy through 2007. The next chapters examine four elements of the Discovery theory of change. The report ends with a summary. Appendix 1 provides detail on the evaluation’s data collection methods and the measures used in this report.

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

The Memorial Fund – in the Discovery Initiative and in its other investments and activities – operates within a broader social, economic, and political environment. The Initiative sought to influence some components of that environment, while at the same time its implementation and results were affected by others. Progress toward improvement in the early care and education systems and the development and school success of Connecticut’s young children depended, not only on the specific contributions of the Discovery Initiative and the Memorial Fund, but also on what happened within the environment.

Recently, the Memorial Fund’s Board of Trustees was presented with brief analysis of progress of several measures related to early care and education.<sup>4</sup> Key points from this material highlight the continuing need for investment in this area:

- “Infant and toddler spaces are in very short supply throughout the state. Lower income municipalities --including the largest cities and the very small, rural towns -- have even fewer slots available than reflected in the statewide rate. Preschool children are somewhat better accommodated. With the public funding available for School Readiness, DSS [Department of Social Services] centers and Head Start, the poorest communities have made great strides. Almost half of the center-based preschool slots in 2003 were part-time, making it more difficult for working parents to satisfy their child care needs.”

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<sup>3</sup> 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>4</sup> The data were collected and prepared by Jeff Daniels and Sue Wilson, who acknowledged the following individuals for their assistance: Cyd Oppenheimer at CT Voices for Children, David Wasch at CHEFA, Deb Flis at Connecticut Charts-A-Course Accreditation Facilitation Project, Jim Farnam at Holt, Wexler and Farnam, and research assistant Ellen Malaspina.

- Based on parent reports, the percent of children statewide participating in preschool programs increased from 76 percent in 2003 to 79 percent in 2007. About half (23 out of 49) of the Discovery communities were at or above the statewide rate, but the range in Discovery communities in preschool attendance was wide – from 48 percent to 97 percent. Young children in communities with higher family incomes consistently had higher rates of preschool participation.

Disparities in school readiness in Connecticut continue into the early grades of school. As a recent report<sup>5</sup> noted, “While every state has an achievement gap, Connecticut is one of the worst offenders. The 2005 NAEP results reveal that the Constitution State’s achievement gap at all levels, in all subjects, for all disadvantaged groups, is among the largest in the nation.”

At the same time, Connecticut is one of an increasing number of states supporting preschool education for many young children. In 1997 the Connecticut legislature established the School Readiness program to provide grants to school districts with substantial numbers of children eligible for the federal free or reduced price lunch program to fund preschool slots in accredited or approved programs for eligible children.<sup>6</sup> 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. The program is operated by the State Department of Education, in collaboration with the Connecticut Department of Social Services with state funds. Supplemental Quality Enhancement grants are available to priority school districts to improve the quality and comprehensiveness of child day care programs or school readiness programs in their communities.

Each eligible community is required to establish a School Readiness Council, appointed jointly by the chief elected official and the superintendent of schools. The council 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 family day care home provider representatives from the community who provide services to children.

From 2004 through 2007, the state expended over \$200 million in the School Readiness program, and in 2007 the program served 8,685 children throughout the state. The vast

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<sup>5</sup> “The Achievement Gap,” Issue Brief Number1, ConnCAN, July 2006.

<sup>6</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.

majority of the School Readiness funds (94 percent) are allocated to Discovery communities and 93 percent of the children served live in these communities.<sup>7</sup>

### **Initiative History**

The well-being of Connecticut's young children — with a particular emphasis on education — has been a major focus of the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund since 1993. Between 1995 and 1999, with 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. Approximately 50 communities were invited to participate in an initial funded planning process during 2002 and 2003, followed by implementation beginning in 2004. Eventually, 49 communities joined the Initiative, organizing themselves into 47 collaborative groups, with 3 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.

In December 2006, the Memorial Fund's Board of Trustees approved a plan to continue the Initiative for an additional two years (2008-2009) and to increase the level of its investment. Calling this "Positioning for Future Success," three goals were outlined for this phase of the Initiative:

- 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

The evaluation was originally designed to assess the Initiative through 2007. It has been extended to cover the additional two years. This report focuses on the Initiative in the 2004 through 2007 period.<sup>8</sup>

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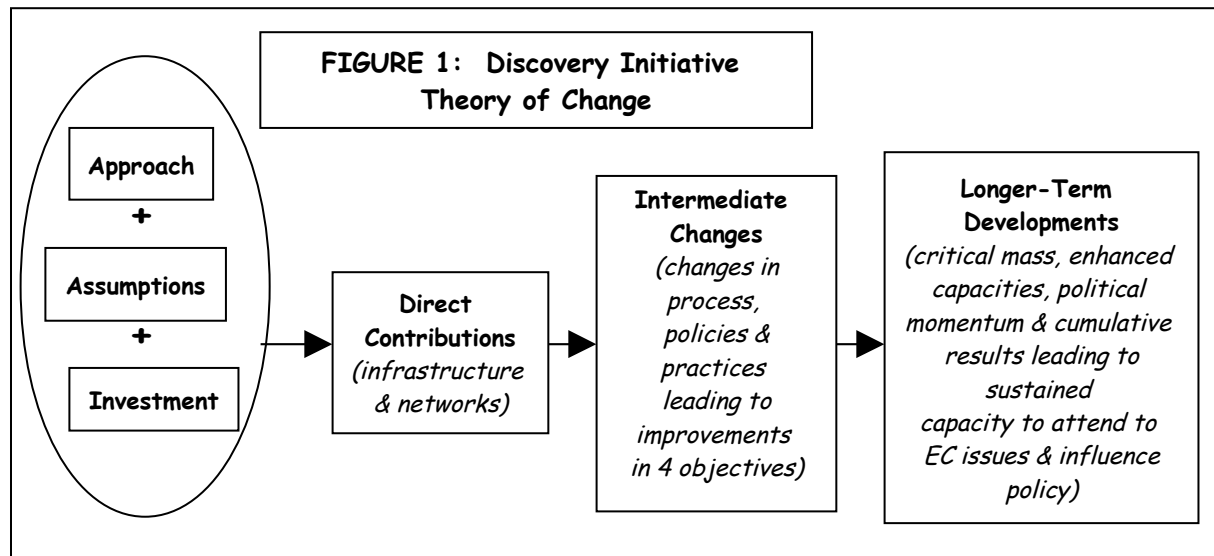
<sup>7</sup> Information compiled by Jeff Daniels and Sue Wilson – see footnote 1.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to this interim summative report and informal memos and briefings, the evaluation has produced a series of more focused reports (see Appendix 2 for a full listing).

**The Discovery Initiative Theory of Change**

The Discovery Initiative theory of change (see Figure 1 below) links what the Memorial Fund does to support the Initiative with expected changes at the community and state levels at different stages of the Initiative. The theory of change predicts 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. While the theory appears to be linear and uni-directional, the Initiative recognizes that in actuality ongoing work is needed to renew and strengthen the results at each stage.

The evaluation uses the Discovery Initiative theory of change to frame evaluation questions and to guide data collection and analysis. The focus of the evaluation is on the Initiative’s strategies and results. The Initiative intended to strengthen community and state capacities needed to make specific policy and practice changes and to sustain attention on and ability to influence policies related to early childhood over the long term.



**Overview of the Discovery Initiative Theory of Change**

The Initiative encompasses the Memorial Fund’s approach to working with its partners, the assumptions or principles that underlie the Initiative, and the specific investments made in capacity building, which include 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 Initiative theory of change, strengthened capacities and relationships will enable stakeholders to mobilize for specific intermediate changes in local and state early childhood education policies and practices.

The Initiative theory of change posits that the strengthened capacities and relationships at the community and state levels will enable stakeholders to mobilize for specific changes in local and



state early childhood education policies and practices. The specific policy and practice changes at the community and state levels are then expected to contribute to cumulative benefits for young children, a critical mass of advocates and engaged constituencies (including parents), enhanced organizational capacities and individual skills among those stakeholders, and political momentum and champions. These factors will contribute to the longer-term development of the capacity to maintain and build political momentum and continue the development and expansion of policies in support of early childhood issues in Connecticut.

### **The Discovery Initiative Approach, Assumptions, and Investment**

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

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>9</sup>

The **assumptions** of the Discovery Initiative underlie choices of intervention strategies and capacity-building supports. They reflect beliefs about what it takes to:

- Engage diverse voices and bring partners together
- Develop community and state capacities necessary to make changes in early childhood policies and practices
- Sustain attention on early childhood issues and continue to influence policy

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.

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<sup>9</sup> The Memorial Fund has commissioned a project to capture stories that illustrate its values and how they are manifested in its approaches.

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- 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 **capacity-building** will enable communities and state-wide organizations to be responsive to emerging needs, opportunities, and conditions.
  - Capacity building will help enable individuals and groups to work together to make early childhood a priority.
  - Capacity building will help 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.
  - Capacity building will develop the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to craft and implement effective policies and practices.
  - Capacity building will increase attention to and broad support for changes in early childhood policies and practices.

The Memorial Fund has made substantial **investments** 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.

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

The Initiative 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 pursue policy and practice change.

The Initiative 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 further the capacities 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).

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

According to the Discovery Initiative theory of change, the capacities and relationships at the community and state levels that are expected to be strengthened through the Initiative will enable stakeholders to mobilize for specific changes in local and state policies and practices. These expected intermediate changes would occur in how decisions affecting young children and their families are made, in early childhood programs and services, and in local and state policies that affect the four Discovery objectives.

### **Longer-Term Developments**

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According to the Initiative 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 contribute to the longer-term development of capacities to maintain and build political momentum in support of early childhood issues in Connecticut.

### **Organization of the Interim Report**

As noted above, this interim report focuses on two questions, is the Initiative “on track” in the key elements of the Discovery theory of change?, and how have these elements contributed to the objectives and long-term goal of the Initiative? The key elements were:

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

The next chapter summarizes observations about progress on the Discovery objectives and capacity to influence policy through 2007. The following chapters examine four elements of the Discovery Initiative theory of change. The report ends with a summary of the key points. Appendix 1 provides detail on the evaluation’s data collection methods and the measures used in this report.

**WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE THROUGH 2007 ABOUT PROGRESS  
ON THE OBJECTIVES AND DEVELOPMENT OF LONGER-TERM CAPACITY TO  
INFLUENCE POLICY AT THE COMMUNITY AND STATE LEVELS?**

*In West Hartford, because of Discovery we opened two new preschools and added full-day and I think it was a direct effect of the organizing efforts of Discovery. We got a little money from the state and came up with local dollars to do this. I love the way [Discovery in West Hartford] did it...grass tops and grass roots. There were Town Council, Board of Education, parents and residents involved in Community Conversation. There were even high school students there. It is sort of a way to think in terms of universality.*

*Connecticut Legislator, 2007 Stakeholder Interviews*

**What does “progress on the objectives and longer-term capacity to influence policy” mean in the Initiative?**

The Memorial Fund set out four specific objectives 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 the Initiative to support sustained community and statewide focus on early childhood issues and the capacity to influence policy on behalf of young children at the local and state levels.

