

From Dream to Reality:

The Growth of Early Learning in Kansas City



*A report from Mid-America Regional Council's
Department of Early Learning*

From Dream to Reality: The Growth of Early Learning in Kansas City

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Introduction

An incredible story has unfolded in Greater Kansas City over the last decade. The community has accomplished what few places in the U.S. can claim: successfully rallying tremendous leadership, resources, funding and community will to improve the start that the youngest children in the community receive.

This story begins in 1989, when a small group of people came together to plan how to improve the quality of child care in Greater Kansas City. While federal funds were being invested in the Head Start programs for children from low-income families, there had been little investment or interest in child care in general – either locally or nationally. The quality of child care in Greater Kansas City and the country was largely substandard and there was no formal support to assist programs in improving their quality.

There have been countless planning processes across the U.S. around improving the quality of early childhood programs. Why did the effort in Kansas City turn into something significant? This report tells the story of how tens of millions of dollars have been raised to build a system of high quality early learning programs. This has been accomplished through initiatives to improve program quality, teacher education and compensation, and the commitment has translated into tens of thousands of young children in Greater Kansas City entering school ready to succeed.

1989-1990: Getting Organized

In 1989, Ronald Reagan was President, the Iran-Contra affair and Oliver North were in the headlines, *The Last Emperor* won nine Oscars, the Soviet Union pulled out of Afghanistan after more than eight years of fighting, and NASA was resuming space flight after the Challenger disaster. It was during this time that Kansas City began considering how a community could rally its leaders and resources behind improving the quality of child care. While Head Start had been in place since the mid-1970's, and provided tremendous opportunity for hundreds of thousands of children nationwide, insufficient funding meant that the program served only a fraction of the children and families who were seeking relief from the crushing realities of poverty. There was no federal funding of any significance designated to help states with child care needs, and neither Kansas nor Missouri were addressing the issue in any meaningful way. Child care was not on the agenda of policy makers or charitable foundations, but changes in the workforce meant more families were becoming dependent on a fragmented child care industry where poor quality was the norm.

In 1989, Kansas City community leaders came together to address the growing demand for child care as part of a task force commissioned by Kansas City Consensus, an independent non-profit that convened people to develop community responses to quality of life issues. The task force concluded that an Office of the Child should be created to address the child care needs of the community.

The multitude of geopolitical boundaries in Greater Kansas City made addressing any child care needs extremely challenging. With two states, eight counties spanning hundreds of square miles, over 100 individually incorporated cities, more than 50 school districts, and significant economic and racial segregation, the divisions in Greater Kansas City were too numerous to count. In a community with hundreds of thousands of children and youth and all of these complicating factors, task force leaders wisely concluded that focus would be required for an Office of the Child to accomplish anything of substance.

As task force leadership tried to move their recommendations forward, it was clear that an organizational home was needed for the work to gain momentum and have credibility. While many

organizations were considered, Mid-America Regional Council (MARC) was identified as the best place to house an office to coordinate strategies to address the community's child care challenges.

While MARC was well positioned to take on this challenge, in many ways was an unlikely organization to coordinate the work because it did not have a history of being actively involved with children's issues. As the coalition of local governments charged with working on quality of life issues that affected the entire region, MARC was well established and respected by diverse stakeholders and elected officials throughout the region.

Because it was not one of the usual suspects – it was not a service provider, a university, or an organization with a history of working on children's issues – MARC had a fresh perspective when it came to developing a coordinated community response to the child care needs of young children. It was clear that MARC's established reputation and credibility on other bi-state issues would help tremendously in expanding the ownership of this agenda. In 1989, MARC created the Metropolitan Council on Child Care (now the Metropolitan Council Early Learning, or MCEL).

In hindsight, the decision to create MCEL was a critical step in creating a system-based, rather than program-based, approach to improving the quality of child care in the metropolitan area. MARC's work on other community issues, such as transportation, environmental and aging services, provided a helpful culture for tackling the challenges of the overall child care industry, not just individual programs. Even within this context, however, there were many challenges in the early years of MCEL.

Unlike the K-12 education system, the child care industry is primarily privately run and made up of thousands of individual business owners providing services, including churches, homes, nonprofit and for-profit agencies. It would be a new challenge to develop initiatives that could bring some organization, standards, and quality to the industry. Significant work had to be done to develop common terminology, identify the scope of the problem, determine what support systems needed to be in place to expand access to child care, and how best to build partnerships with others. A significant challenge would be building consensus while not losing momentum that came out of the task force. As with any issue where the need far exceeds the resources available, organizations in the

field had been in competition with each other and fought turf battles over the small amount of available funding.

Significant volunteer time was invested to move the early childhood agenda forward through MCEL. The early childhood leaders, along with numerous community leaders from other sectors, were the volunteer force that invested incalculable hours to move the first rumblings of the early childhood interest to a community movement. There was tremendous work done in work groups to bring definition to the issue and determine how to best build an early childhood system.

While many early childhood leaders remember this time as a period of great anticipation and opportunity, others look back on this period with frustration. A tremendous amount of time was spent focusing on terminology and details that were seen as largely academic. When actual service providers and community leaders outside of the industry were brought to the table, they often did not feel as though the work was addressing the very real and immediate needs of parents who could not find child care, or child care programs that were struggling to keep their doors open.

Resisting the temptation to focus on producing outcomes for a few individual programs, rather than focusing on building the systems needed to support all programs, was an ongoing challenge. There also was the very real issue that the relationships among early childhood leaders at the time were new and relatively undeveloped. These relationships needed to be nurtured at a time when everyone was being challenged to think in a new, systemic way about the industry.

1990-1995: Early Investments

Early philanthropic investments in early childhood programs in the metropolitan area came from four primary sources: the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation, the Francis Family Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and the Hall Family Foundation.

The Greater Kansas City Community Foundation (GKCCF) leadership recognized early on that children from low-income families were at particularly high risk for low achievement. While Head Start provided programs and support to families, the part-day, part-year program did not meet many

parents' needs for child care and was insufficient to ensure children entered school prepared for success. Many children were leaving their high quality Head Start program and attending mediocre child care for the rest of the day. The transition to new staff and the reduction in quality were not good for children and did not maximize the gains Head Start was producing.

The foundation worked closely with KCMC Child Development Corporation, the largest Head Start grantee in the community, to develop a program model to better meet the needs of children. The GKCCF then took the lead on engaging additional investments from federal, state, and local governments and brought new investors to the table from the philanthropic community, particularly the Hall Family Foundation. The combination of these new sources of funding created the Full Start program in 1993 at three sites and enabled new program components to be added, such as wrap-around, full-day early education programs, a lower ratio of education specialists and family advocates to provide more focused support, new materials for classrooms, and enriched teacher education training.

While this is a relatively common program model now, it was unheard of at the time. KCMC had created such trust at the federal level that waivers were provided to test these innovative strategies to better serve children and families. As welfare reform was implemented in the mid-1990's there was an immediate increase in demand for full-day, full-year services for children whose parents were now required to work. Full Start and the pioneering work of the KCMC Child Development Corporation and the local foundation community served as a national model for linking public and private sector funds and providing extended services to children attending Head Start as more families moved into the workforce.

The GKCCF subsequently played a critical leadership role in the development and implementation of the Schools of the 21st Century program in the Independence, Missouri school district. In addition to other reforms for K-12 education, Schools of the 21st Century provides high quality early learning opportunities to help prepare young children for success in school. At the time, it was radical for these programs to be offered by the public schools.

GKCCF donors, the Hall Family Foundation, and a number of other foundations provided seed funding to get these programs off the ground. The Independence school district program, which provides Parents as Teachers, Head Start, and Pre-K programs free of charge to hundreds of young children annually, seeks to engage families in the school in a positive way before children ever formally start kindergarten. Early childhood education is an integral component of the services now provided by the school district. Recent successful bond measures included funding for new state of the art early childhood facilities.

The GKCCF also convened other funders and brought in regional and national experts to discuss the importance of early childhood investments. These conversations with early childhood authorities prompted a germinating interest from the Francis Family Foundation. John and Mary Harris Francis were seeking ways to help improve children's academic success. Mary Harris Francis' experience as a kindergarten teacher made it clear that too many children were not prepared when they arrived at kindergarten and the family was seeking to create an early childhood strategy as strong as their renowned Pulmonary Fellowship Program investments.

In the late 1980's the GKCCF facilitated conversations between the Francis Family Foundation, Metropolitan Community College-Penn Valley, KCMC Child Development Corporation and a committee of early childhood leaders about how to best address the needs of child care professionals. From these conversations, a plan evolved to develop a Resource Center at Penn Valley that would reach out to child care centers and family child care homes to assist them in improving quality. The Resource Center was viewed as an exciting addition to the existing teacher education program in early education at Penn Valley and small lab school on campus.

The Child Growth and Development associate degree program at Penn Valley had been established many years ago, but was not widely used because there was little demand for trained professionals in the field. The Francis Child Development Institute, as it was eventually called, encompassed these three components and worked to provide comprehensive professional development opportunities to child care providers in the community, especially the Kansas City, Missouri urban core.

The Francis Child Development Institute's programs and expanding vision grew quickly, including a new five million dollar building that was dedicated on May 15, 1998. The Francis Child Development Institute was a popular entity at community meetings, but its leadership was often stretched thin. In some ways, the Institute was a victim of its own early success as leadership struggled with the rapid expansion of programs and services.

For example, Penn Valley worked hard to create a highly flexible and responsive model that met the needs of the early childhood community by creating a field-based model that offered classes in locations throughout the community in evenings and on weekends. Unfortunately, quality control measures were lacking. Consistency across over 100 faculty members in the field-based program was lacking and the skills and knowledge of students varied widely. Through experience and technical assistance from the Center for Family Policy and Research at the University of Missouri-Columbia, the Institute has corrected many of its early missteps and continues to strengthen its role as a provider of quality education, training and consultation services to ensure teachers are well prepared.