The Discovery Initiative theory of change predicts 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 Cabinet, the Discovery Initiative’s grants and capacity-building are expected to promote:

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

**How has the Memorial Fund supported progress on the objectives and longer-term capacity to influence policy?**

The community collaborative groups were asked to identify which of the four Discovery objectives they had selected to be their focus and to develop annual plans for actions designed to contribute toward 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>10</sup> Communities were given technical assistance to do local needs assessments during the Initiative'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.

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 coordinated collective voice of communities, and engaging a sufficient number ("critical mass") of Connecticut communities with experience of local efforts and success in early childhood issues to build momentum for change in early care state-wide and at the state-level. 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>11</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.

Communities were also provided with information about advocacy with elected officials especially at the state level. An orientation to advocacy was held in 2006 and an Advocacy Toolkit produced by the Early Childhood Alliance in 2007. Parent Power and the Alliance organized two Advocacy Camps, weekend trainings intended to "empower, engage and mobilize parents across the state to act on behalf of children." Parent Power also organized three "parent field trips" to the state capital where parents met with their legislators on early care issues and attended public hearings and committee sessions.

With support from the Memorial Fund, Connecticut Voices for Children 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. The Early Childhood Alliance and Parent Power focused on engaging

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<sup>10</sup> During 2008, the Memorial Fund funded Sue Wilson to develop standard community-specific Early Childhood Community profiles; these profiles were made available on the Discovery website ([http://stage.discovery.wcgmf.org/profiles/profile\\_1.pdf](http://stage.discovery.wcgmf.org/profiles/profile_1.pdf)). 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.

<sup>11</sup> In another instance, a Discovery collaborative formed between two communities at the beginning of the Initiative soon decided to separate and organize independently.

stakeholders and organizing advocacy events.<sup>12</sup> By the end of 2007, these four grantee organizations became the core of the Discovery Initiative's statewide strategy.

**What would “being on track” look like with regard to progress on the objectives and longer-term capacity to influence policy?**

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. 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. The quotation at the beginning of this chapter illustrates this. At the same time, it may be early to expect all communities to be able to realize results at this level.

It also appears early to expect many of the Discovery communities to be ready to engage in cross-community and state-level work. Many of the Discovery collaborative groups were quite limited in their collaborative structure and functioning when the Initiative's implementation period began in 2004. Much of their efforts during the first years of the Initiative were to build and strengthen their local group and begin to work on and impact local issues. In addition, in the early years of the Initiative, the statewide advocacy organizations were not fully prepared to engage the communities in state-level work or to support local advocacy work.

**What is the evaluation's assessment of progress on the objectives and capacity to influence policy at the community and state level through 2007?**

***Through 2007, almost all of the Discovery collaborative groups were able to report some level of improvement within their communities on one or more of the four objectives, and to identify ways in which the work of Discovery had contributed to those improvements.***

The improvements most often mentioned by communities were increases in the supply and quality of early education opportunities and strengthening of connections between early education providers and the K-12 school system. Between 70 and 80 percent of communities mentioned progress on these objectives. Improvements in children's social-emotional development or early school success were noted in about 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 collaborative groups were believed to have contributed to these improvements through a variety of local strategies. The most common of these strategies were:

<sup>12</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.

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- Providing information and data, such as identifying training needs of early childhood professionals; developing and administering a parent survey; creating a map for the local school district of neighborhoods in which children typically did not have preschool experience; and providing data on taxpayer views of full-day kindergarten.
- Facilitating planning and collaboration within the community, such as promoting and supporting the development of an early childhood community plan; and acting as a hub for information exchange and partnership development among community agencies.
- Promoting and supporting program and practice changes, such as sponsoring early childhood provider training; and bringing together early childhood providers with kindergarten teachers to share curriculum and teaching practices.
- Advocating for school district policy change, such as promoting the adoption of kindergarten transition practices; mobilizing voters to support full-day kindergarten; and advocating for an early childhood specialist position with the school district.

***By 2007, some cross-community or regional work was being organized, but less than one-third of the Discovery communities were involved and most of the work was programmatic in nature. About half of the Discovery collaborative groups had the capacity and community support to begin more comprehensive local planning around the needs of young children in 2008.-***

Less than one-third (30 percent) of the Discovery communities requested funding to carry out activities with other communities in their region. Five of the six regional grants awarded were to take advantage of economies of scale in providing parent leadership training or professional development for early education providers and kindergarten teachers. One of the six regional grants was focused on cross-community mobilization and policy advocacy

About half (51 percent or 24) of the Discovery collaborative groups applied for and were awarded partnership grants to begin comprehensive local planning. These grants were the result of an offer by the Memorial Fund to match state funding to support community planning to increase the capacity of communities to take advantage of increased investment in the state-funded School Readiness Program as well as to mobilize local and other resources on behalf of young children's health, development, and school success. In 2007, the Connecticut General Assembly authorized a partnership grant program to support communities in developing comprehensive local plans to respond to the needs of young children. Communities were encouraged to assess their readiness before applying for these grants. Readiness factors included community engagement, political and other leadership, and resources.

Therefore, by 2007, 60 percent of the 49 Discovery communities were engaged in either regional projects or in community-wide planning, or in eight communities, in both. These efforts took the work outside the bounds of a small group to the larger community and beyond. Community reports of improvement on the Discovery objectives were not correlated with community participation in regional or state work nor with receipt of regional or state partnership grants.

***Community demographic characteristics and experience in collaboration were factors in community readiness to engage in broader work on early childhood planning in their community, but not in their participation in projects with other communities in their region.***

Communities with longer collaborative experience<sup>13</sup> were more likely to consider themselves ready to engage in broader community planning on early childhood issues, compared to less experienced communities. All but one of the seven Children First Initiative (CFI) communities applied for and received partnership planning grants, as did all nine of the communities rated as having stronger collaborative infrastructure and experience in 2004 (six of which were CFI communities). This compared with 43 percent of the non-CFI communities and 39 percent of the communities beginning the Discovery Initiative with less collaborative experience. These characteristics were not associated with whether communities participated in a regional grant. The nature of the regional projects – focused on programmatic more than policy activities – may not require a high level of collaborative experience. At the same time, these kinds of projects – both locally and regionally – may be stepping stones for collaborative groups in developing the broader engagement and support needed to spearhead community planning.

Community demographic factors were also strongly associated with whether a community applied for and received a partnership grant. The more populous Discovery communities, those with larger populations of color, and those designated as priority school districts based on the percent of low income school children were all more likely to have applied for and received a partnership grant (Pearson coefficients ranging from .5 to .6). These characteristics themselves are highly intercorrelated (Pearson coefficients ranging from .6 to .75). These communities receive larger School Readiness grants. School Readiness grants provide administrative support for the local Council, building collaborative infrastructure in addition to the Discovery collaborative group and making early childhood education a larger presence in the community. More urban communities have more local government and school district staff that can apply for and contribute to projects like the community planning grants, than smaller communities. More of these communities, compared to smaller ones, are likely to have a local foundation or a large business that can contribute funding and other resources to support community planning work.

***Through 2007, political support in Connecticut for early childhood issues grew, with credit given to the sustained work of the Memorial Fund in laying the foundation for action spearheaded by the Governor and Legislature. However, the apparent gains were not fully realized.***

<sup>13</sup> Three cohorts of communities were defined based on assessment of the level of collaborative infrastructure and experience at the beginning of the implementation phase of the Initiative in 2004. The cohorts were expected to need different types of technical assistance and were convened together for a number of capacity-building events. The levels were defined to reflect how well the Discovery collaboratives were organized to work on behalf of all young children, the extent to which the collaboratives were taking actions that will improve how young children fare in their communities, and the extent to which changes in policies and practices were observed. Of the 49 collaborative groups formed from the 49 participating communities, 24 (51 percent) were assigned to first (starting) level indicating that there was limited collaborative structure and activity, 14 (30 percent) were assigned to the middle level, and 9 (19 percent) were at the top level. Five of the seven communities that had participated in the Children First Initiative were assigned to the top level, and one each to the middle and starting levels.



State-level stakeholders from various sectors 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. At the same time, stakeholders acknowledged the Memorial Fund's long-standing work on early childhood as a major factor as well.

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. In a letter to State of Connecticut policymakers, the Memorial Fund challenged the state that it would match funds for local strategic planning to support the expansion of a high quality system of early care and education. The state allocated funds to the Cabinet for this purpose. In the same letter, the Memorial fund offered to match new state investments in parent leadership 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. In the Governor's proposed state budget, funding for the Parent Trust Fund had been eliminated. The Memorial Fund's offer to match state investment not only ensured that existing programs continued, but added to the scale of those programs.

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 in new state funding for early childhood education of \$56.2 million. These funds authorized for the School Readiness program were expected to create 2,000 to 2,400 new slots in 2008 and 2009.

However, the apparent gains from the 2007 sessions were not fully realized. During the 2008 legislative session, there was a change made to the school readiness funding formula so that the allocation of funds was based on the actual number of slots available in each priority district rather than the estimated need for slots in the district. Even with this change, the Connecticut State Department of Education chose not to spend the full \$15 million allocated for preschool expansion. Instead, the Department allocated \$7 million for expansion of 1,000 new slots for the 2008 school year. Though this is a positive step, it is half the expected expansion.

**What is the evaluation's overall assessment of progress on the objectives and development of capacity to influence policy through 2007?**

Many of the Discovery collaborative groups, particularly those in communities that had invested in parent leadership training, were able to report some improvements in their community's early care and education services by 2007. In general, these improvements were too recent and too small in scope and scale to result in major changes in children's experiences and outcomes. However, thirty of the 47 collaborative groups were engaged in either regional projects or in community-wide planning, or in eight communities, in both. These efforts take the work outside the bounds of a small group to the larger community and beyond. Building a strong collaborative infrastructure and gaining experience in collaboration locally were factors in community readiness to engage in broader work in their community and with other communities in their region.

During the Discovery Initiative covered by the evaluation thus far, Connecticut was enjoying a period of strong political support for early childhood issues that resulted in a major "win" during the 2007 legislative session. The statewide organizations supported by the Memorial Fund played a major role in promoting increased state investment in early care and education

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services, and the Memorial Fund leveraged state resources for parent leadership development and community planning.

**WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE THROUGH 2007 ABOUT THE USE AND VALUE OF THE INITIATIVE'S CAPACITY-BUILDING SUPPORTS FOR COMMUNITIES AND STATEWIDE ORGANIZATIONS?**

*One thing I admire is that the Memorial Fund is willing to bring in people on any topic that is valuable to us. I don't know of any other initiative that has been supportive in that manner.*

*Discovery Community Collaborative Chair, 2007 Interview*

*I couldn't ask for a funding partner to do more or in a better way. David Nee convened the community foundations for us to present to and made the pitch for a statewide collaborative funding pool. When we have a glitch, he supports us and works with other funders. I have never had a funding partner like this before.*

*Statewide grantee organization, 2006 Interview*

**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 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 focus on early childhood issues and continue to make improvements over time. "Capacity building" is the general term used to describe process of developing and sustaining these abilities. It is the strategy used by the Memorial Fund in the Discovery Initiative to support this process among the Discovery community grantees, statewide and regional grantee organizations, and statewide entities such as the Early Childhood Education Cabinet and the Research and Policy Council.

**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 technical assistance resources focused on building collaboration, encouraging parent engagement, and promoting community change. The Memorial Fund also provided support (in addition to grants) to a group of statewide and regional grantee organizations, intended to build their internal capacities and promote coordination and collaboration as well as to support specific activities. 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.

**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

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services or run programs, rather than invest the funds in building their capacity to mobilize public support and develop sustainable plans to invest in young children. It took guidance and incentives from outside the community, and leadership, vision, and experience from within the community for such groups to move from a focus on developing and implementing specific programs or activities toward a role as a catalyst for mobilizing community resources and actions to improve the early experiences of all the community's children.

Since the Discovery 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 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>14</sup> that the Memorial Fund sponsored 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

Technical assistance included information and skill-building. Most technical assistance was delivered through meetings or workshops at which communities were introduced to a topic and to available resources. These workshops were 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>15</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>16</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 the collaborative group's activities; and provided feedback to the community on strategies, progress and

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<sup>14</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>15</sup> See footnote 14 above.

<sup>16</sup> Early in the Initiative, 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.

challenges. In addition, the liaisons participated in identifying community capacity-building needs and developing technical assistance strategies.

Communities were also provided specific peer learning opportunities through the annual conference, a listserv, and support for cross-site visits. 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**

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

The Initiative design included less specific technical assistance for statewide and regional grantees than for Discovery communities. However, Memorial Fund staff worked closely with the statewide and regional 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. Over the course of the Initiative, statewide and regional grantee organizations were also provided with additional funding for evaluation, technology upgrades, staff training and networking opportunities.

Where the Memorial Fund saw a gap in state-level capacity, it looked for opportunities to foster that capacity and provided “incubator” support. For example, Connecticut Parent Power began as a group of Children First communities that wanted to look at ways to engage parents across the state. The Memorial Fund provided technical assistance support and seed funding for the nascent organization. Recognizing a need for a unified voice among the early childhood advocates, the Memorial Fund provided support for the Early Childhood Alliance and ongoing funding as the Alliance defined its role. The Memorial Fund brought the Community Conversations model to Connecticut and supported its implementation through the Connecticut League of Women Voters, in recognition for the need to foster community level dialog around issues that can divide communities. Connecticut Voices for Children began working on policy research in the early childhood field at the request of the Memorial Fund.

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. The decision was made to provide individualized technical assistance to these organizations to work on both organization capacity building and cross-organization collaboration among themselves. Since 2007, technical assistance to these organizations, provided by an outside consultant, has fallen into the following categories:

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- Communications
- Strategic planning
- Organizational development
- Governance
- Diversity of fund development
- Community engagement
- Board and staff diversity

In addition to supporting these statewide and regional organizations, the Memorial Fund provided leadership to other state entities. Since its formation in 2006, 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 to state investments through legislative action in parent leadership training and community planning grants to communities.

### **What would "being on track" look like in terms of 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 the Initiative with a history of collaborative activity and parent engagement around early childhood issues. Because more than half (51 percent) of the communities were rated as having little or no collaborative infrastructure or experience when the Initiative'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.

The Memorial Fund has been explicit in including state-level policy research and advocacy in its strategies since its founding. However, until the Discovery Initiative was being planned, the foundation did not begin to articulate specific expectations about the importance of coordinated agendas and actions among organizations working on early childhood issues at the state-level. Early on in the Initiative, grantees were provided with opportunities to build their organizational capacities to work on those issues and to begin to see each other as being in more complementary than competitive relationships. Increasingly, the understanding by the Memorial Fund and by the grantee organizations has been that a shared agenda and a common voice are needed to be effective in increasing broad support and public investment in early childhood education.

Further, as with communities, the Memorial Fund believed that funding and technical assistance would be necessary to build this collaboration and realize these results. Based on the internal capacities and extent of communication and collaboration among the statewide and regional grantee organizations at the beginning of the Initiative, and the nature of the supports provided by the Memorial Fund, it would be reasonable to expect to see greater internal capacity to

advocate on behalf of young children and more coordinated joint work and the development of a common agenda for this work by the end of 2007. The Memorial Fund's messages to the statewide and regional organizations, particularly the four core advocacy organizations, about supporting work in communities and engaging communities in state advocacy became clearer during the 2004-2007 period. Therefore, these organizations would be expected to have begun to working with at least some Discovery communities by 2007.

**What is the evaluation's assessment of the use and value of capacity-building supports through 2007?**

***While communities valued opportunities to learn through relationships with their community liaison and from their peers, the technical assistance workshops offered were considered less helpful.***

In interviews conducted in the summer of 2007, every community coordinator reported being aware of the capacity-building workshops and peer exchange sessions that were offered and this information was generally shared widely within the collaborative, through announcements at collaborative meetings and circulation via e-mail. Most (in 2006, all but three) collaborative groups reported sending representatives, typically the coordinator, to training sessions and meetings.

On average, communities found the technical workshops and trainings to be of little value, based on assessments provided for those offered in 2006. On a scale from zero (the community did not use the capacity-building support or found it of no value) to 3 (the community used the support and found it of great value), the average Discovery community attended the technical assistance workshops and trainings offered in 2006 but found them of little value (the mean value was 1.0, and of the 93 percent who attended at least some of the sessions, 53 percent found them of little value).

Comments from interviews with both community coordinators and liaisons suggest that the value that the coordinator assigned to these sessions depended on whether or not it was about something that was part of their immediate or imminent work. This suggests that it is a challenge to provide relevant and immediately applicable information and tools to many communities simultaneously. Some strategies appear to be more successful in this regard than others. Single session, group workshops are of interest to communities, but applying what is learned is affected by the topic's relevance to what the community is working on at the time and the amount of follow-up support available. On the other hand, multi-session institutes that engage community teams have been of greater value to communities. The institutes offered in 2006 and 2007 on kindergarten transition planning were reported to very helpful to work in the participating communities. The characteristics of these institutes that were most valued included the requirement that a team from the community participates 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.

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 overall. Peer discussions at the annual conference, meetings with smaller groups of communities, and

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participation in peer exchange visits were rated, on average, at 1.6 – indicating that these experiences were of moderate value. Communities valued the opportunity to share experiences with their peers and get a sense of how they were approaching the work and dealing with challenges.

Support from the community liaison was given an average rating of 2.5, between moderate and great value, indicating that this form of technical assistance was of more value, on average, than other forms of support. 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. One coordinator, in describing the role of the community liaison said, *“She is a huge support system for me. She offers guidance and the Memorial Fund is always in the room in a good way. They are never far away if there is a problem.”* In addition, liaisons have often encouraged and supported peer learning by sharing what they know about the other communities with which they work.

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. Most community coordinators (88 percent) were members of the Discovery listserv set up to facilitate communication and exchange of information among communities. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) reported ways in which the listserv had been helpful to their work.

Communities that used and valued one type of capacity-building, generally took advantage of and found value in the overall capacity-building strategy. For example, communities reporting higher use of the listserv and website also reported participating more in and getting more value from face-to-face peer exchange opportunities (Pearson correlation coefficient of .35)<sup>17</sup>. Communities reporting greater value from peer meetings also reported that the technical assistance and training sessions were more helpful (Pearson correlation coefficient of .33). Communities that reported greater value from activities of their liaison also made more use of electronic means of communication (Pearson correlation coefficient of .40) and distributed materials from the technical assistance sessions more broadly (Pearson correlation coefficient of .33). It should also be noted that the value coordinators placed on their liaison's support was not related to how many hours of liaison time they received.

***Community use and value of capacity building supports were greater among the collaborative groups with a robust organizational structure and capacity.***

<sup>17</sup> Pearson correlation coefficients represent the degree to which one variable co-varies with another. The range of these coefficients is from +1.0 (indicating that the values on each variable are perfectly aligned so that the highest value on one variable and the highest value on the other variable are found in the same case – individual, organization, or community, and so on through all values of both variables) to -1.0 (indicating that the values on each variable are arrayed in exact opposite order so that the highest value on one variable and the lowest value on the other variable are found in the same case, and so on). A correlation coefficient of 0 (zero) indicates that the values of two variables are randomly associated with each other, so that the value of one variable for a case is completely independent and cannot be predicted from the value of the other variable for that case. The statistical significance of these coefficients depends on the number of cases and the variation among the cases in the distribution of values of the two variables together. In social science research, a statistically significant correlation coefficient of +/- .3 or greater may be considered meaningful, while correlation coefficients of +/- .7 or greater are considered very high.



Communities that reported receiving more value from the capacity-building workshops also had higher ratings from their liaison on collaborative functioning (Pearson correlation coefficient of .33). Communities that reported value from the workshops also had more stakeholder groups represented on the Discovery collaborative (another marker of collaborative strength) (Pearson correlation coefficient of .46) and were less likely to carry over substantial grant funds into 2007 from prior year grants. All of these measures – liaison rating, number of stakeholder groups, and use of grant funds – were assumed to represent dimensions of collaborative group structure and functioning. All were associated with greater use and value of technical assistance workshops.

This relationship suggests that there may be a minimum level of collaborative organization and capacity necessary to make good use of technical assistance, and/or that the supports were helpful in strengthening the collaborative group. Collaborative groups that took advantage of and valued the overall capacity building strategy may have had greater internal capacity to attend (perhaps even send more than one member); bring back materials and “re-present” to the larger collaborative group; and integrate the skills and concepts into their work. At the same time, collaborative groups that participated in the workshops may have made use of the information and tools to further strengthen their structure, expand their membership, and improve their functioning. In fact, this relationship is likely to be reciprocal in many communities.

***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.***

The statewide and regional grantees reported a constellation of supports received from the Memorial Fund beyond funding that have been critical to their work. Half reported that Memorial Fund staff had convened funders to hear about their work or helped them to make contact with funders. These connections led to additional funding for the grantee on several occasions. One grantee received funds from 5 community foundations across the state that the grantee directly attributed to Memorial Fund efforts. Grantees also recognize and appreciate the Memorial Fund’s efforts to create a statewide collaborative funding pool.

Additionally, grantees noted that they benefited greatly from the Memorial Fund staff’s advice, knowledge and insight and knowledge of the field. The Memorial Fund’s willingness to share contacts provided access to individuals and institutions that grantees felt they could not have gained access to otherwise. Twelve of the fourteen grantees interviewed commented on the Memorial Fund’s efforts to encourage contacts and relationships with other organizations, including state agencies and school districts. The attendance of the Memorial Fund’s Executive Director David Nee at key meetings was seen as lending credibility and visibility to grantee efforts. In general, grantees felt that their connection to the Memorial Fund increased the visibility of their work.

One of the key roles that grantees ascribed to the Memorial Fund was that of “convener.” Grantees appreciated the opportunity to come together with “unlikely conversationalists” who are very committed and knowledgeable about the issues and saw these convenings as an opportunity to “make interesting connections.” Even when not attending meetings organized by the Memorial Fund, more than half of the grantees interviewed reported that they have used the Memorial Fund offices to hold meetings, events and workshops and one saw it as “a hub for

nonprofit childcare related things.”

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. The two newest organizations, Connecticut Parent Power and the Early Childhood Alliance, used that support to work on internal organizational capacity to a much greater degree than the other two organizations. Both organizations used the technical assistance to work on governance and planning. The Alliance focused on hiring an executive director, developing its membership structure, addressing fiscal issues, and developing a communications campaign proposal. Parent Power focused on creating a governance structure to ensure that parents are driving the work of the organization and engaging in strategic planning. All of the four organizations used the technical assistance offered to develop collaborative projects.