Around this time the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation was also becoming increasingly interested in early childhood programs. Ewing Kauffman and the foundation staff came to the realization that the scholarships provided through Project Choice to help high-risk high school students go to college were necessary but were insufficient. While many teens were eager to participate in Project Choice, many were so far behind by the time they arrived at high school that they were not at all prepared to go to college, regardless of what support was offered. The foundation decided that investing in early childhood would be necessary and that the child care industry was ripe for reform. But how to best invest in a disjointed child care industry comprised of many small business owners was not clear.

Project Early, a research project to determine how to best meet the needs of low-income families, emerged in 1989 as the Foundation's initial investment in early childhood. Project Early initially offered 37 Latino families (and a control group of similar families) in a low-income Kansas City neighborhood help in identifying barriers, setting goals and finding resources for their family. Community service agencies and neighborhood resources were tapped to help families meet early

childhood development needs. In addition to working directly with families, Project Early worked to develop the capacity of agencies that provided support for at-risk families in maternal and child health care, especially for uninsured and underinsured families; safe and affordable housing for poor and working poor families; job opportunities for the underemployed and unemployed, non-traditional worker; family support services focused on the family's needs; and affordable, quality child care.

In 1991, MCEL was one of the community organizations identified to assist in addressing families' needs around affordable, high-quality child care. MCEL received a multi-year grant of \$242,000 from the Kauffman Foundation to provide staff support to Project Early, as well as to convene community leaders to address the community's child care challenges. This grant provided the first funding for a full-time staff person at MCEL to support the expanding coalition of providers that by then involved over 100 professionals from the field.

Kauffman staff later identified this investment in MCEL as a wise strategic move. While similar amounts of money were being devoted to improving individual child care programs, investment in MCEL helped bring together human resources, ultimately creating solutions that provided better quality care to more children over time than any individual center could. It was critical that staff support was provided in this effort to keep it coordinated and moving. There were increasing numbers of people and organizations getting interested in the work and investing time and energy to move it forward. Relying solely on volunteer investments of time and expertise always has its limits, and the success of the MCEL's work in Kansas City could not have been sustained or increased without dedicated staff with the explicit responsibility of moving the initiatives forward.

These early investments from foundations fueled the growing demand for measurable outcomes. In the early 1990's, MCEL received a grant to document the supply, demand, and characteristics of the early childhood market. Funded through an EQUIP grant from AT&T, the *Status Report on Child Care* collected and analyzed data that quantified the issues in the child care market. Through sampling a cross-section of child care centers and family child care homes, the report documented information on child care programs such as the availability of care by different age groups (infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school age children); the education level of the workforce; average levels

of compensation and availability of benefit packages; staff turnover; availability of care for children receiving child care subsidies; and the cost of care to parents.

As the *Status Report on Early Learning*, as it is now called, has evolved, it has become a valuable tool for increasing general awareness on child care issues and a valuable resource for framing the issues to secure grant funding, both for community organizations and individual early learning programs.

As the collection of data on early learning programs grew, broader community work demanding measurement of children's health and well-being also increased. Partnership for Children, the local child advocacy agency, was just starting to put together its annual report card on the health and well-being of children in the community in 1991. Through collecting data on a variety of indicators of children's health and well being, the *Report Card* evaluated whether the benchmarks were improving, stabilizing, or getting worse in Kansas City, and also compared local data to national statistics. While child care/early education was not originally included in the report, the early work to elevate the importance of quality child care and the EQUIP grant had built the capacity for child care to be thought about in new ways. The inclusion of child care as part of the community's grade on the *Report Card* was one of the first times that a public focus was brought to the importance of providing sufficient child care spaces and improving the quality of child care in the community.

However, to grade child care, indicators were needed so progress could be measured over time. The national research on child care was increasingly focused on levels of teacher education and measures of program quality as important ways to improve the quality of child care. This work informed the *Report Card* benchmarks for the child care grade, which included quality (the percentage of nationally accredited programs); workforce development (the percentage of children in classrooms with credentialed or degreed teachers); workforce stability (turnover in child care programs); and access to services (the percentage of early learning programs willing to serve children who receive child care subsidies).

The benchmarks identified in the *Report Card* focused the community's attention on the importance of early learning programs for the overall health and well-being of the community's youngest citizens. Further, they set the stage for the four significant initiatives in the community that have

significantly improved the quality of early childhood programs: Partners in Quality, the Accreditation Project and Fund, the Fern Webster Professional Development Fund, and compensation initiatives.

1995-2002: Major Investments

By the mid-1990's, the conversation around child care was starting to change from a dialogue about child care availability to one that focused on ensuring access to quality child care programs. The Kauffman Foundation was deepening its interest in early childhood, and dedicated expertise was brought on board to develop and manage the foundation's early childhood portfolio.

The new leadership had the benefit of significant knowledge of the community's resources, partners, and plans as it developed the foundation's early childhood strategy. The foundation identified three significant priorities: engaging new voices and partners in the early childhood work; improving early childhood program quality; and enhancing the skills of early childhood teachers. The Kauffman Foundation's staff and financial leadership were instrumental in getting the early childhood agenda off the ground in Greater Kansas City.

Significant work had been taking place in the community to define what a high quality early childhood program should look like. After a great deal of community discussion about what the standard for excellence should be, national accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children was selected. In order to assist programs in achieving this goal, however, it was clear that resources would be needed.

Technical assistance to navigate accreditation process and how to implement standards at a classroom level, financial grants to improve facilities and purchase materials, and scholarships to increase levels of teacher education were identified. These three needs translated into the Accreditation Project (technical assistance), facility improvement grants to programs (the Accreditation Fund) and scholarships for teachers (the Fern Webster Professional Development Fund). In order for these ideas to be taken to scale and owned by the community, additional support

would be required and a strategic process of engaging new champions and investors would be required. This strategy became Partners in Quality.

These initiatives were created as an integrated systemic change strategy. With every step in the investment development, the connections between the strategies were evaluated and very intentional work took place to ensure that isolated initiatives were not created. Careful thinking and partnership building, always an eye on creating synergy and targeted investments for young children, took place as the ground work was laid for the launch of the of strategies.

Engaging New Voices: Partners in Quality

The leaders of the early childhood movement realized early on that new voices would need to be engaged in order to create an initiative with broad ownership. The groundwork had been set for engaging new voices in children's issues by the pioneering work of Partnership for Children. The Partnership had engaged numerous community leaders in its work and had elevated involvement in children's issues to a community priority. The organization also developed the #1 Question Campaign, which asked the community to consider the question "Is it Good for the Children?" in any decision-making. The premise was that if parents, schools, governments, businesses, churches and others asked the #1 Question before making decisions, the needs of children would be better met in all areas of the community. This campaign was adopted by hundreds of organizations and got the community energized around the needs of children.

The leaders in the early childhood movement wanted to both create a new forum where community leaders could work together on early childhood issues, as well as develop new investments in the early childhood work. Using the model of the American Business Collaborative, a framework was developed that required members to complete an application and make a "significant new commitment" to early childhood in the community.

Partners in Quality for Early Childhood Care and Education (PIQ) was launched the same day as the Fern Webster Professional Development Fund and the Accreditation Project in 1996. Nearly a year in the making, a number of new organizations and businesses agreed to provide new support to the

early childhood work. On August 28, 1996, sixteen charter members signed a statement of commitment and PIQ was formally launched to tremendous community enthusiasm.

The goal of PIQ was not to rally the usual early childhood stakeholders, but to create a place where organizations with influence could meaningfully invest their time and resources with early learning leaders to improve the early childhood system. The strategy was to engage atypical messengers to invest in and advocate on behalf of young children. Charter members of PIQ included: the Administration for Children and Families, Region VII office; The Civic Council of Greater Kansas City (comprised of the leading CEOs in the community); Early Childhood Higher Education Consortium; the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation; The Francis Child Development Institute and Francis Family Foundation; Greater Kansas City Association for the Education of Young Children; The Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce; The Greater Kansas City Community Foundation and Affiliated Trusts; Heart of America Family Services; Heart of America United Way; KCMC Child Development Corporation; Metropolitan Council on Child Care; Metropolitan Kansas City Resource and Referral Network; Mid-America Regional Council; The Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership, University of Missouri Kansas City; and Partnership for Children.

While each of the members contributed something significant to the early childhood work in the community, two of these members were particularly noteworthy for the new perspective and resources they brought to the table.

The Civic Council of Greater Kansas City actively engaged the corporate leaders in the community and provided tremendous leadership in the areas of policy and advocacy. The Civic Council paid for lobbyists in both Kansas and Missouri to work on early childhood issues and created an early childhood education task force as part of its education reform strategy that was already actively working on K-12 and higher education improvement. The Civic Council was instrumental in securing public funding increases for early childhood in both states, and many corporate leaders continue to actively work on early childhood issues.

The Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce also made early care and education a priority on its annual policy platform and also began actively advocating for early childhood issues. The Civic Council and the Chamber created new dialogue and consciousness on early childhood education among the leadership of the business community, and continue to provide a powerful voice on behalf of young children in both legislatures.

Membership has grown over the years, and now includes 47 members. As of 2006, members of Partners in Quality include:

Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services	Lee's Summit Economic Development Local Investment Commission
Bi-County United Way	Maternal Child and Health Coalition
Bright Horizons-Citicorp Family Center	Metropolitan Community Colleges
Children's Place	Metropolitan Council on Early Learning
CitiCards	Mid-America Association of the Education of Young Children
Civic Council of Greater Kansas City	Mid-America Regional Council
Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph	Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership
Early Childhood Special Education Directors' Forum	National Center for Fathering
Economic Opportunity Foundation Head Start	Parents as Teachers Consortium
Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation	Park University
Family Literacy Center Inc.	Partnership for Children
Francis Child Development Institute	Pembroke Hill School
Francis Family Foundation	Project EAGLE
Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce	Seton Center Family and Health Services
Greater Kansas City Community Foundation	The Family Conservancy
Hall Family Foundation	Tri-County Smart Start Kansas Coalition
Hallmark Cards, Inc.	United Community Services of Johnson County
Hallmark Corporate Foundation	United Way of Wyandotte County
Head Start of Shawnee Mission Inc.	University of Missouri-Kansas City Family Studies
Healthy Steps	University of Missouri- Kansas City Institute for Human Development
Heart of America United Way	Wyandotte County Early Childhood Inter-Agency Coordinating Council
HOMEFRONT	YMCA of Greater Kansas City
Independence School District	
KCPT- 19	

There was tremendous anticipation when PIQ was launched. In addition to major new investments for early childhood, there was now a new forum that would bring together leading early childhood organizations with public and private sector leaders in an exciting way. The engagement of new voices and powerful interests to the early childhood conversation brought fresh ideas, energy, and resources to the work. One of PIQ's initial goals was to develop clear and consistent messages about the importance of quality early childhood education programs.