**What is the evaluation’s assessment of the contribution of the Initiatives’ capacity-building strategies through 2007?**

***There is evidence that community and statewide and regional grantee's internal capacity to act as catalytic agents for change has increased. However, for both, the impact of this capacity on early childhood issues in the state remains to be seen.***

Through 2007, there was an association between community use of the Initiative’s capacity building supports and the strength and functioning of the Discovery collaborative group, as noted above. However, community support for the Discovery work and for early childhood issues was not higher when the Initiative’s capacity-building supports were reported to be used and applied. The level of community support was determined by looking at support from the collaborative agent, championship from local leaders, and local contributions, cash and in-kind, to the Discovery budget. The evaluation found no correlation between use and value of technical assistance workshops, peer exchange opportunities, or the community liaison and community support for the work of Discovery. Reported use and value of the technical assistance was also not correlated with community reports of progress on the four objectives, nor with participation in the regional work or community planning projects. Given the focus of capacity-building during the 2004-2007 period and the limited collaborative capacity in most communities at the beginning of that period, the Initiative’s investment in community capacity-building appeared to have contributed to laying a foundation in the collaborative group, but not yet to have contributed to community change.

Similarly, though parent leadership and training was a key area of technical assistance sponsored by the Memorial Fund, use and value of the Discovery capacity-building supports generally was not correlated with the level of support of parent leadership in the community. Collaboratives that used and valued the capacity building supports were not more likely to support parent engagement and leadership nor was the community more likely to offer formal parent leadership training.

Most of the fourteen statewide and regional grantee organizations interviewed at the end of 2006 were able to identify a way in which their organizational capacity had increased, including:

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- increased staff, adding staff with critical skill sets and expertise and/or enhance the skills of existing staff
- improved technological capacity
- increased funding and connections to potential funders
- stronger relationships with other organizations and entities with a stake in early childhood

Toward the end of the 2004-2007 period, the Memorial Fund shifted its strategy with regard to the statewide grantees, providing formal technical assistance to four key statewide organizations in 2007, then offering additional funds for joint work and a communications campaign. External stakeholders saw these four organizations as a key capacity in the state and noted that they had contributed to 2007 legislative action expanding state investment in early childhood education. Still, as of 2007, their ability to mobilize parents and communities was limited, and external stakeholders did not see a cohesive vision and strategy among early childhood advocates.

### **What is the evaluation's overall assessment of capacity building in the Discovery Initiative through 2007?**

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 electronic communications vehicle to access information, individual workshops appeared to be less helpful. It was challenging to use these workshops to provide relevant and immediately applicable information and tools to many communities simultaneously. While the workshops were generally attended by someone from most communities, applying the information provided was affected by relevance to what the community was working on at the time and the amount of follow-up support available. On the other hand, learning from the community liaison and to some extent from peers was of more immediate value to the collaborative group's work. Communities could decide when to follow-up with peers and, through their regular contact with their assigned communities, liaisons could identify appropriate times to offer information and resources.

Communities that received value from Discovery technical assistance and training sessions had collaborative groups that were broader in their membership and had stronger collaborative structure and leadership. These communities, and those that found the work of their liaison helpful, also were more likely to have used the bulk of their prior Memorial Fund grants, indicating that they had been better able to implement their action plans. This relationship suggests that there may be a minimum level of collaborative organization and capacity necessary to make good use of technical assistance, and/or that the supports were helpful in strengthening the collaborative group. However, collaborative use of capacity-building opportunities was not associated with broader community supports, with reported progress on results, or with community planning, at least through 2007.

Grant funding and staff support were important to moving some statewide organizations toward greater focus on and effectiveness in advocacy on early childhood issues. Providing a smaller set of statewide 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 statewide organizations that now form the core of

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the Memorial Fund's statewide strategy were viewed as a key capacity in the state by stakeholders. Together, they provided a strong base of data and policy research that was relied upon by other grantees, state departments and political leaders. Still, as of 2007, their ability to mobilize parents and communities was limited, and some concerns remained about their consensus on a clear vision for the work.

**WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE THROUGH 2007 ABOUT PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP AT THE COMMUNITY AND STATE LEVELS?**

*Anne and Thai Nguyen took the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) course offered by Danbury Children First in 2000, which spurred their actions in a couple of directions. Thai ran for a seat on the Board of Education. He didn't get elected but it reinforced his understanding of how government works, a key lesson of the PLTI training. He began volunteering for the middle school Math Counts club. His wife started a Vietnamese cultural program that's been offered through the years in the community and their children also became community volunteers. "I think the program is excellent, especially for parents. It awakens a new view of how to see things, not just to look to your family but to have a bigger view that correlates to the community," Thai said. "You need parents to change things and you can't do it alone. You need the voice of the community, it's more powerful than one voice."*

*Adapted from an article By Eileen FitzGerald, Staff Writer for the Danbury News Times*

**What does "parent engagement and leadership" mean in the 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>18</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.

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<sup>18</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."

**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. When the Parent Trust Fund was established in 2001 through the efforts of CFI and PLTI communities and the Connecticut Commission on Children to provide a vehicle to funnel a mix of public and private funds to communities for quality parent leadership training, the Memorial Fund seized the opportunity to support this effort and became the first Connecticut foundation to contribute funding. 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. The Memorial Fund provided financial support, first to Danbury CFI, then to Meriden CFI to foster and launch Parent Power, then later to support its work with parents.

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.

When state support of the Parent Trust Fund was in jeopardy during the 2007 legislative session, the Memorial Fund encouraged continuation of public support for parent leadership training. It proposed to match any new state investments in parent leadership 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.

**What would "being on track" look like with regard to parent engagement and leadership?**

The Discovery community collaborative groups and statewide parent organizations were expected to be the vehicles for promoting parent engagement and ensuring that there are ongoing supports for the development of leadership skills among parents. The Discovery community collaboratives were intended to provide one way in which parents could have a strong role in influencing local policies and practices affecting young children as members and leaders on the collaborative group. Therefore, "being on track" would mean 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.

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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 collaboratives 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.

The matching funds provided by the Memorial Fund to the Parent Trust Fund were intended to make it possible for communities to offer high quality leadership training, build up a cadre of parent leaders, and give them experience in taking community leadership roles. Funding to support parent leadership training has been limited and implementing training programs required both local matching funds and logistical support. Even so, a reasonable expectation is that by 2007 many, if not most, of the Discovery communities would have provided parent leadership training.

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 were modest.

### **What is the evaluation’s assessment of the implementation of parent engagement and leadership in the Discovery Initiative through 2007?**

***While almost universally acknowledged as an important goal and thriving in some communities, implementation of parent engagement and leadership was generally modest in many communities and at the state level.***

Building a parent-led collaborative and engaging large numbers of parents often required a deliberate strategy and allocation of resources. This is illustrated by this quote from one community application for a 2008-2009 grant:

“When the original Discovery group...initiated the...Council in 2003, its intent was to develop a group that was largely composed of and led by parents, who would gradually take responsibility for the Discovery work. This effort was highly successful, largely due to the efforts of the coordinator hired to reach out to the community and engage parents in this effort. Today, parents make up the majority the Council’s membership, hold most of the organization’s offices, and are the major decision-makers.”

A more typical experience was expressed in this message on the Discovery listserv in response to another community’s request for information on ways to increase parent membership: “We are constantly trying to increase our collaborative membership with more parents. It is difficult!” This experience echoed findings from an assessment of the Initiative’s planning period: “The Discovery grant has not designated any specific group of parents or children to be special targets of early childhood programming generated out of the initiative. However, professional participants in several communities expressed concern that they were not reaching “the right parents.” This concern was backed up by comments to the effect that the parents who became active in the collaborative were the parents who are already engaged in their children’s education and their communities, and therefore, not the ones who needed early childhood programming the most. There was almost unanimous agreement in all sites that the demographic and economic diversification of their communities was an issue that needed to be considered in recruiting parents to join the collaboratives.<sup>19</sup>

The Discovery communities had engaged parents as members and offered them leadership opportunities on the collaborative groups in many cases, but almost two-thirds of the groups had few parent members or leaders. Thirty percent of the collaborative groups in 2007 had parents as 10 percent or less of their membership, and another 33 percent had between 11 and 20 percent parent members. Just over half (57 percent) of all collaborative groups had parents in leadership roles, such as collaborative chair, member of the steering committee, or chair of a committee. Overall, the community liaisons rated more than half (56 percent) of the collaborative groups as providing support for parent members and opportunities for parent leadership as less than good, and almost one-quarter (23 percent) as less than minimally adequate.

While almost all (44 of the 47) Discovery collaboratives supported activities and events to provide parents with access to information on community resources, many fewer (25 percent) reported examples of parents taking leadership roles in the community. Further, just over half (51 percent) of the Discovery communities had offered none of the statewide parent leadership training programs between 2002 and 2007. The communities that had offered any training program did so only occasionally, in about one-quarter of the possible years in which the three programs were available.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</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.

<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that the data available for this report are only for three statewide parent leadership training programs – Parent Leadership Training Institute, People Empowering People, and Parents Supporting Excellence in Education. There are “home-grown” and other parent leadership training programs that were implemented in some Discovery communities during the same period.



In 2005, with funding support from the Memorial Fund, Connecticut Parent Power hired an Executive Director with a strong community organizing background and a proven track record in bringing people together around early care and education issues. In the following two years, Parent Power became much more active in supporting community mobilization and advocacy. It initiated a plan to train communities in conducting one-on-one listening campaigns and worked with the Alliance to deliver advocacy training and advocacy camps for community representatives. As of the fall of 2007, Connecticut Parent Power had delegates from 5 Discovery communities,<sup>21</sup> and 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, delivered along with 5,000 pictures from young children.

***Parent participation on the collaborative and parent leadership programs were distinct aspects of work on parent engagement in the Discovery communities. Progress on one was not associated with progress on the other.***

The measures of parent participation on the Discovery collaborative group included the percent of members who were serving as parents only, not in any professional capacity; whether any of these parents had taken a leadership role in the collaborative; and the rating that the community liaison gave the collaborative in terms of how well it supported parent engagement and offered leadership opportunities. None of these measures were statistically related to the percent of possible years of parent leadership training offered in the community. This support for parent leadership training did not appear to make it easier or more likely that parents would play a substantial role in the Discovery work, nor did having parents as members and leaders on the collaborative lead to more opportunities for parents to receive training and opportunities to exercise leadership in the community.

While population size was significantly correlated with both measures of parent leadership, the nature of the relationship was different. Larger communities, perhaps because of greater local resources to help sponsor and operate parent leadership training programs, offered more of these opportunities for parent leadership training (correlation coefficient of +.64 between population size and percent of possible years of training offered).<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, parents in smaller communities, where parents may feel more comfortable joining community groups and where those groups may operate less formally, were more likely to have leadership roles on the collaborative group (correlation coefficient of - .32 between population size and whether any parents were collaborative leaders in either 2006 or 2007).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> By 2008, Parent Power had delegates from 16 communities; 15 of which are Discovery communities.

<sup>22</sup> Analysis of the relationship of the percent of possible years of parent leadership training with the three community demographic characteristics – total population size, percent of the population that was non-White, and whether the community was designated a priority school district based on having a large number of low-income families – using multiple regression resulted in overall statistical significance of all three together, with each characteristic making its own independent contribution. Larger population size and priority school district status were associated with more opportunities for parent leadership training, while percent non-white was associated with fewer such opportunities.