This work and the emerging PIQ partnerships would promote the issue of quality early learning programs to many sector of the community, and a common language was critical. PIQ members took the message of quality early childhood back to their boards and the knowledge of and commitment to early childhood began to expand. The word was further spread when board members from organizations like the United Way, the Chamber of Commerce, the Civic Council and numerous non-profits carried message about the importance of quality early childhood programs multiple times to the other boards on which they served.

PIQ was also an important forum for community problem-solving and partnership development. As the scholarship and accreditation initiatives were getting off the ground, for example, PIQ helped provide feedback and develop innovative solutions and partnerships that supported the initiatives' implementation. Additionally, partnerships that improved the early learning system developed from the collaborations and partnerships that were formed at this table.

In the late 1990's, the Kauffman Foundation commissioned a number of papers from prominent national researchers who submitted proposals outlining how a comprehensive evaluation could be imbedded in Kansas City's system development efforts. As part of this project, technical assistance was provided to PIQ and to many of its individual members. At the time, the partnership was not ready to bring this type of thinking to its mission and the field had not evolved to the place where this kind of evaluation was common.

Over time, PIQ has fluctuated in its effectiveness and focus. Initially, when top organizational leaders came to the table, things moved quickly. There was open and honest sharing and feedback and PIQ became a valuable forum for creating and refining work to support early learning programs. Over time, PIQ meeting attendance was delegated to others, and this altered the power of the group and its ability to move forward. There were times when the interest in protecting turf would outweigh the willingness to contribute to community solutions. There were periods when the primary purpose of the meetings was to share organizational accomplishments. Attendance fell off dramatically during these periods and the purpose and effectiveness of the group was questioned by many key leaders.

Despite those roadblocks, the invaluable role PIQ played in creating an early childhood system in the community cannot be overstated. The PIQ forum became the primary convening place where funders, non-profit leaders, and community volunteers collectively worked to ensure the creation of a coherent, viable, and high quality system of early childhood programs that would benefit all children in the community.

Refining the System

Questions arose early in the Kansas City effort that other communities and states wouldn't start asking a decade or more later. For example, should an early learning system be universal and available to all children? Should resources be concentrated on only low-income or at-risk children?

Some funders preferred that their investments target low-income children or children in specific zip codes where there were high rates of poverty and child abuse and neglect. Others wanted their funding to be available to any program that wanted to improve quality, as they operated on the assumption that all children would benefit from improved quality of care. With all of these voices in one place, the funding could be knitted carefully together to create a system where the priorities of individual funders could be met, and all children throughout the community would benefit. The diversity of investors

and voices at the PIQ table permitted a comprehensive, universal strategy to be implemented.

In 1999, there was a summit on financing of early childhood programs. Two prominent business leaders were involved in the financing summit and served as the co-chairs of the event. They reported while the information was helpful to them, they were frustrated by the process that sought them out as a partner, but did not listen to their recommendations. While the summit helped some early childhood leaders better understand issues around financing of early childhood programs, it did not succeed at one of its primary goals of engaging private sector leaders.

The desire to engage voices, particularly from the private sector, was still a strong need. In 2001 a chance meeting at the Kauffman Foundation between a local business leader and MCEL leadership reignited the opportunity to engage new private sector leaders. This conversation expanded and a list of 14 top community leaders who could potentially help with the early learning movement was identified.

The idea of using an investment banking metaphor to engage these leaders was developed. The business leaders would be asked to look at the product model of a new early learning system to make sure it was something they would strongly support and that reflected the community's needs and values. Ultimately, new public financing would be needed, so developing a model that would get widespread community support was crucial. Individual meetings were set up with the identified leaders and 14 ultimately agreed to help support the work. The significant cultivation and education that the Civic Council, the Chamber of Commerce and individual champions from the business community had done on this issue was evident, because the group was already aware of the importance of the issue.

In hindsight, the questions the business leaders asked at the early meetings were predictable, but were hard to answer quickly by an industry that had not thought in

private sector terms. Most simply, they boiled down to “What do you want?” “How much will it cost?” and “Where will you get the money to fund it?”

The questions of “What do you want?” and “How much will it cost?” were questions that would require six months of intense community work to answer to the degree the business leaders requested. To answer the cost question, the components of the early learning system had to be broken down, goals had to be identified, and a plan had to be developed for getting early childhood programs in the community to these standards.

Questions included, how much should teachers get paid in each different role? What is the difference between this amount and how much they are currently paid? What qualifications should teachers have in each role? What is the difference between current qualifications and this goal? How much will be required in scholarships and other support to increase workforce qualifications to this level? What should a benefits package include? How many spaces will be required to meet community demand? Will new facilities need to be built? What type of physical infrastructure improvements are needed to ensure existing facilities are in good shape? What kind of parent education and family support services need to be in place? What interim benchmarks are needed to measure progress over time? How will funding flow to programs that participate in this system to compensate them for working toward and then sustaining these higher standards? What kinds of infrastructure needs to be in place to monitor the effectiveness of these investments to ensure the public and private sector funders are receiving the impact they desire and children deserve?

Additionally, market research was done to determine what messages resonated with the public and how to best frame the issues around early learning. This led to changing the message to preparing children for success in school and referring to the work as early learning rather than child care. Among other things, it also prompted the name of the Metropolitan Council on Child Care to be changed to the Metropolitan Council on Early Learning.

The community work to this point provided critical information to inform the answers to the above questions. The *Status Report* provided a rich data set on the current status of early learning programs, teacher qualifications, and existing benefits. The Accreditation Project and Fund and scholarship initiative had clearly quantified the amount of time, support, and funding required to improve program quality and increase teacher qualifications. The compensation improvement initiative had successfully reduced turnover, developed a reasonable salary scale, and developed a basic infrastructure for administration.

Partners in Quality was commissioned to develop a detailed vision for the community's early learning program to inform the cost quantification. Four task forces were formed and countless meetings were held over six months to develop a detailed vision for the community. This process revived PIQ and united community organizations around the important work of community visioning. The vision that was developed included:

Access to Quality Early Learning Programs

- Early learning programs - family child care homes and center-based, for-profit and nonprofit programs - will implement research-proven curriculum and will work in partnership with families and local school districts to ensure children arrive at school prepared to succeed.
- A well-established, metro-wide Quality Rating System (QRS) will help families choose high-quality programs for their children. Quality ratings will determine family financial aid reimbursements to programs and operational reimbursements; higher-quality programs will receive higher reimbursements. Technical assistance will be available to programs to assist them in improving their quality ratings.
- The impact of increased investment on programs will be evaluated to ensure parent satisfaction. Program quality and children's readiness for school will be positively impacted, and constant improvement will occur as a result of the evaluations.
- Administrative support will be available to support the business operations of programs and create a more efficient industry. This support could include billing,

fee collection, accounting, auditing, overall fiscal management and purchasing pools for materials, services (janitorial, catering) and benefits and/or liability insurance.

Workforce Development

- Well-educated teachers and staff will work in all early learning programs. Directors and teachers will hold degrees and certificates in the field of early education. These professionals will receive competitive compensation and benefits packages so a competitive workforce can be recruited and retained.

Public Engagement

- A highly engaged and supportive public will encourage continued investments in early learning. Elected officials will include early learning as part of their platforms, and will work closely with PIQ.
- New funding from the public and private sectors will be developed and dedicated to various components of the community's early learning system, including quality improvement, family support, resource and referral services, oversight, accountability and administration.

Support for Families

- Sufficient funding - through family fees, public funds and private investments - will be secured for parent education and quality programs for all families who choose to access them, for resource and referral services and for quality improvement initiatives.

The plan that grew from this vision had to be highly detailed to enable the cost of the local early learning system to be quantified. The Finance Project from Washington, D.C. was engaged to support this plan development and specifically to quantify the cost of the early learning system in the metropolitan area. The process used and the Kansas City experience is outlined in a recent Finance Project publication: *The Guide to Calculating the Cost of Quality Early Care and Education*.

A local law firm that had expertise in public finance was engaged to quantify what different revenue sources would generate, as well as provide some feedback on the feasibility of having any of them designated to fund an early learning system. This made it clear what options existed to address the needs of young children, and also provided a political reality check about what would be required to see any of the new revenue streams dedicated to young children.

The process of determining the cost of the community's desired early learning system had both negative and positive consequences. On the negative side, the process of quantifying the cost of the early learning system produced sticker shock for some, and deflated the energy for generating new local funding sources, as none seemed sufficient to fill the large gap. With states struggling to balance their budgets, this left few immediate opportunities for generating new public funding. This, however, resulted in renewed realization that impacting state policy was crucial for the long term success of the community's early learning work, ultimately resulting in the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation designating funding in 2004 to support public policy work on early childhood in Kansas.

Also on the positive side, the planning process pushed the early childhood stakeholders to concretely identify needs, goals, and areas for improvement in the existing initiatives. The planning process broke down the system into components and developed a detailed plan for helping the community meet these standards. This planning process resulted in concrete improvements in the community's support for early learning programs. For example, the planning process supported the implementation of the quality rating system to expand the definition of quality and provide additional support help programs improve quality. Additionally, this planning process was used to identify community priorities and apply for new grants, ultimately yielding over \$5 million in new grants from the federal government and a reenergized local foundation community.