<sup>23</sup> Multiple regression analysis using all three community demographic characteristics in predicting parent leadership on the collaborative resulted in only population size having a statistically significant relationship.

Communities that began the Discovery Initiative with stronger collaborative groups and those that had been involved in the Children First Initiative in which parent engagement and leadership was a major tenet offered more parent leadership training opportunities between 2002 and 2007 (correlation coefficients of + .39 and + .41, respectively). CFI was credited with laying the groundwork for parent leadership, as illustrated in the following quote from a focus group conducted in a CFI community in 2007:

“Parents have created their own priorities; they feel free to take on the school board or the city council. We have seen CFI as building the infrastructure for parents – by holding parent meetings, providing a forum for parents to choose issues to work on. CFI gave parents a place from which to work their way to the top leadership.”

However, these same community factors – collaborative strength in 2004 and the CFI experience – had no significant relationship with the percent of parents serving as members or leaders on the 2007 Discovery collaborative group.

**What is the evaluation’s assessment of the contribution of parent engagement and leadership in the Discovery Initiative through 2007?**

***There was growing recognition of the critical role for parents in both community and state work on early childhood issues, but overall, by 2007, parent voices were not yet strong drivers of that work.***

While the level of parent membership and leadership on the collaborative was not statistically associated with reported progress on the Discovery objectives across all the communities, there were specific examples where parents made substantial contributions through Discovery. One example of this was described in a community’s 2008-2009 grant application:

“Parents provided leadership when School Readiness funds became available to [our community], with a very short turnaround time to submit the application. The elementary school already had a small preschool program in place and the elementary school principal at the time doubted that additional children would attend a formal program. Discovery parents not only strongly advocated with the principal and convinced him to make the application, but they also helped write sections of the application and actively recruited families so that the program was full within two months of opening.”

In communities where there was greater support for parent leadership training, improvements for young children were more often reported. The number of parent leadership training offerings in the community was significantly related to reports of progress on three of the Discovery objectives – the quality of early care and education services, the connection between early education and schools, and children’s social-emotional development and early school success. For each of these objectives, communities providing more parent leadership training opportunities also reported improvements on these three objectives. In some cases, the role that parent leaders played in contributing to these improvements was explicit (as described in the quotation in the paragraph above); in others, it may be that community interest and devotion

of resources to parent leadership comes from the same roots as community efforts to improve what happens for young children.

Experience with parent leadership training, but not parent membership and leadership on the Discovery collaborative group, played a role in preparing communities to take on broader community planning work. The correlation coefficient between the percent of possible years of parent leadership training offered and whether the community applied for and received a partnership grant to support the development of a community-wide plan for young children was +.50. One-quarter of the differences across communities in whether they took on community planning in 2008 can be understood by knowing how much the community supported parent leadership training in the 2002 through 2007 period.

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. This was the case, even though these stakeholders also noted that Connecticut Parent Power had become well organized to work on early childhood policy issues and important contributors to recent policy wins.

Other statewide and regional grantee organizations, interviewed in 2006, were encouraged by their perception of a new momentum around parent and community organizing. In Parent Power they saw a strong partner with impressive organizing capacity and organizations were aligning around this expertise to take advantage of the positive political climate for early childhood issues. 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.

### **What is the evaluation's overall assessment of parent engagement and leadership in the Discovery Initiative through 2007?**

The picture of parent engagement and leadership in the Discovery communities is mixed. The overall level of support that many Discovery collaboratives provide for parent participation and the extent of parent membership and leadership on the collaboratives were moderate in most communities. Further, many Discovery communities had not offered parent leadership training, even with the opportunity to apply for grant funds available to support such activities.

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 direct impact on children's experiences. A frequently made comment is that parents find much of the collaborative groups' work abstract and sometimes intimidating. At the same time, when asked by the Memorial Fund if the 2008-2009 period should offer communities the option of focusing on specific projects without the need to work on collaboration and parent engagement, the communities' overwhelming response was negative. The general sense was that, without the Memorial Fund's emphasis on these core values, the work would tend to become narrower in focus and in support.

On the other hand, it appears that community support for parent leadership training was more likely to create the conditions for progress for young children. It may be that increased investment in this area and greater utilization of these opportunities by communities may be

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necessary to build the kind of broad constituency support needed to sustain attention to early childhood issues at the community, and state, level.

While Connecticut Parent Power was recognized as an influential advocacy organization, the legislators interviewed reported that they did not perceive parents themselves as demanding attention to early childhood issues.

**WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE THROUGH 2007 ABOUT COLLABORATION  
AT THE COMMUNITY AND STATE LEVELS?**

*“There have been moments when – I have to confess – I’ve referred to it as group therapy,” laughs a member of Norwalk’s School Readiness Council in describing the process surrounding Norwalk’s involvement in the Discovery Initiative. “At other times can I say it was a lengthy process of building consensus.” For Norwalk, as for the other 48 Discovery sites, building consensus was essential. To encourage collaboration, the Memorial Fund accepted only one Discovery application per community; each application had to be signed by representatives of five specified groups. “Our Discovery steering committee spent much of its first year developing trust and defining a common purpose,” notes a Board of Education Member.*

*From “Minding Our Business,” a story from the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund 2001-03 Annual Report.*

**What does “collaboration” mean in the 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>24</sup> Collaboration at the community level was a principle of the Children First Initiative. In the Discovery Initiative, it 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>25</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>26</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

<sup>24</sup> From the glossary on the Discovery website.

<sup>25</sup> Both quotations are from the 2004-2007 community application instructions.

<sup>26</sup> Included in the 2004-2007 community application instructions and in the glossary on the Discovery website.

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 the Initiative evolved, Memorial Fund staff, liaisons and some statewide and regional grantees felt that statewide grantees could be more effective advocates if they were working in collaboration toward a common agenda. The Memorial Fund began convening the statewide grantee organizations on a more regular basis to give them opportunities to explore connections with each other’s work. The Memorial Fund also began talking with its four core statewide grantees about how to foster collaboration among them and with Discovery communities.

### **How has the Memorial Fund supported collaboration?**

The Memorial Fund approached communities for the Discovery Initiative in a way that encouraged the identification or formation of a group outside the usual government or non-profit institutions with the participation and support of the public sector and other community leaders. While each grantee community needed to designate an existing organization to receive the grant funds, this organization – described as the “collaborative agent” rather than “fiscal agent” – was expected to play an active role in supporting the collaborative group and in linking the group with community stakeholders and resources. In addition, the 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.

The community collaborative groups were assumed to need collaborative 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>27</sup> The Initiative 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>28</sup> (See the section on Capacity-Building for more details on the capacity-building 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 other organizations,

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<sup>27</sup> From the glossary on the Discovery website.

<sup>28</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.]

including state agencies and school districts. They saw the Memorial Fund as providing opportunities for collaboration with communities and one another. One grantee perceived an “overt, intentional effort on the part of the Memorial Fund to bring state grantees together” and believed that has helped them to maintain a sustained focus on thinking of ways to work together. Technical assistance offered in this area was viewed as helpful and useful.

In late 2006, the Memorial Fund began supporting focused technical assistance to build the internal capacity of four of its “core” statewide organizations, Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS), Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance (the Alliance), Connecticut Parent Power (Parent Power), and Connecticut Voices for Children (Voices).<sup>29</sup> These organizations also received technical assistance to develop joint work, which was in funded in 2008-2009.

**What would “being on track” 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>30</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.

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<sup>29</sup> In the fall of 2006, the evaluation was focused on a group of 14 statewide and regional grantees whose work was considered by Memorial Fund staff to be integral to the Discovery Theory of Change and the objectives. In 2007, when the Memorial Fund focused on these four “core” grantees, the evaluation narrowed its focus to these grantees, though it will continue to collect information from the broader group as part of the stakeholder group.

<sup>30</sup> From the 2004 Community Planning and Assessment Tool, which was a self-assessment required as part of the process of developing the coming year’s action plan. While this tool was revised slightly during the Initiative, the basic dimensions and definitions have remained substantially the same.

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 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 support the capacities of specific state entities (the Governor's Early Childhood Education Cabinet and Research and 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 evaluation's assessment of collaboration in the Discovery Initiative through 2007?**

***By 2007, collaboration within communities had increased overall to a moderate level, although some collaborative groups remained loosely structured without strong member engagement or leadership.***

By 2007 Discovery collaborative groups were at a level of structure and functioning between minimal and good, on average. The combined liaison rating of community collaborative functioning, structure, and leadership ranged from 1.4 (just above "inadequate") to 3.8 (just under "ideal"). The average collaborative group's rating was 2.6, about mid-way between "minimal" and "good", with 42 percent of the collaboratives rated below that value. Just over half (51 percent) were rated between 2.6 and 3.4, leaving only 3 of the 45 communities rated close to the highest value. The liaisons' ratings of the collaborative coordinators' skills and time available for the Discovery work averaged just under "good" (2.7). Almost one-quarter (24 percent) of the collaboratives had coordinator support rated above the "good" level, while only 7 percent were rated under "minimal."

In general, the Discovery collaborative groups had engaged a substantial number of stakeholder groups and had the participation of some key public sector leaders. In 2007 the Discovery collaboratives included members from as many as 18 and as few as 4 distinct stakeholder groups within the community. On average, the number of stakeholder groups on a collaborative was 10. Thirteen percent of the collaboratives had 6 or fewer stakeholder groups among their membership, and an equivalent number had 14 or more stakeholder groups.

A large majority (79 percent) of Discovery collaboratives included the local school superintendent or his/her designee as a member in 2007. The mayor (or other chief elected official) or someone from his/her staff designated to act in her/his stead was a member of the Discovery collaborative in just under 2 in 5 communities (38 percent) in 2007. In almost all (94 percent) communities where the chief elected official was on the Discovery collaborative group, the superintendent was also. However, in more than half (54 percent) of communities where the superintendent was on the collaborative group, the chief elected official was not.



Having the chief elected official or the superintendent as a Discovery collaborative group member brought a more diverse set of stakeholders to the table. When either the mayor or the superintendent was a collaborative member, the total number of stakeholder groups represented was, by definition, larger. However, in the case of both leaders, the increase was more than a single category. Communities with the superintendent on the collaborative had an average of 4 more stakeholder groups represented, and communities with the chief elected official had 2 more stakeholder groups, than communities without the respective community leader as a member. The 9 collaboratives with neither leader averaged 7.5 different types of stakeholders represented. The 21 with one but not the other averaged 10 different types. The seven groups with both leaders on the collaborative averaged 12 different types of stakeholders represented on the collaborative.

Many Discovery collaborative groups did not make full use of their Memorial Fund grants during the grant year, suggesting that they were not sufficiently organized to implement their action plans. Almost one-quarter (22.5 percent) of the community collaboratives were carrying over grant funds from 2006 equal to or in excess of the amount of their new 2007 grant, while an equal number of the collaboratives had used all or almost all of their prior Discovery grants.<sup>31</sup> The nine Discovery communities that did not have the superintendent or designee on their 2007 Discovery collaborative group carried over grant funds equal, on average, to about 1.3 times their 2007 grant, compared with the 31 collaboratives with the superintendent as a member, which carried over only about half of the amount of their new grant.