Over time the loose-knit group of business leaders who asked these questions became a more formally established Leadership Board at MCEL. This Board continues to provide

guidance, support, and strategic thinking on the ongoing systems development work of MCEL and the community.

The Accreditation Project

Impact at a glance

The Accreditation Project was started in 1997 when Greater Kansas City had 15 nationally accredited centers. Today there are 140 nationally accredited centers and 44 nationally accredited family child care homes. Over \$10,000,000 has been invested in improving program quality through technical assistance, facility improvement grants, and teacher training.

What early learning teachers have to say about the Accreditation Project:

As teachers become more knowledgeable in their field, they become more confident in the classroom. This confidence translates to a more appropriate learning environment and an enhanced appreciation of that learning by the families.

This may not be the type of story that gets featured but it does represent real life in pre-school. Our consultant visited us to provide support to teachers in the science area. On the day she was scheduled to arrive, one of our classrooms had multiple cases of head lice. We were in the midst of washing lines, toys and checking all the children. The consultant walked in and voluntarily delved in to washing toys. She completed multiple dishwasher loads of toys before sharing information on science with our teachers. The significance of this is that our consultant is perceived by our staff in a 'real' sense. She provides professional support, but is capable of translating her knowledge to the classroom. The visits are welcomed by our staff. Her behavior models excellence we want to achieve.

It has been a very eye opening experience with my staff. They are learning so much. It has brought our team together in a very beneficial way of learning and growing together.

Families benefit when children are in high quality programs with professional staff. Families are involved, not just informed. Books, materials, equipment & objective advice all contribute to providing that quality.

We were able to order rubber mulch and other materials to improve the draining of our outdoor play spaces. We asked parents in our program if they would like to help with the project. We were able to involve our parents in improving the play space and enjoyed the time working together toward a goal. The parents take pride in what they did and the children love to go outside now. It's beautiful, practical, and safer and we're very thankful for the mini-grant!

The teachers benefit from the training which in fact benefits the children and families. Our staff has been greatly impacted by the Accreditation Project. The numerous trainings were well presented with lots of information. I see 'light bulbs' going off and people being energized.

In 1996 the Kauffman Foundation approached Heart of America Family Services, (now The Family Conservancy, or TFC), to develop a strategy to improve the quality of child care in the community. TFC was a multi-disciplinary agency that provided child care resource and referral services and was managing a small project to get child care programs accredited through funding from Work/Family Directions. This project made it clear that without sufficient support, programs could not improve program quality, let alone meet national accreditation standards.

With this experience in mind and with the support of a planning grant from the Kauffman Foundation, TFC staff developed a feasibility study by interviewing local United Way-funded child care programs and the handful of national quality improvement projects already in place. They identified the direct barriers to program quality improvement. Those barriers included knowledge of what a quality program looked like; support to improve and sustain quality over time; and financial resources to enhance classroom materials and improve physical facilities. To address these problems, a model that would provide technical assistance, teacher education, and facility improvement grants was created. These evolved into the Accreditation Project (technical assistance), the Accreditation Fund (facility improvement grants) and Fern Webster Professional Development Fund (teacher education).

With limited resources and tremendous need, determining which community-based programs to support was a difficult challenge. The idea emerged to focus on those child care programs that received support from a large local United Way agency. The Heart of

America United Way (HAUW) had long invested operating support in programs that served low-income children. Focusing initially on these programs had the benefit of supporting programs that had received community support in the past, were relatively well known in the community, and within which quality improvements would be seen by community leaders.

As the program to support child care programs toward accreditation was designed, TFC realized that they could not be both in the position of providing technical assistance and awarding and denying grants. The emerging partnership with the HAUW proved critical. HAUW's expertise in managing grants was tapped to provide competitive grants to assist programs seeking accreditation. The Accreditation Fund, the partner to the Accreditation Project, was created. The goal of both of these projects was to build infrastructure and the capacity of early childhood programs to provide a high quality of services, long after the initiative stopped providing support.

Over time, HAUW raised over \$3 million to support this crucial aspect of the community's efforts to improve early childhood program quality. Prompted by an opportunity by Bank of America Foundation/United Way of America through its Success by Six initiative, the Accreditation Fund saw significant investments from major foundations like Citigroup, the Hall Family Foundation, Francis Family Foundation, Kauffman Foundation, and others.

Between 1996 and 2005, 153 grants were awarded for centers and homes seeking national accreditation. The grants for centers averaged \$20,000 and grants to family child care homes averaged \$6,000. Primary expenditures included playgrounds, minor facility renovations to meet health and safety issues, learning materials (such as books, manipulatives, dramatic play, science, musical instruments, math, blocks, sensory, art) and classroom furnishings (such as low shelving, cubbies, child and adult size tables, chairs, soft furnishing and soft flooring).

The United Way program served as the initial test audience for this new initiative, but interest in improving child care quality caused the effort to grow quickly. The Local Investment Commission (LINC) expanded its early childhood efforts beyond its work training family child care providers and informal caregivers. In 2000, LINC was allocated approximately \$500,000 annually from the state of Missouri to improve the quality of care in the urban core. This provided significant new funding for centers and family child care homes to receive technical assistance and facility improvement grants.

While many funders were focused on improving the quality of care in the urban core, a few were willing to invest their funding in any program that was committed to improving quality. In addition to programs funded through foundation investments, systems also committed to get their programs accredited. A Catholic diocese, a school district, Head Start programs and others increased the volume of centers working toward accreditation. Programs that were a part of larger systems were balanced by stand alone, community-based programs. This diversity of funding and community partners created a diverse mix of programs throughout the metropolitan working toward accreditation. A detailed administrative structure within TFC ensured that the desires of all funders were kept as different programs received funding and support.

In 1998, an ambitious goal of getting 100 centers in the metropolitan area nationally accredited was raised. While the goal panicked many of the organizations that would have to make that its achievement possible, it served to rally the community around a bold benchmark. Investments were framed around getting the community to this goal, and updates on progress toward the goal were met with growing excitement. This resulted in many new investors in the early childhood work and an expansion of the ownership of the early childhood agenda in the community. By mid-2006, there were 140 accredited centers in the Greater Kansas City area. This represented approximately 25% of centers in the community.

In 2000, the accreditation model was expanded to include accreditation of Family Child Care homes through the National Association of Family Child Care (NAFCC). At its

inception, there were two nationally accredited family child care homes in Greater Kansas City. By May 2006, there were 44 nationally accredited homes. Family child care accreditation support includes orientation to accreditation, on-site and telephone technical assistance, and monthly support group meetings. A total of 27 accredited providers have been trained as mentors and 23 accredited providers have been accredited with the support of a mentor. This model has made achieving accreditation through NAFCC very cost-effective and is developing a new level of professionalism in the field.

Over nearly a ten-year period, foundations invested millions of dollars to provide the technical assistance and grants needed to assist programs in getting accredited. In hindsight, the early leaders of the accreditation work realize that the challenges of quality improvement were initially underestimated, and the initiative has evolved significantly in response to the needs of the field. The leaders of this work have been extremely responsive and modified implementation of the quality improvement efforts over time to better invest time and energy given these lessons learned. Lessons learned and program modifications have included:

- **Trust but verify:** Ensuring that programs are in good standing with licensing, asking for documentation of program statistics like turnover and budgets, defining clear and measurable outcomes and holding programs accountable to these plans, and asking for documentation of progress regularly are important. These steps have enabled the Accreditation Project to better focus its resources on programs that are fundamentally sound and truly committed to the quality improvement process.
- **Get formal commitments from key organizational leaders:** Not only does the director need to be committed to quality improvement, but boards of directors, executive directors of larger organizations that provide services in addition to the child care program, and lead teachers are all important stakeholders in the quality improvement process. Formalizing their involvement through signing letters of commitment has improved the buy-in of programs and also the success rates of achieving national accreditation.

- **Provide flexible support tailored to address specific needs in each program:** There is no one-size-fits-all solution for quality improvement in centers or family child care homes. The broader the range of support that can be tailored for each program the better. Common supports include staff trainings; scholarships for classes through a college or university; technical assistance/coaching; funds for classroom improvements, materials or application fees; and support groups for directors and/or coaches.
- **If progress stops, so does support:** If a program is not showing sufficient progress toward specific goals, they need to be removed from the process. Success creates success, and one of the most effective ways to raise additional funding for accreditation or quality improvement projects is to point toward a measured improvement in programs. Programs that do not contribute to this success are not only a drain of limited resources, but they also negatively impact the ability of projects to raise funds.
- **Build partnerships:** Organizations with particular expertise or resources should be engaged in targeted ways to support the quality improvement work. For example, Hallmark donated significant employee time to construct playgrounds or complete renovations, reducing direct costs. The United Way was engaged to use their expertise in raising and dispersing funding to provide grants to programs. The more entities that own a meaningful piece of the quality improvement work, the greater the community buy-in and support.
- **Quality improvement is harder than most people think:** Having a trusted partner – in the form of a technical assistance provider or coach – in the process makes an enormous difference. While not all coaches are created equal, when there is a good match it makes a tremendous difference.
- **Support should be delivered incrementally based upon progress:** In the early grant cycles, the materials were delivered all at once to programs. In programs that received a lot of materials, this was often overwhelming and the materials were misused, broken or lost. Providing the materials more slowly in measured amounts based on achieving specific quality improvement goals proved more effective. Holding programs accountable to make specific progress in order to

receive support and materials ensured programs moved forward and enabled a more effective targeting of resources to programs that were committed to quality improvement.

- **Training coaches is an important part of creating consistent quality improvement:** The vast majority of providers of technical assistance rarely receive formal training for this critical role. While having the early childhood background that these roles require is helpful, coaches have widely varying skills and knowledge on holding programs accountable, mentoring effectively to produce sustainable change, and the other elements of being an effective coach. Creating training and feedback mechanisms to measure the effectiveness of different coaches is an area of work that is under development.

The Quality Rating System

By 2003, it was becoming clear that the programs that wanted to achieve national accreditation had either achieved the benchmark or were well on their way. Additionally, NAEYC was adding additional requirements, making national accreditation difficult for many to achieve, including currently accredited programs. There was concern that staking the quality mark solely on accreditation was shaky, as the accreditation validation happened only every three years and some program quality slipped significantly over that time.

It was clear that the field would benefit significantly from clear benchmarks in the quality improvement process that incrementally worked toward the highest quality of services. In short, the leap from barely-licensed to accreditation is too steep, and an expanded definition of quality would enable both early childhood programs and funders to see measurable progress over time. Accreditation was still the ultimate quality benchmark, but a clear path was needed for programs to achieve this measure.

A broad community planning process identified the need to develop a quality rating system that would provide incremental quality benchmarks for child care programs to

achieve. After extensive research by MCEL into other state rating systems, the model developed in Colorado by Educare (now Qualistar) was selected. The Qualistar Quality Rating System (QRS) assigned points in five areas: family involvement, classroom environment, accreditation status, teacher education and training, and child/staff ratios and group size.

The Qualistar model had a number of strengths over other state quality rating systems. First, the model was developed by the RAND Corporation using measurements that had been research-proven to make an impact on children's readiness for success in school. Second, Qualistar was paying for an extensive evaluation of their model that included both program and children's outcomes. The theory that children from higher quality programs arrived at school more prepared for success was being tested and the results could eventually be used to leverage additional investment for QRS in Kansas City. Finally, and possibly most important, Qualistar had developed the technological capacity to create quality improvement plans individualized for programs based on their ratings.

Implementation of QRS was jumpstarted by a \$1 million federal Early Learning Opportunities Act (ELOA) grant. A \$2.1 million federal Department of Education grant expanded its implementation into very low quality programs serving low income children, marking the first community focus on seeking to systematically improve the programs that needed it most. Another \$1 million ELOA grant, numerous grants from local foundations, and adoption of QRS by numerous community-based agencies and early learning programs have sustained and expanded QRS implementation.

While the development of QRS came from a highly collaborative community planning process and expanded the definition of quality, rather than substituted QRS for accreditation, there were many growing pains in implementing QRS. First, there was confusion and the sense that accreditation was being thrown out for QRS. An awkward period of about a year occurred as the expanded definition of quality settled in and partners and programs familiarized themselves with the new model. Although the foundation community transitioned quickly to the QRS model, the lack of a gradual

transition and effective communication created awkwardness and confusion for both technical assistance providers and programs.

The implementation of QRS itself also took time to iron out. Centers and homes reported that the initial assessments had serious issues, including assessors who appeared unfamiliar with how centers and homes operated and did not seem to make an effort to either explain the process or work to make the program staff feel comfortable. In some cases, the initial results and ratings were met with resistance and frustration in programs that had worked for years on quality improvement and received low scores.

Over time, these issues have been addressed and the system continues to improve. Programs participating in QRS report that the assessment process has significantly improved since the first round of assessments, with assessors communicating the assessment process more effectively and exhibiting a better knowledge of early childhood programs. Numerous programs credit the quality improvement plan they received as part of the QRS process with helping them achieve national accreditation and make significant improvement in their programs.

The results of QRS have been impressive. Since its inception in 2004, 81 centers and 49 family child care homes have participated; of these programs, 41 centers and 22 family child care homes are located in the urban core.

Of the 130 programs participating in the QRS, 72 programs had completed at least two QRS assessments by the end of September 2006. The majority of these programs have increased their QRS scores at their second rating. Further,

- The assessment found that 36 percent of the programs increased their star rating and 14 percent increased their rating by more than one star.
- The number of 3 and 4 Star programs increased from 26 percent in the first assessment to 28 percent by the second assessment.
- 63% of programs increased their overall QRS points. Learning environment scores and family partnership scores have shown the greatest improvements.

- The majority of programs that improved their QRS scores are programs that initially scored zero or one star at their first assessment and are located in the urban core and serve a large proportion of low income children.

A total of 49 programs have completed three QRS assessments. These data show that:

- Over the three year period, 42 percent increased their star rating by at least one level; of these 22 percent increased their star rating by more than one level
- The number of 3 and 4 Star programs increased from 31 percent from the first assessment to over 51 percent by the third assessment.
- More than 3/4 of participating programs increased their overall points level at time three.

Child assessments were conducted on three and four-year-olds in a limited number of urban core QRS programs serving at least 50 percent low-income children as part of a study funded by a U.S. Department of Education Early Childhood Educator Professional Development grant. Assessments were conducted on 93 children in the fall 2004 and again in the spring 2005. At the end of the pre-kindergarten year, statistically significant improvements were found in receptive language and social skills for children in these programs.

Lessons learned on QRS include:

- The technological capacity to produce individualized, high quality improvement plans is invaluable and more effective and efficient than relying on the varying skills of coaches to individually produce program quality improvement plans. While expertise is needed to refine the plans to ensure they are appropriate for each program, the Qualistar quality improvement plan technology is an important and very valuable addition to the quality improvement work of the local community.
- The quality improvement plans also better support quality improvement independent of a consultant and make it easier to hold individual programs responsible for their own improvement over time. This enables a more efficient

- use of limited technical assistance capacity, and provides programs with information needed to move forward on improving program quality on their own.
- Annual assessment, rather than an assessment done every three years, gives immediate feedback if program quality is improving or slipping.
 - Providing parents with program quality information has the potential to help inform consumer choice and put both parents in the position of demanding (and policy makers in the position of funding) high quality programs.
 - A liability of QRS is that it is not a national standard. Some funders that have employee interests in multiple locations want a national standard so they can consistently fund similar investments across the country.

Improving Teacher Education: The MARC Scholarship Initiatives

Impact at a glance

Since 1997, 22,088 college credits have been completed as a result of the MCEL scholarships. As of spring 2006, 271 early childhood professionals have graduated with degrees or credentials. These include 41 CDAs, 2 AAs, 122 AAS, 72 BAs and 10 BS and 24 MA degrees. Currently, 178 professionals are working on degrees with support of full tuition scholarships through MCEL.

What early learning teachers are saying about the scholarship initiatives

Thank you for allowing me the chance to attend college. Being a single mother with 3 small children, I would have never been able to pursue my degree without this scholarship.

This scholarship has increased my professionalism and knowledge of children. The additional education has been a blessing for me, thank you for allowing me to grow in this area.

I thank Fern Webster for the opportunity to go to college. I was a single mom on welfare. Now I have a job with a Head Start program and a new outlook on life. I am most grateful.

If I was not taking any classes in this field of early childhood, I would not realize how important my profession is and how much it impacts our society and community.

This scholarship has increased my professionalism and knowledge of children. The additional education has been a blessing for me, thank you for allowing me to grow in this area.

The scholarship has made it possible for me to continue my education, without it I couldn't be the advocate for children that I am now. I wouldn't have had a chance to learn about child development and how to help the children in my care".

In early 1996, the Kauffman Foundation approached MCEL and asked it to convene community leaders to develop a multi-faceted professional development initiative. The Office of the President at the Foundation had committed \$1 million over three years toward a professional development initiative for early childhood educators that would include scholarships, capacity building of higher education institutions, and leadership development for directors.

When the Kauffman Foundation approached MCEL, it had a fairly tight timeline in mind. Three committees were convened to develop strategies for providing scholarships for child care professionals, support for higher education leaders, and leadership development. The model that evolved in less than six months included:

- **Scholarships:** Full tuition scholarships for people working at least 25 hours a week in an early childhood program to complete an associate's, bachelor's or master's degree in early childhood development or a related field.
- **Early Childhood Higher Education Consortium (EC-HEC):** A forum for faculty at higher education institutions to build their skills as adult educators, receive information on cutting-edge practices in early childhood education, and develop relationships to work toward better alignment of curriculum and articulation agreements.

- **Center Director's Institute (CDI):** CDI emerged as a 15-hour course to build the skills needed to be a strong director.

Scholarships

The committee that designed the scholarship component of the initiative had a number of goals in mind. First, the scholarships and the Accreditation Project were programmatically and conceptually linked. The scholarships were a significant vehicle to improve program quality, and staff at sites participating in the Accreditation Project received priority in the awarding of scholarships. While the committee wanted to increase the level of education among early childhood professionals, it also wanted to make sure these newly educated teachers did not immediately leave early childhood programs for the school system or non-direct service positions where they could make more money.

The committee also wanted to ensure that the knowledge teachers were gaining was immediately put to work in early childhood classrooms and that the scholarships focused on people who were already committed to the early childhood field. Further, while it was recognized that early childhood professionals did not make much money, a cost-sharing plan to make sure individuals contributed to their education was desired. A small scholarship fund named for Fern Webster, a long-time early childhood educator, was moved to MCEL and plans were developed for its expansion.

The committee decided that the individual scholarship component of the Fern Webster Professional Development Fund would cover payment of 100% of tuition costs and fees through the college or university. Scholarship recipients were required to pay for books, mileage, and other costs associated with attending school. There was no salary increase or wage enhancement built into the scholarship initiative. If additional help was needed, case-by-case exceptions could be granted to help cover exceptional costs, but the availability of this support was not advertised and rarely accessed.

In order to qualify for a Fern Webster scholarship, applicants were required to work at least 25 hours per week in an early childhood program, either at a center as a teacher or director or as a family child care provider. Recipients further agreed to continue working directly with young children after completing school for as long as they received the scholarship. In other words, if someone received three years of scholarship support they agreed to continue as a teacher, director or family child care provider for three additional years after graduation.

Scholarship award decisions were made by a committee of funders and community leaders. Scholarships were awarded three times every year, prior to each semester. All students approved for a scholarship were required to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA) and exhaust any federal grant supports prior to using the local scholarship funds.

As a result of the scholarship program, enormous demand was created for early childhood degree programs and area higher education institutions experienced dramatic enrollment increases. The Metropolitan Community College–Penn Valley campus was particularly entrepreneurial in taking advantage of this new market opportunity, and worked hard to meet the needs of early childhood professionals by offering field-based classes and classes on the evenings and weekends to meet the needs of the workforce.