***Developing strong and stable collaboration in communities required time to build relationships and put in place mechanisms for communication and decision-making.***

After a planning period and four years of funding and capacity-building support, many of the 47 Discovery collaborative groups appeared, based on available measures, to be organized and functioning moderately successfully, as described above. Further, between 2004 and 2007 many communities increased in level of collaborative infrastructure and functioning.<sup>32</sup> Thirty of the 45 Discovery communities with information for both years either increased or decreased in level of collaborative structure and functioning – five went down in their rating while 25 moved up (see the table below).

	Decreased Level, 2004 to 2007	Stayed at Same Level, 2004 to 2007	Increased Level, 2004 to 2007
Lowest Level in 2004	NA	N =4	N = 19

<sup>31</sup> The mean percent that carryover grant funds were of the 2007 grant amount was 73 percent and the median was 57 percent. The amount of carryover grant funds was not correlated with the Discovery collaborative group having other sources of funding for its work.

<sup>32</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.

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Middle Level in 2004	N = 2	N = 5	N = 6
Highest Level in 2004	N = 3	N = 6	NA

Even so, communities that began the Discovery Initiative in 2004 with the least collaborative experience and organization generally continued to be rated as having weaker collaborative groups. Communities in the lowest group based on the 2004 assessment, compared to communities in the middle and highest groups, were rated lower by their liaison in 2007 on collaborative infrastructure and functioning (2.5 compared with 2.8, on a scale from 1 to 4 – 2.5 representing a point mid-way between “minimal” and “good,” and 2.8 representing a point close to “good”). Communities at the lowest level of collaboration in 2004 were less likely to have the superintendent as a collaborative member than other communities (63 percent compared to 96 percent) and to have fewer stakeholder groups as a whole on the collaborative than other communities (9 groups compared with 12 groups). Communities with little collaborative infrastructure and experience in 2004 also had substantially larger grant carryover funds (more than equal to their 2007 grants), compared with communities that started the implementation phase of the initiative with stronger collaborative structure and experience (where the carryover was about 37 percent of the 2007 grant).

This consistent pattern suggests that it is likely to take more than the four years between 2004 and 2007 to build strong collaboration in communities where it had not previously existed. Further, there is both quantitative and anecdotal information to confirm the observation that the kind of loosely organized collaborations currently existing in most Discovery communities can fluctuate in capacity and functioning over time. The following description of one community’s journey from the Children First Initiative into the Discovery Initiative is an example of this at the extreme: “What went wrong with CFI was that the engagement of the community wasn’t there... When the Discovery opportunity came along, we had the lessons learned about how to play nice with others. [CFI] was a very sour experience but a good one because we learned from it. Our community was very polarized by CFI. There was reticence about whether to get into [Discovery], whether the community was ready, whether we as leaders were ready.”

***By 2007 communication and cooperation among the statewide and regional grantee organizations had increased, although active collaboration was just beginning.***

Early on in the Initiative, the grantee organizations were observed to be “territorial” in their approach to the work while duplicating some activities and functions. This was particularly true among the statewide research and advocacy organizations. By 2007, with encouragement and opportunities provided by the Memorial Fund, these organizations reported stronger connections in their work on early childhood issues.

This appeared to play a role in making it possible for the advocacy organizations to craft a joint agenda that contributed to the successes of the 2007 legislative session. At the same time, the 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. Most noted that while there had been progress, more work was needed to develop a common vision that is accepted and promoted by all of the groups working on early childhood issues.

Legislators in particular identified a need for advocacy groups to present a shared agenda for action. One legislator said, *“There are still a lot of fissures among the actors. Every actor seems to be in relative agreement with every other in terms of the key things that are needed, but in disagreement about how it needs to get done. There is consensus around goals and not around means for reaching goals.”*

During the period of the Initiative, the concept of an Early Childhood Alliance began to take hold and evolved from its initial conception as a table for exchange of information among state and local early care and education advocates. By 2007, the Alliance was seeking to play a leadership role in organizing and supporting its members to advocate for early childhood issues with one voice. However, as of the end of 2007, the Alliance had not yet become a strong coalition of early childhood advocates speaking with a coordinated message on early childhood issues in the estimation of other statewide and regional organizations. Having struggled with start-up challenges, major staff changes, and realizing its role as leading a coordinated advocacy effort on behalf of young children, the Alliance was focused on building its staff and internal governance and structure.

***Collaborative work between communities and the statewide organizations was not widespread nor robust by the end of 2007.***

In late 2006, most statewide and regional grantees reported some connection with Discovery community grantees. Most of these connections involved providing support to the community (rather than receiving information or taking direction from the community). 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. Some organizations were also engaged in some joint event organizing and advocacy with 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 in some way. Those communities that had relationships with the statewide and regional organizations reported that these connections had benefited their work by increasing the community's awareness of the broader early childhood issues, helping them connect to their legislators, providing essential data and policy analysis, and assisting the community with local events. Similarly, the statewide grantee organizations reported that they were doing some work with communities, but believed more work was needed to strengthen their connections with communities and engage in meaningful joint work.

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 engaged communities in public will building projects and worked with communities on regional candidate forums. Parent Power engaged communities in statewide strategies, such as the “When I Grow Up” picture drive organized through childcare centers in the state and trained communities to conduct one-on-one listening campaigns. Parent Power and the Alliance also delivered advocacy training and tools to the communities and Parent Power trained communities to conduct one-on-one listening campaigns. 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.

At the same time, just over one-half of the community coordinators interviewed in mid-2007 mentioned some barrier to connecting with statewide organizations. While two-thirds of these coordinators mentioned barriers related to collaborative capacity issues, about one-half reported that the statewide organizations themselves made participation difficult. A comment made by several collaborative coordinators was that it often appeared that the statewide organizations wanted help with their own work rather than being prepared to assist the communities.

The connection between the work of the Discovery collaboratives and the work of the Alliance and Parent Power, particularly Parent Power, seemed more intuitively obvious to communities than those of the other statewide grantee organizations. As one community coordinator said, “There was a really strong easy-to-see connection between Parent Power and the work in the communities. In terms of CAHS and Voices, it is more of the big picture level that people want the information about but were not willing to do anything about. I am not sure that the communities understand what the statewide organizations can do for them and I don’t think there has been enough outreach. People don’t know what these organizations can do to be helpful to them in their work in their community.”

**What is the evaluation’s assessment of the contribution of collaboration in the Discovery Initiative through 2007?**

***Collaboration at the community and state level set the stage for local groups and statewide organizations to take advantage of opportunities to build support for early care and education. However, collaboration within and between the community and state levels had not yet emerged as a powerful force for broad-scale change.***

Communities with stronger Discovery collaborative groups were also more likely to be places where the leadership of the community championed early childhood issues and the organization selected as collaborative agent supported the collaborative group’s agenda. Collaboratives rated as stronger by their liaisons were in communities where leadership championed early childhood issues and supported the collaborative’s agenda (Pearson correlation coefficient of .51). These collaboratives also enjoyed more support from the community agency acting as collaborative agent (Pearson correlation coefficient of .37). (Note that, because these variables were all measured at or near the same point in time, it is difficult to attribute causality to these relationships.) Communities in which the Discovery collaborative became stronger over the course of the Initiative had the same level of community support – both in leadership and resources – as communities in which the collaborative stayed the same or became weaker.

As noted above, Memorial Fund support to develop the capacity of statewide organizations to work together on a common agenda for early childhood contributed to the effectiveness of these organizations in policy advocacy. The four core statewide grantee organizations and other advocates came together after Governor Rell released her proposed 2008 budget and developed a consensus “Advocates Budget” for 2008 that was largely adopted by the Appropriations Committee. Legislators pointed to this as evidence of a more unified advocacy network. At the same time, the statewide organizations were not perceived as having a cohesive message and a coordinated agenda.

**What is the evaluation's overall assessment of collaboration in the Discovery Initiative through 2007?**

Collaboration is both difficult to develop and sustain and difficult to measure. The evaluation of the Discovery Initiative to date illustrates both points. After a planning period and four years of funding and capacity-building support, many of the 47 Discovery collaborative groups appeared, based on available measures, to be organized and functioning at modest levels. The available measures of collaborative membership, infrastructure, and functioning generally indicated that by 2007 many communities had established a collaborative body with diverse membership, leadership, and organizational structure. Most had engaged their school superintendent as a collaborative member, and many had combined their school readiness council and Discovery group, sharing membership and resources. However, relatively few had engaged city elected leadership as active members on the Discovery collaborative. About one-third had not used a substantial portion of their prior year's Memorial Fund grants, even though that group with substantial carryover amounts (above 75 percent of new grant) had significantly less of their Discovery budgets coming from local sources (24 percent, compared to 47 percent in communities with smaller carryover amounts).

While many of those that started the implementation period in 2004 with minimal collaborative infrastructure and experience have become stronger, collaborative infrastructure and capacity assessed in 2004 remains a good predictor of collaboration strength as measured in 2007. Further, there is both quantitative and anecdotal information to confirm the observation that the kind of loosely organized collaborations currently existing in most Discovery communities can fluctuate over time in capacity and functioning. The work of building collaboration is never "done."

Collaboration around early childhood advocacy among the statewide organizations supported by the Memorial Fund has been growing and played a role in the early childhood successes of the 2007 legislative session. However, this success was realized in a much more favorable economic climate than is true today. The current circumstances of a state tight budget and struggling economy coupled with a wide range of pressing issues affecting young children and their families beyond early education may make developing consensus and a single agenda more difficult.

**WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE THROUGH 2007 ABOUT COORDINATED STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION?**

*In 2006 the Memorial Fund sponsored a statewide poll of registered voters and interviews with a number of state policymakers, primarily legislators, to understand the extent of support for state investment in early childhood education. The report summarizing results of this research concluded:*

*“...Connecticut voters and policymakers understand that early education is extremely important to children’s learning and development, and they believe that parents need access to early education programs. These same voters and policymakers see a clear role for the state in funding these programs for many Connecticut families; and proposals such as making kindergarten universal and increasing funding for preschool attract significant support.*

*At the same time, advancing a pro-early childhood agenda that includes substantial increases in funding will not be a simple task. While policymakers believe that starting education when children are young is extremely important, to both the children and the state, they consider a number of other issues to be more pressing; and the voting public does not seem to view this as an urgent issue. This absence of demand for action translates into a lack of urgency for many policymakers as well.”*

From *Starting Early: Attitudes on Early Childhood Issues in Connecticut, Findings of a Statewide Survey*, page 2, [discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps\\_resource\\_841.pdf](http://discovery.wcgmf.org/resources/sps_resource_841.pdf).

**What does “coordinated strategies for building public support for early care and education” mean in the Discovery Initiative?**

One of the goals of the Discovery Initiative is to mobilize parents, communities, advocates, and policymakers statewide to improve policy and practice for children from birth to eight years old. Community collaborative groups and statewide advocacy organizations that receive Discovery grants and supports and those with whom they collaborate are expected to have major roles in creating these conditions for mobilization and for policy and practice change. The Initiative has invested in capacity-building for both Discovery community collaborative groups and a set of statewide organizations so that they can effectively take on those roles.

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

**How has the Memorial Fund supported the development of coordinated strategies for building public support?**

This aspiration became more explicitly articulated to community and statewide and regional grantees and partners over the course of the Initiative. 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 public support for changes and investments in early childhood education policies and practices on the local and state levels. These strategies included:

- Providing the Discovery collaboratives 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. Other tools were developed and delivered by statewide grantee organizations, such as the Advocacy Toolkit prepared by the Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance and the one-on-one conversation training conducted by Connecticut Parent Power.
- Supporting the dissemination extensive early childhood policy research and the collection of community-level data. 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>33</sup>
- 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.
- Providing support for statewide and regional grantees to build their organizational capacities, further their state-level research and advocacy work, and connect with the Discovery communities.

Although these strategies were employed from the beginning of the Initiative, early on relationships among several organizational grantees were strained and a systematic strategy for creating and supporting connections between statewide organizations and Discovery

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<sup>33</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 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*.

communities was not in place. The focus was less on building the 50<sup>th</sup> community and more on strengthening the capacities of the individual statewide organizations and community collaboratives and on building the relationships within each group.

Beginning in 2006, the Memorial Fund began to give more explicit messages to statewide and regional grantees about their role in building a common voice across the state involving communities and advocacy organizations. Community grantees were also introduced to the statewide grantee organizations at meetings and given more regular updates on their work.

**What would “being on track” look like with regard to coordinated strategies for building public support?**

The Initiative intended to assist in the development of coordinated and collaborative work among and between statewide and regional grantee organizations and the Discovery communities. If coordinated strategies were in place, 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.

However, given the capacities and relationships of the communities and statewide organizations when the Initiative began, a fully articulated shared agenda and coordinated strategies would be an unrealistic expectation at the end of 2007. In 2002, there were few existing regional structures in Connecticut on which to build cross-community work. Instead, there were (and continue to be) 169 individual municipalities, differing in history, demographics, local resources, and access to state funds, agencies and processes. In many cases, there were few existing collaborative groups in communities ready to take on the work of Discovery. These collaboratives had to be built, and in many cases, revitalized over the course of the Initiative, before they could become effective catalysts for local action.

As noted earlier, the organizations receiving grant support from the Memorial Fund did not collaborate among themselves at the beginning of Discovery. They competed for funds and, in some cases, for the same “niche” in the early childhood world. Two of the four organizations that have become the core of the Memorial Fund's statewide strategy did not exist before the Initiative and one organization only began work in the early childhood field at the Memorial Fund's behest at the start of the Discovery work. Also, the explicit messages about the 50<sup>th</sup> community and specific supports and tools to help implement this vision were put in place late in this period of the Initiative, beginning in 2007 with major investment coming in 2008.

**What is the evaluation's assessment of the development of coordinated strategies for building public support through 2007?**

***Overall, the Discovery communities provided modest levels of support for early childhood issues and the work of the collaborative group.***



Evidence of community support included evidence of:

- community leaders championing early childhood issues
- the community organization acting as the Discovery collaborative (fiscal) agent providing a broad range of support to the collaborative group, and
- the percent of the collaborative group's budget that came from local public and private sources.

The extent to which community leaders 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 one-quarter of the communities, support from community leaders for the work of Discovery and early childhood issues was rated as "minimal" or below. This suggests that a number of communities struggled to find active early childhood champions.

One-fifth (20 percent) of the Discovery collaboratives 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 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 2.8, just under "good."

The largest differences among communities were in the amount of local resources provided for their work. Almost one-quarter (23 percent) of the 2007 Discovery collaborative budgets included no local resources, either cash or in-kind. On the other end of the spectrum, approximately (25 percent) of the Discovery communities contributed three-quarters or more of the 2007 collaborative budget. On average, communities provided 39 percent of the resources in their local Discovery budgets. Larger communities were better able to provide those resources, both cash and in-kind, than smaller ones.

Level of collaborative functioning, currently and as of 2004, was also correlated with community support. The liaisons' rating of collaborative infrastructure and functioning was positively correlated with their rating of support for early childhood issues from community leaders and champions (Pearson  $r = .51$ ) and from the collaborative agent (Pearson  $r = .37$ ). Predictably, communities with little collaborative experience and infrastructure in 2004 had lower ratings on local leadership support for early childhood issues and on collaborative agent engagement with the work of the Discovery collaborative, than communities that began the Initiative with stronger collaboratives (2.4 versus 2.7 and 2.3 versus 3.2, respectively). There was also a correlation between collaboration history and local funding for Discovery work. Communities with stronger collaboratives in 2004 received, on average, 54 percent of their 2007 Discovery budgets from local sources, compared to 27 percent for communities that began in 2004 with little collaborative experience and infrastructure.<sup>34</sup> However, collaborative functioning in 2007 was not correlated with local support of the Discovery group budget.

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<sup>34</sup> Multiple regression analysis was conducted using all three community demographic characteristics – population size, percent of residents who are non-White, and whether the community was designated as a priority school district based on family income levels – along with the community's ranking on collaboration in 2004 in predicting the percent of the Discovery budget from local sources. This analysis confirmed the significant contribution of having a longer history of strong collaboration to greater local support for the Discovery budget. It also indicated that percent non-White was the one community demographic characteristic having a statistically significant relationship with local support.

***While most Discovery collaboratives sponsored activities to inform their local legislator of their community's interest in early childhood issues, these were not part of a state-wide advocacy strategy.***

There is evidence that Discovery communities recognized the need to reach out to state level leadership. Most (81 percent) hosted 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. Further, some Discovery communities did not see how their work could be enhanced by forming relationships with the statewide organizations. In some cases, they perceived the statewide organizations as trying to get communities to work on "their" agenda, rather than supporting community work. For community collaboratives with very limited staff hours, taking on a broader agenda that requires relationship building, travel outside of their community, and fitting their work into another group's agenda was difficult, if not impossible. As one coordinator put it, "It is tough because communities are so swamped with their own work. It would be great if they [statewide grantee organizations] could help collaboratives with things that are already going on in the community, rather than wanting communities to do one of their programs."

***Although by the end of 2007 relationships between statewide grantees were stronger than they had been at the start of Discovery, they had not yet become a strong coalition, speaking with a cohesive message.***

During the 2007 session, at a point when some critical elements in early education funding was at risk in the Governor's proposed budget, the advocacy organizations funded by the Memorial Fund were able to come to consensus on an "Advocates Budget" which was presented the legislature and largely adopted by the Appropriations committee. These statewide advocacy organizations were credited 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 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. One legislator stated, "There are still a lot of fissures among the actors. Every actor seems to be in relative agreement with every other in terms of the key things that are needed, but in disagreement about how it needs to get done. There is consensus around goals and not around means for reaching goals."

**What is the evaluation's assessment of the contribution of strategies to build public support in the Discovery Initiative through 2007?**

***By 2007, there had been progress toward building coordinated public support for early care and education, but the vision of the 50<sup>th</sup> community was not yet fully embraced or implemented by communities or the statewide organizations.***

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From the beginning of the Initiative, Discovery communities were encouraged to connect with and learn from each other and provided with tools and venues to do so. These opportunities for peer connections were reported to be highly valued by communities, but led only to sporadic joint projects in the early years of Discovery. By mid-2007, Discovery communities were asking for additional support for regional work and in 2008 six regional grants, involving a total of 14 Discovery communities, were awarded by the Memorial Fund. These regional grants principally focused on program-related work, rather than joint advocacy or mobilization. For example, more than one regional group applied for support for parent leadership training; another requested funding to support parent peer and family literacy activities; a group of 11 communities wanted to organize local councils to develop strategies around improving children's social and emotional development. These projects may become the foundation for broader coordination on policy advocacy in the future. One example of this is Children First-Southeastern Connecticut, comprised of the Norwich, Groton and New London Discovery collaboratives, each of whom has taken on the "Children First" name to establish their collaborative identity and jointly identifies and advocates for a set of priorities.

The statewide advocacy organizations funded by the Memorial Fund were credited with contributing to the increase in new state funding for early childhood education services, for the renovation and construction of preschool facilities, and for technical assistance and flexible funding to communities to build local capacity for birth to five system expansion and management. However, after the 2007 session, state level stakeholders, including legislators, reported that parents had not exercised a strong voice on early childhood issues and that communities had not played an active role in state policy work. This suggests that there is not yet an organized, coordinated network of communities, early childhood champions, local and statewide organizations and agencies working together to funnel their individual early childhood goals and strategies into a cohesive state policy agenda.

### **What is the evaluation's overall assessment of strategies for building coordinated public support in the Discovery Initiative through 2007?**

The level of community support for the Discovery work on early childhood issues was, on the whole, modest. While many communities had champions for the work in local leaders and institutions, a substantial portion did not as of 2007. On the other hand, one-quarter of the Discovery collaboratives, generally in smaller communities, received no cash or in-kind resources from local public or private sources.

While most Discovery communities took actions to connect with local state policymakers, these were generally carried out by each community individually, inviting their local legislators to attend a single event per year in the community. Only a few communities were members of the Early Childhood Alliance or had parent delegates in Connecticut Parent Power, and many did not see how connecting with the statewide organizations or forming a coalition across the state would be feasible or valuable to their work.

The statewide organizations were recognized as carrying out effective advocacy during the 2007 legislative session. However, they were not seen as yet having a single agenda and set of priorities, nor had they engaged sufficient numbers of parents and communities in their work for these constituents to be recognized as having a powerful voice at the state-level.

## SUMMARY OF INTERIM FINDINGS

In response to the question, *“Is the Initiative “on track” in the key elements of the Discovery Initiative theory of change?”*, the interim findings suggest an overall answer of “yes, to a moderate degree.” Through 2007, there was some progress at the community and state level in all of the elements of the Initiative examined by the evaluation: policy and practice changes associated with the Discovery objectives and development of capacity to influence policy, use of Initiative capacity-building supports, parent engagement and leadership, collaboration, and public support.

At the community level, some improvements in the supply and quality of early education services and in connecting early education with the K-12 system were reported. There was also progress in terms of use of capacity-building supports and establishing a functioning collaborative group with strong leadership, broad membership, and staff support. Less progress was seen across the communities overall in engaging in cross-community and state-level policy work; providing opportunities for parent leadership either on the collaborative group or in the community at large; and gaining deep community support for the Discovery work.

At the state level, the greatest progress through 2007 was the substantial increase in state investment for early childhood education services and for infrastructure development through state entities like the Early Childhood Education Cabinet. Progress on parent leadership was also observed through increases in parent leadership training and the creation of a vehicle for channeling parent voices and parent leadership to state policy debates. Funding to support community planning; increased support for early childhood education among both executive and legislative state decision-makers, and strengthened communication and cooperation among the statewide advocacy organizations were other areas where progress was observed through 2007. Areas where less progress was seen at the state level included development of a cohesive policy message and strategy among the advocates, support by statewide organizations for community mobilization and advocacy work, and having parent interests and demands be considered as powerful forces in state policy debates. Further, the authorized increase in early education programs was not fully implemented. Thus, while progress is evident, the strength and resilience at the community and state levels predicted by the Initiative’s theory of change have not yet been fully realized.-

The answer to the question, *“How have these elements contributed to the Initiative’s objectives and the long-term goal of sustained community and statewide focus and ability to influence policy on early childhood issues?”*, is also “yes, to some degree.” The Memorial Fund’s long-standing commitment to and support of early childhood issues and the Discovery Initiative supports and strategies were credited with laying the groundwork in Connecticut communities and at the state level for increased attention to and investment in early education and young children’s early school success.