Over time, MCEL's management of the Fern Webster Scholarship expanded to include a number of other scholarship funds, including scholarships funded through another \$1 million grant from the Kauffman Foundation, funding through the state of Missouri to the Local Investment Commission, a federal Department of Education grant, and grants from foundations that focused their grants on specific community-based early learning programs. The scholarships are now called Metropolitan Council on Early Learning Scholarships. While other funders have started investing in scholarships, the loss of the large Kauffman investment has resulted in noticeable decreases in enrollment at area colleges and universities.

Lessons learned over the course of the scholarship initiative include:

- **Scholarships for professionals to complete degrees make an invaluable impact on individuals and their programs.** Over time, professionals who have worked toward degrees have repeatedly stated the tremendous impact education has had on their teaching practice, understanding of children and families, and personal self-esteem.
- **With the twin investment of compensation increases, teachers stay in the classroom longer.** The data appears to show that teachers who participate in the compensation initiative (see next section) stay in the classroom longer than teachers who do not have access to this support. However, this impression comes primarily from anecdotal information from directors. Stronger data collection and longitudinal follow-up with scholarship recipients would have yielded helpful data on the long-term impact of the scholarship initiative.
- **Having relationships with colleges for billing improves record keeping and helps students.** The scholarship's ability to direct-bill colleges for student costs helps the colleges, ensures better record-keeping, and helps students who do not have to worry about paying for classes and getting reimbursed. Additionally, when data is needed on students these existing relationships make it possible for this data to be accessed from the colleges and universities more easily.
- **Requiring all students to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA) enables limited scholarship funds to be stretched further.** So many early childhood professionals make so little that they qualify for Pell Grants and other grants. By requiring all scholarship awardees to complete this paperwork, more students were able to benefit from the limited philanthropically-funded scholarships.

Early Childhood Higher Education Consortium

Discussion about improving the education level of early childhood teachers and directors inevitably also included the need to build higher education capacity. A committee of higher education faculty was convened at the same time as the scholarship committee to identify strategies to build the skills and knowledge of higher education faculty, as well as develop articulation agreements and other supports so students could seamlessly move from one degree to another.

The Early Childhood Higher Education Consortium (EC-HEC) was developed to address these issues. The members of EC-HEC received professional development on adult learning styles, effective adult teaching strategies, and classes on cutting edge research on early childhood development and learning. The goal of these sessions was to increase faculty capacity to instruct early childhood teachers and to make sure the latest information on early childhood development was being taught. While this project was successful at bringing information on the latest research to faculty and greatly expanding the professional development to which they had access, it was less successful at prompting improved teaching practices.

MCEL also took the lead on a number of other system development efforts, specifically on career and professional development. Through a grant from the Kauffman Foundation to Wheelock College, Greater Kansas City was one of a few communities that participated in Wheelock's efforts to build career and professional development systems for early childhood professionals. MCEL took the lead on convening and developing core competencies for early childhood professionals that are identical for Kansas and Missouri. This effort was extremely time-consuming since the two states have separate systems with very different standards. It proved to be an important building block, however, as both states use these core competencies to approve in-service training and Missouri used them to develop their training registry.

Wheelock also provided support to MCEL and EC-HEC to advance higher education and career development supports. Building these relationships among EC-HEC members also had the goal of creating better formal relationships between the institutions, specifically in the development of articulation agreements between two-year and four-year institutions. Over time, new articulation agreements were developed, most significantly in a partnership between Metropolitan Community College-Penn Valley and Park University. Park University created its new degree with full articulation using Penn Valley as a model. This 2+2 degree agreement enables students to transfer seamlessly from a two-year to a four-year degree without having to repeat any classes. These two higher education institutions educate the vast majority of the early childhood educators in the community and the partnership provides an important path for advancement.

Despite these advances, there are still barriers to building a seamless higher education system:

- Poor basic skills of students are a concern for all of higher education. Far too many students arrive without the basic reading, writing, math and critical thinking skills to complete classes effectively. Requiring all students to complete basic competency exams and take remedial courses, if needed to ensure preparedness, is now required at Metropolitan Community College-Penn Valley.
- The content in degrees, and the extent to which cutting edge practices and the latest science on early childhood development are taught, are issues about which both students and child care program administrators express concern. The needs of low-income, high risk, English-language learners, and children with special needs are not infused throughout the curriculum and teacher preparation, While EC-HEC helped provide faculty with information on new developments in the field, there is currently no organized forum for faculty to gain new knowledge or make curriculum revisions with feedback and input from other stakeholders such as program directors who are serving high-need children.
- The vast majority of people who have completed two-year degrees in early childhood or a related field have completed AAS degrees. These AAS degrees are thought of as “terminal” degrees and were not designed to be a stepping stone for

people to move to a four-year degree. Students who decide they want to continue their education are often frustrated by the perceived barriers they see in having their AAS not fully count toward completion of the first two years of a four-year degree.

- Developing teaching methods that help students transfer the content knowledge gained in the college classroom to their teaching practice in the early childhood classroom is an ongoing challenge. When students are able to recite facts about child development or early childhood education principles but do not translate this knowledge to improving teaching practices, the community will not see its investments translate into better school readiness.
- There are a growing number of early childhood professionals who completed degrees in other countries, primarily in Mexico or Central America. The lack of a system to translate transcripts and consistently give education credit where it is due negatively impacts individuals who are seeking positions with more responsibility, as well as systems, such as Head Start, that are seeking professionals with degrees.

Forum for Early Childhood Leadership and Organization Development/Center Director's Institute

The Center Director's Institute (CDI) was developed as the third component of the professional development initiative. The goal of CDI was to build the skills of center directors. Nearly 100 directors from Greater Kansas City and over 375 directors in the six-state region completed the 15 hour course of study. Designed to enhance both specific skills such as finance, budgeting, and human resource management, CDI also helped develop relationships among the directors, who attended the institute in cohorts. The CDI included information on how to support scholarship recipients in the early childhood workplace; what was required to create and sustain change over time; understand the larger movement of which they were a part; and be motivated to continue their personal professional growth and development in leadership and management.

Another element of the professional development work included building leadership capacity in the field. The Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership (MCNL) at the Henry W. Bloch School of Business at the University of Missouri-Kansas City was doing nationally recognized work to enhance the performance of the nonprofit sector. The Kauffman Foundation approached the MCNL's leadership to see if they would develop a plan to enhance the performance of the early childhood industry. The Forum for Early Childhood Organization and Leadership Development was developed in response to this request. The Forum became the incubator for broader work that ultimately spanned six states and was also supported by the Mott and Danforth Foundations.

Funding for continuing CDI was not found after the second \$1 million grant from the Kauffman Foundation expired in 2001. Over the next few years the other sources of funding for this work decreased, causing the Forum to greatly reduce subsidized programming specifically tailored for the early childhood community. Ultimately, the Midwest Center folded leadership and management education opportunities for the early childhood audience into regular MCNL programming. The Family Conservancy has since developed a Director's Training Series to fill the gap in director professional development. MCEL is currently working with Kansas and Missouri to develop a Director's Credential.

Tri-County Smart Start and Compensation Advancement Project Initiatives

Impact at a glance

The compensation initiatives have significantly decreased staff turnover, from an average of 87% in participating centers to 15%. The average wage increase is \$1.34 per hour. A total of 53 centers and 510 directors, teachers and assistant teachers have received support since the initiatives' inception. Currently 241 staff in 34 centers are receiving compensation support.

In 2000, a partnership spearheaded by the United Way of Wyandotte County to improve early learning services in Johnson, Leavenworth and Wyandotte counties was formed. The partnership received a grant through Smart Start Kansas, a new funding source through the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund. The Tri-County Smart Start Partnership decided to target high staff turnover by focusing on improving teacher salaries. The proposal to provide hourly salary increases based on education and experience was approved and the Partnership received initial funding for 17 centers.

The initiative was modeled on a similar project in the state of Washington, which augmented hourly salaries and developed a salary schedule that provided incremental salary increases based on the education and experience of center teachers and directors. The Smart Start partnership provided funding for the gap between current and recommended wages, as well as a small administrative stipend. The initiative also provided funding for flexible benefits, which was initially calculated at \$300 for each full-time teaching staff person and \$150 for each part-time teaching staff person. Centers could use the funding to help cover the cost of creating or enhancing benefits, teacher training, and other professional development opportunities, such as college tuition, books, professional early learning conferences or memberships to early learning organizations (e.g. NAEYC).

The compensation initiative worked hard to develop strategies to ensure that funding was appropriately increasing wages. It required programs to provide a compensation plan prior to receiving funding, and wage records documenting ongoing compliance with the wage plan. The model was time-consuming for staff to oversee, but very popular with the participating centers.

In 2001, MCEL received a federal Early Learning Opportunities Act (ELOA) grant which expanded the compensation funding initiative to the Missouri side of the metropolitan area. The impact of the compensation project has been significant. Annual turnover dropped from an average of 87% to 15% among teachers receiving the

compensation support. Additionally, the salary scale provided tremendous incentive for teachers to go back to school to complete credentials and/or college classes.

Lessons learned include:

- Compensation is often the missing link in quality improvement efforts and makes all other investments more effective. Among centers that have received compensation funding, quality improvements have happened faster and staffs have completed college classes and degrees more quickly. Many community-based programs cite compensation funding as the most critical assistance they have received from the community's investment in early learning.
- Relatively small increases in wages significantly reduce turnover and attract and retain degreed teachers. The average hourly increase has been relatively small – \$1.34 per hour. Yet it has resulted in a dramatic reduction in staff turnover. Centers also report that their ability to recruit, hire, and retain degreed teachers has increased significantly.
- The model is expensive and difficult to expand due to cost. With limited funding, communities are always in the position of deciding whether to invest a little many programs, or to invest more in a smaller number of programs. Per program and child, this is the most expensive of the community's investments in the quality improvement work and has been difficult to expand as a result.
- Programs need to be at a certain level of readiness for compensation increases to make a big difference. Experience has shown that programs that first participate in QRS or other quality improvement work for at least one year before applying for compensation use the funding more effectively and reap more benefits.

Other System Development Efforts

During the implementation of these community-wide initiatives, other critical components of the early learning system were being developed, including a serious effort to streamline resource and referral services.

In the mid-1990's, there were more than a dozen organizations marketing resource and referral (R & R) services for businesses and others who were looking for cost-effective ways to help their employees find child care. There were efforts to bring together the various R&R agencies to reduce duplication and simplify access by consumers, with Hallmark providing the funding. After more than two years of meetings and presentations by numerous national experts, participation in the process decreased. The decrease was due more to agencies opting out rather than a deliberative process that identified those best positioned to deliver services.

What the meetings did accomplish was to identify a shared vision about what child care R&R would look like, although funding has never been sufficient to finance the vision of what those services could be. By 1999, there were two primary organizations receiving state and foundation funding to provide R&R services. Although one organization was significantly larger than the other, the two organizations were able to streamline services by collaborating to establish one phone number for consumers to use metro wide, to create a common child care R&R Web site and to market under one name. In 2005, the smaller organization ceased operations and the other now delivers R & R services for the entire metropolitan area.

Public Policy

The importance of working on public policy to sustain the local work has grown over time. In 1997, Missouri Governor Mel Carnahan, with support from the Kauffman and Danforth Foundations, appointed a statewide commission on early education that included a number of work groups. The collective effort from this partnership yielded the Early Care and Development Fund in 1988, often referred to as HB1519. This fund provided resources for multiple early childhood issues, including different subsidy rates for providers that were accredited or served a disproportionate share of subsidized children; a dramatic expansion of the Missouri Preschool Project; and new grants to community-based providers to improve facilities and quality.

These new resources supported local efforts and provided a new stream of revenue. It was clear that local work could be supported and elevated by targeted public policies and investments. The following year, a joint policy platform was created by a coalition of organizations in the community that advocated for early care and education issues. A platform was created for Kansas and Missouri to address policy issues in each of the states. This platform was then presented to and adopted by all members of Partners in Quality. Its approval ensured there was a collective policy voice from Greater Kansas City.

Both the Civic Council and the Chamber of Commerce adopted this platform as well. Their lobbyists were invaluable in moving funding and policy changes through the legislatures. In 2001, the Civic Council spearheaded an effort to include early childhood programming in the final plan for investment of a proposed excise tax on cigarettes. While this measure narrowly failed, the Civic Council worked extremely hard to ensure early childhood remained a part of the ballot language for the investment of the proposed tax revenues.

While not directly a part of the system's development work, the energy and momentum around early childhood issues made a number of significant capital campaigns possible. Over \$15 million has been invested over the last decade to build numerous state-of-the-art facilities in the community, largely as a result of the generosity of area foundations. These sites provide early childhood programs to over 1,000 children a day and include:

- Hiersteiner Child Development Center at Johnson County Community College
- Operation Breakthrough, Inc.
- St. Mark's Child and Family Development Center
- Thomas-Roque Family and Child Development Center
- Metro Early Learning Center

A tremendous planning effort led by Project EAGLE which included dozens of partners in Wyandotte County recently created a plan for an Educare facility, a non-profit campus,

and relocation and expansion of the children's museum. This capital campaign is currently under development and has attracted significant commitments from national foundations.

Current Work on Early Learning in Greater Kansas City

The work on improving early learning opportunities for young children in Greater Kansas City continues and has significant momentum because of the focused commitment to make the lives of children better. While there have been times when the work has faltered, it has ultimately been sustained because of a combination of leadership, resources, and flexibility to adjust to an ever-changing landscape.

MCEL is the nexus for the community's planning and implementation efforts for an early learning system. MCEL regularly convenes key partners, develops shared budgets for community-based initiatives and lobbies area funders to invest in this endeavor. This focus has decreased the competition between organizations and encouraged true collaboration. As a result, area foundations have been reassured that their investments are going toward community-wide improvements.

New funders have also come to the table, committing more than one million new dollars for quality improvement work in the last two years. The Baum Family Foundation, Durwood Foundation, H&R Block Foundation, Sprint Foundation, and others have made significant new contributions to the early childhood improvement efforts. Additionally, Great Plains Energy/KCP&L is evaluating how it can best invest its corporate philanthropic and volunteer resources to improve the quality of early childhood education opportunities for young children.

In 2005, MCEL became the Head Start grantee for Jackson, Clay and Platte counties, making it one of the largest providers of early learning programs in the community. In partnership with the Independence and Kansas City, Missouri school districts, The Family Conservancy, and the YMCA of Greater Kansas City, over 2,700 young children receive early learning and family support services through Mid-America Head Start. This

partnership also provides new opportunities to infuse continuous quality improvement work through the Quality Rating System into the Head Start and school district programs.

With QRS as the organizing structure, the work on refining quality improvement strategies continues. Local leaders are working closely with leaders in Kansas and Missouri on integrating quality rating systems into state policy and expanding these systems statewide. Kansas has adopted the Qualistar/Kansas City QRS model and Missouri has developed a similar model. Local leadership is working to create consistency between the two models and use innovations in each to enhance both systems.

Area leaders are also seeking ways to make QRS even more beneficial to sites. Work is underway through MCEL and the Francis Child Development Institute to develop training for the coaches who provide technical assistance to QRS sites. This curriculum is being reviewed by professionals at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and will also be reviewed by an advisory committee of national experts from around the country. This curriculum will be a valuable resource for training coaches locally. A national distribution plan to share it with other communities and states is under development.

Work from two federal Early Reading First grants also have informed and enhanced the work in the metropolitan community. One grant, received by Children's TLC Easter Seals, developed and implemented the Emergent Language and Literacy Curriculum (ELL) which measures significant literacy and language gains for high risk children. Project EAGLE received a second federal grant and implemented a national curriculum for low-income, high-risk children in partnership with a Head Start grantee and a large urban school district. All of these sites are now participating in the QRS process and the significant expertise gained through these grants is informing the community's overall strategy.

There is emerging work in Kansas to increase investment for pre-kindergarten programs for four-year-olds and to integrate QRS as a component of the Pre-K requirements. In 2006-2007, \$2.3 million will be invested for Pre-K pilots in six counties, including two in Kansas City. KACCRRRA, the state resource and referral agency, is currently implementing a pilot of the QRS system with dozens of school and community-based programs serving over 600 children in six counties across the state. This capacity will be expanded to support the Pre-K pilots. The pilots and an equivalent group of control classrooms will have a comprehensive evaluation of both children and program outcomes that will be overseen by the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University in partnership with the University of Kansas. The foundation set by the Pre-K pilots will provide a platform for Pre-K expansion in the future, as well as imbed QRS into state policy and ensure sustainability of the local QRS efforts.

Lessons Learned

There are many lessons to be learned about Kansas City's experience.

The arc of change is long. Keep the work fresh and interesting so partners and funders don't get tired and look for something else to invest in. Major systemic change does not happen overnight. It is important to carefully cultivate leadership that understands that this is a marathon, not a sprint. There have been some local investments that have produced measurable outcomes in relatively short periods of time. There have also been changes that are apparent today in the local early learning system that had their roots in grants that ended years ago. All of these investments and projects are contributing to the development and improvement of the early learning system in the community. Change is difficult and takes time, but this reality can be forgotten as funders and organization leaders lose patience with the time needed to make change happen.

Set realistic goals. The effort in Kansas City has been most effective when it has measured impact along the way and rallied resources behind specific, measurable goals. Updating these goals keeps the work fresh and interesting, creates opportunity for new partners to get engaged and keeps existing partners at the table.

Partnerships between funders and non-profits must be open, honest, and truly collaborative for them to be maximized. Visionary funders can enhance the process of improving early childhood services by effectively involving their nonprofit partners in developing the investment strategy or by fully trusting and supporting the nonprofit's vision for improvement. At times, local funders had great ideas for how they would improve the quality of early childhood programs, but they did not involve their nonprofit partners in developing those ideas. Nonprofit leaders charged with implementing grants confess that, at times, they felt they were shooting at an invisible target and were unable to fully maximize the opportunities the funding created.

An unhealthy dance between foundations and nonprofits played out numerous times. The foundation leadership stated emphatically that they did not want to control the vision or implementation of early learning initiatives, but the foundations did control the work to a great degree as funding was continued or stopped based on the funders' perceptions of the effectiveness of the project.

When collaboration did not occur, nonprofit organizations perceived there was a vision they were not realizing and felt like the mythical character Sisyphus, doomed to work tirelessly to push the rock up the hill only to have it roll down again when they did not "guess" a foundation's goals correctly. This caused disillusionment among many nonprofits and frustration among many foundations that their investments were not being maximized. On the other hand, when the funders and nonprofit leaders participated in a process that authentically brought each of their assets to the table, the investments and the work produced better outcomes and was more satisfying for all involved.

Collaborative projects should always ask "to what end?" Collaboration and partnership-building is time-consuming, messy, and absolutely worth it. But collaboration should always have a specific purpose. The early learning initiative was most successful in Kansas City is when it was moving toward a specific goal, the right players who could

make it happen were at the table, and the process moved forward even when it was not perfect.

Effective collaboration does not need to include everyone and does not need to be democratic. There is a tendency in the early childhood field to reassemble the same players for every project and to restart conversations when someone new joins. This wastes precious time and resources and does not strategically bring the best possible thinking to bear on new projects.

Different methods have to be used to get buy-in. Sometimes a carrot works and sometimes a stick is needed. This lesson has been learned at every level of the quality improvement work, whether dealing with early learning programs, higher education institutions, or major community-based agencies. Strong, focused leadership and a broad-based collaboration that can tell the difference between when to gently prod and when to leave the detractors behind is critical to success.

While critical constructive feedback is essential, there come times in system development when the programs that aren't showing improvement are a drain on resources, rather than a contribution. The same is true of critical voices and partners that drain more energy from the work than they contribute. Effective leaders develop graceful ways to un-invite participation that is not constructive and is bogging down the process.