At the community level, use of Initiative capacity-building supports was associated with stronger collaborative structure and functioning. Stronger collaborative groups were more likely to have local champions for early childhood issues and be ready to take on broader community planning around these issues, although not necessarily to make progress on specific early childhood practice and policy changes. Communities that began the Initiative with stronger collaborative groups and larger communities were more likely to support parent leadership training. Communities able to support parent leadership training were also more likely to provide resources for the work of the Discovery collaborative group, to have seen improvements on the

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Discovery objectives, and to seek support for the development of community-wide early childhood plans. On the other hand, parent membership and leadership in the Discovery group, which varied across all types of communities regardless of size or demographics, was not an important factor in community support for parent leadership training, progress on the Discovery objectives, or the initiation of early childhood community planning activities.

At the state level, technical assistance provided to the four core statewide advocacy organizations improved communication and strengthened relationships among these organizations. This made it possible for these organizations to craft a joint advocacy agenda that contributed to the successes of the 2007 legislative session. However, by the end of 2007, the statewide organizations had just formulated joint projects and developed more focused strategies for expanding the role of parents and communities in setting and pursuing state policy issues.

The Memorial Fund's decision to continue the Initiative for an additional two years (2008-2009) and to increase the level of its investment reflected the staff's and board's recognition of the Initiative's progress through 2007 and belief in the potential for further progress. Called "Positioning for Future Success," three goals were outlined for the next phase of the Initiative - sustaining the momentum of Discovery, leveraging expanded State commitment to early care and education, and building the capacity of community and statewide organization grantees and other partners to lead and advance an early care and education agenda. This extended period for the Initiative coincides with changes in national political leadership and priorities and an economic environment in which family, community, state, and national resources have been dramatically reduced and in which the needs of young children face even tougher competition with other critical issues. These circumstances represent both opportunities and challenges for the Discovery Initiative.

**APPENDIX 1:  
METHODS AND MEASURES**

**Community-Level Data Collection and Measures Used in the Interim Evaluation**

Quantitative community-level data used in the interim evaluation were derived from a variety of sources, including grant application materials, liaison<sup>35</sup> ratings, a community survey conducted in the fall of 2006, and interviews with community coordinators, collaborative agents, and liaisons. Qualitative information used in this report to supplement or expand on the quantitative findings came from applications, interviews, and focus groups.

The chart below outlines the primary quantitative community-level measures used in the analyses presented in this report.

<b>Quantitative Evaluation Measures at the Community Level</b>
<p><b>Use and Value of Discovery Capacity-Building Supports:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The 2007 grant application included a list of technical assistance sessions and other capacity-building supports available during 2006; communities were asked to indicate whether they had participated in or received the support and how valuable it had been to their Discovery work. Communities were given a score from 0 (did not attend or the experience had no value) to 3 (attended and reported a great deal of value from the experience) related to three types of capacity-building supports – technical assistance workshops or trainings, support from their liaison, and opportunities for peer contact.</li></ul>
<p><b>Parent Engagement and Leadership:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Parent engagement and leadership on the Discovery community collaborative groups was measured by combining the liaison rating of collaborative support for parent membership, participation, leadership on collaborative in late 2007, the percent of parents on the collaborative in 2007, whether any parent was in a leadership position on the collaborative in either 2006 or 2007, and the factor score of parent engagement and leadership measures from the 2006 community survey.</li><li>▪ Community support for parent leadership was measured by the percent of program years in which the community offered a formal parent leadership training course between 2002 and 2007.</li></ul>
<p><b>Community Collaboration:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The functioning and infrastructure of Discovery community collaborative groups were assessed by their liaisons<sup>36</sup> in several areas – breadth and inclusiveness of membership, engagement of members in the work of the group, use of data to guide the action plans, existence of a governance structure with designated subgroups, and strength of</li></ul>

<sup>35</sup> Liaisons are consultants contracted with the Memorial Fund to work regularly with assigned community collaborative groups to offer advice, give feedback, provide limited facilitation support, encourage use of other capacity-building supports, and promote understanding of the Discovery values and goals as they apply in the community's unique context. They consult with the collaborative chair and coordinator and meet with the collaborative groups.

**Quantitative Evaluation Measures at the Community Level**

leadership for the group.

- The liaison also rated the collaborative group in terms of the strength of its staff support on two dimensions – the skills of the coordinator and the adequacy of staff time to carry out necessary tasks. Again, these ratings were summed and divided by two for the final measure.
- Breadth of membership was measured by summing the number of stakeholder categories represented by members of the collaborative group listed in the community's 2007 grant application.
- In addition, each community collaborative group was characterized in terms of whether the chief elected official or designee was a member and whether the superintendent of school or designee was a member.
- While there may be legitimate reasons for a collaborative group to have prior grant funds left at the end of a grant year, in general one can assume that a well-functioning collaborative with an appropriately ambitious work plan would spend most of each year's grant funds. The proportion of each collaborative's 2007 budget that came from unexpended prior years' grants was calculated.

**Community Support for the Work of Discovery:**

- Each Discovery collaborative group was expected to identify a community organization that would act as its collaborative agent. This role was expected to go beyond management and accounting for the grant funds – the traditional fiscal agent role. The liaisons rated the level of engagement and support of that organization on a scale from one (less than adequate) to four (good), following a set of specific rubrics.
- Another measure of community support for the Discovery collaborative's work was the percent of the 2007 budget coming from local cash and in-kind resources.
- The liaisons also assessed each community in terms of the extent to which the chief elected official and the superintendent actively supported the Discovery objectives in their own policy agendas and the extent to which there was a community early childhood champion or spokesperson beyond the Discovery collaborative. These three ratings from 1 to 4 were summed and divided by 3 for a summary score.

**Progress on the Discovery Objectives and Development of Capacity to Sustain Support for Early Childhood:**

- Communities were provided with a number of opportunities to report evidence of progress on the Discovery objectives – during their 2006 and 2007 application narratives and in the mid-2007 Memorial Fund site visit. On each of the four objectives, communities were coded as reporting progress or not.

<sup>36</sup> In 2007 the liaisons and Memorial Fund staff developed a standard scale and set of rubrics for rating communities on their progress in the following areas: Broad and Inclusive Collaborative Group, Engaged Collaborative Group with Specific Roles and Responsibilities, Strategic Use of Data, Governance Structure with Working Committees, Parent Engagement and Leadership, Support of Mayor/Chief Elected Official, Support of Superintendent, Strong Collaborative Leadership by Chair, Engaged Collaborative Agent, Community Champion/Spokesperson, Strong and Skilled Facilitator Coordinator, Coordinator Time, and Meaningful Local Match. Each area was given a score of one (less than adequate), two (minimal), three (good), or four (ideal), based on observable characteristics for each level.

**Quantitative Evaluation Measures at the Community Level**

- One way to expand capacity for change across the state is through regional work in which multiple communities joined together to carry out projects requiring broader scope and shared resources. Communities were coded as participating in regional work if they participated in a regional Discovery grant awarded for the 2008-2009 period.
- Another way in which community work could contribute to statewide change was by linking local interest in early childhood with the state policy activities. Based on information in the Discovery applications and the Memorial Fund site visits, communities were coded as having engaged in such activities during 2006 or 2007.
- Communities were offered the opportunity to apply for partnership grants co-funded by the state and the Memorial Fund to support the development of comprehensive community plans, and associated governance and financing structures, to address the needs of young children. Communities were coded as committed to and ready for this work if they applied for and received a partnership grant in 2008.

In this report, one way in which the degree of association between two measures is calculated is the Pearson correlation coefficient. Pearson correlation coefficients represent the degree to which one variable co-varies with another. The range of these coefficients is from +1.0 (indicating that the values on each variable are perfectly aligned so that the highest value on one variable and the highest value on the other variable are found in the same case – individual, organization, or community, and so on through all values of both variables) to -1.0 (indicating that the values on each variable are arrayed in exact opposite order so that the highest value on one variable and the lowest value on the other variable are found in the same case, and so on). A correlation coefficient of 0 (zero) indicates that the values of two variables are randomly associated with each other, so that the value of one variable for a case is completely independent and cannot be predicted from the value of the other variable for that case. The statistical significance of these coefficients depends on the number of cases and the variation among the cases in the distribution of values of the two variables together. In social science research, a statistically significant correlation coefficient of +/- .3 or greater may be considered meaningful, while correlation coefficients of +/- .7 or greater are considered very high.

**State-level Data Collection and Measures Used in the Interim Evaluation**

Initially, the evaluation included all grantee organizations in its work. In the fall of 2006, a group of fourteen statewide and regional grantees whose work was integral to the Discovery Initiative was identified by Memorial Fund staff. These grantees encompassed a broad range of organizations involved in advocacy, research, and best practice development work and included:

- Bridgeport Hospital Child FIRST
- Connecticut Association for Human Services
- Connecticut Center for School Change
- Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance
- CHDI Early Childhood DataCONNECTIONS
- Connecticut Parent Power
- Connecticut Voices for Children



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- Danbury Children First
- League of Women Voters Community Conversations
- Local Initiatives Support Corporation
- Meriden Children First
- Parent Trust Fund
- United Way of Connecticut
- Yale Child Study Research Center

In 2007, the Memorial Fund began to concentrate on four core statewide organizations to support stronger and more coordinated advocacy. The evaluation also focused its attention during that period on those organizations – Connecticut Association for Human Services (CAHS), Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance, Connecticut Parent Power, and Connecticut Voices for Children.

Representatives from all fourteen organizations were interviewed in the fall of 2005, responded to a questionnaire late in 2006, and thirteen were interviewed again early in 2007. Interviews with Memorial Fund staff and the technical assistance consultant about the work of these grantee organizations were also conducted in the spring of 2005 and the summer of 2007. The evaluation team also observed statewide and regional grantee events, reviewed grant applications and Memorial Fund materials related to these grantees, and reviewed information from the statewide and regional grantee's websites.

The evaluation used the 2007 legislative session as a point in time to observe the contribution of the cumulative work of the Discovery Initiative to policy decisions. A wide range of stakeholders – including non-grantee advocacy and policy organizations, other foundations, public agency staff, and state legislators – were interviewed after the 2007 legislative session. The interviews with stakeholders that followed the conclusion of the session provided an opportunity to begin to understand how the broader work of the initiative contributed to the increased funding for early education. They also asked about other factors in the environment that may have influenced this outcome and the degree to which it was the result of increased community and statewide capacity to sustained focus on early childhood issues and influence policy on behalf of young children-- the longer term result.

**APPENDIX 2:  
INTERIM EVALUATION REPORTS**

- *Discovery Initiative Progress Report, July 2006*
- *Collaborative Infrastructure, Collaboration, & Parent Participation in Discovery Communities: Fall 2006*
- *Community Reports of Changes in Discovery Objectives: Preliminary Observations on “The 50th Community” through 2006*
- *Community Use of Capacity-Building Supports as Of Mid-2007*
- *Collaborative Agents in the Discovery Initiative as Of Mid-2007*
- *The Kindergarten Transition Institute Model for Providing Capacity-building Technical Assistance in the Discovery Initiative, 2006 and 2007*
- *Discovery Contributions to Recent Early Childhood Policy Results—The View from State-Level Grantees and Stakeholders: December 2007*
- *Summary Evaluation Findings Through 2007 Linked With the Discovery Initiative theory of Change*
- *Electronic Communications in the Discovery Initiative*