Ongoing institutional capacity is needed to sustain progress over time. An institutionalized coordinating mechanism that was both responsive and flexible helped the early childhood initiative weather the inevitable changes in interests, funders, opportunities, and issues. MARC and MCEL have played a valuable role in sustaining community momentum, bringing new funding to the table, and facilitating the creation of entrepreneurial initiatives that elevated the overall community work. MCEL also served as the key organization for interacting with other sectors, such as the business community, and brought clarity to early childhood issues in a way that individual stakeholders with vested interests in parts of the system could not.

Strategic linking of the initiatives creates bigger impact. Early on in Kansas City’s work, there was support to help programs become accredited and to award scholarships to help teachers complete degrees. While teachers whose workplaces participated in the Accreditation Project received priority in the awarding of scholarships, there was not tight alignment early on between these initiatives to provide multiple levels of support to the same program. Centers could access grants to help gain accreditation, and individual teachers within these programs could apply for scholarships. But it was largely up to the early childhood programs to maneuver through the options, rather than having a package of support individually tailored to improve all aspects of the program. While this was somewhat deliberate, in hindsight, it is not clear whether larger gains could have been made more quickly if the funding had been more tightly focused to show how these investments could create programs of excellence.

Under-promise and over-deliver Expectations are critical. There have been times when a project was seeing results, but it did not move as quickly as leadership had promised, and therefore was not perceived as a success. This is particularly important with the business community, which moves quickly and can become impatient with the slow pace of reform. This was exacerbated more than once when early childhood leadership over-promised how quickly information could be gathered or projects could be launched.

Create many ways for individuals, foundations and businesses to invest in the early childhood system Foundations have been strategically cultivated to invest in early childhood issues and many funders are now willing to invest in system-level reforms such as the ones outlined in this report. Key funders were also encouraged to use their expertise on behalf of early childhood issues. For example, the largest United Way in the community took on the role of fundraising and grant distribution, both areas of expertise it already possessed, which enhanced the efforts to build an early childhood system.

In 2005, a new strategy for investment was developed. There are currently a number of foundations investing in the system by “adopting” individual sites and paying all costs

associated with their quality improvement work (technical assistance, compensation increases for staff, facility improvement grants, and scholarships for teachers and/or directors.) These donors have developed relationships with the sites where they invest and have become extremely vocal advocates for early childhood issues. The sites are seeing tremendous improvement in quality as a result of the investment.

Young children need powerful allies to speak on their behalf. When strategic partnerships are formed to lobby on behalf of early learning issues, the impact is much greater than when individual agencies go it alone. When the lobbyist for the Chamber of Commerce speaks about the importance of quality early learning programs to state and federal elected officials, the message gets heard in a different way than when it's received solely from child advocates.

True collaboration is impossible when agencies are competing against each other for limited funds. A major reason why the Kansas City model is successful is that the major players came together, jointly developed funding proposals, and worked with foundations on what elements of the ongoing work each foundation will fund. This is much more efficient and produces better outcomes than individual organizations competing against each other for limited grant resources. Without this joint proposal development, competition between the organizations for limited resources is inevitable and true collaboration is impossible.

Engaging multiple interests and funding sources to support various pieces of the system has helped the work to weather changes over time. There have been many moments of uncertainty in the local early learning effort when large funders pulled out or major early childhood service providers closed their doors. It has been critical throughout this process to engage new partners based on their self-interest. A broad coalition and diverse ownership ensured that the initiative had the credibility to weather these changes. Additionally, by creating a table where there is space for everyone and roles are assigned that build on participants' strengths, the best of all worlds can be brought to bear on the challenges of improving early childhood systems.

Information gaps will be filled with misinformation. Communicate thoughtfully and repeatedly to all stakeholders. Targeted communication that repeats key messages in multiple forums is crucial to keep momentum going. When this is done well, it keeps major players united and moving forward. When it doesn't happen, it can cause confusion and frustration. For example, when Greater Kansas City expanded its definition of quality to include measurement by a quality rating system, not just accreditation, there were a lot of questions raised and misperceptions. The community leadership that was part of the planning to make this change had been involved for months in the conversation, and QRS seemed to be a logical next step in the work. However, communication to community leaders, technical assistance providers and center directors was not well thought out, which caused much confusion. Clear communication with all parties affected, particularly during times of change, is critical.

Don't reinvent the wheel. Learn from others and adapt the work to serve your community. Throughout the effort in Greater Kansas City, the approach of early learning advocates in other states and communities has been studied and adapted to fit this locality. Time and money was saved. Additionally, mistakes made by others were avoided, enabling local funding to be used more effectively.

Process is important, but the end product matters. Early childhood educators often say "it's the process, not the product" as they teach others about how young children learn. The process of system-building absolutely matters. There is no way that something as complicated and difficult as building an early childhood system could happen without a lot of discussion and collective buy-in. But when building an early learning system, the product really does matter, particularly if stakeholders from other sectors are going to be involved.

There is such a thing as too much planning. Strategic planning has become an overused term, and many are suffering from planning fatigue. There is a perception that some organizations and individuals believe that the planning process is an end to itself.

The work in Kansas City has been most effective when the planning process had a definite end and there were well-defined next steps after the planning was completed.

Investment in evaluation enhances the work. The data gathered through the *Report Card* provided the community with an important barometer on the impact of the movement to improve early learning. Outside evaluation has provided validation of the effectiveness of the community's investment. The outcomes from a strong, unbiased evaluation helped attract new interests to the table and expanded the investor circle. The investment in evaluation more than paid for itself many times over.

Using a regional focus has enhanced the initiative. An argument could be made that quality early learning programs will make the biggest impact on low-income and high-risk children. In Kansas City, taking a regional approach and investing in programs that serve all children has been questioned, but it has been crucial to the local success. The goal of the work has not been just to impact individual child care centers, but to influence and improve the entire sector.

The local effort has grown over the past 15 years because leaders have been able to knit together funding and support from many sources to create a coherent system that makes sense for all consumers. The process has been diverse and strong enough that leadership at all levels has been able to maneuver through the varying expectations of funders, programs, and service providers. Some elements of the initiative have lost funding or been discontinued. If the approach had not been holistic, these losses could have stopped the process.

The change process is not linear. Just because something was tried once does not mean it should not be attempted again. There have been a number of instances where projects got underway and, for a variety of reasons, the timing was just not right and they failed to get off the ground. Yet later, when the context had changed, efforts to launch the same project were more successful. The fact that something did not succeed once does

not mean the issue is not important. It's critical to study why the idea did not take off the first time and adjust strategy accordingly.

Celebrate success and progress along the way. The community created an annual Quality Celebration to publicly acknowledge the educational achievements of individual early education teachers and the accreditation of programs. The Quality Celebration provides a powerful way to reinforce the buy-in of teachers and directors to continue the difficult work of quality improvement.

Next Steps: Does history tell us what to do next?

The early childhood leaders in Greater Kansas City have much to be proud of. They could easily rest on their laurels and continue to implement the initiatives outlined in this report. That would be unfortunate for both the children of Kansas City and other communities who can learn from the Kansas City experience. If the following three recommendations were tackled with the same energy and focus that has been demonstrated in the past, Kansas City could become a groundbreaking model that could inspire early childhood system-building in communities around the county.

- **Additional focus must be brought to improving children's outcomes.** Initial assessments of children's outcomes in QRS sites show promise that the community's early childhood investment is improving the readiness of children for success in school. These outcomes must be deepened and sharpened. The implementation of this system should be adapted based on the results of these assessments to ensure all investments are having maximum impact on improving the well-being of young children.

The assessments and reports from coaches have shown there is significant room for improvement in the implementation of developmentally appropriate curriculum and activities, administrative skills of directors, and enhancement of the teaching skills of teachers. This could be accomplished through improving

teacher education (see below) and through offering on-site coaching to help teachers enhance their teaching skills.

The coaching curriculum that the Francis Child Development Institute and MCEL are developing is a step in the right direction. Identifying other strategies to improve the skills of coaches and ensuring they are improving the skills of teachers is critical. It may also be worthwhile to expand the definition of quality measured by QRS to include such additional measures as program administration, curriculum, and interactions between teachers and children.

- **The preparation of teachers and the higher education system must be improved.** The quality of early childhood programs rests most significantly on the preparation and skills of individual teachers. Improvements have clearly been made in the higher education system in recent years, with the creation of new degrees, the creation of flexible classes and degree programs to meet the needs of the industry, and hundreds of early childhood professionals currently working on degrees.

But there are serious weaknesses in the rigor and content of the curricula at area higher education institutions and too many students are emerging from degree programs without basic academic skills, let alone cutting edge early childhood teaching abilities. Reforms in urban K-12 education show that when teachers have strong teaching skills, children do better socially, emotionally and cognitively. The same lesson is beginning to be recognized in early childhood education. Early childhood degree programs must instruct teachers on how to educate in developmentally appropriate ways, not merely attend to the social and emotional development of young children through facilitating positive play environments.

This challenge should be a priority of MCEL. It should convene appropriate leadership and develop a strategy for addressing this issue. Through its roundtable, a comprehensive strategy is being developed by a broad-based team

of community leaders to inform the development of a Pre-K to post-graduate pipeline of educational access and opportunity.

- **Connections with two critical partners – school districts and legislatures in Missouri and Kansas – must be strengthened.**
 - There have never been strong partnerships between the local early learning community and the area school districts. The purpose of quality early learning is to prepare children for success in school. A lack of dialogue and alignment between the two systems means that this is more theoretical at this point and there are disconnects between the focus and work of the two sectors. A strong partnership would ease children’s transition from early childhood to K-12 education.
 - Any long-term, system-wide improvement in the early learning sector will require new public investment. Partnerships and funding from the two states will be crucial. But there has not been sustained focus and expertise to create new public funding for early learning. This should be a key priority of those involved in the early learning movement. Incredible progress has been made in Kansas City that has impacted thousands of children. But this effort will remain small scale, and will be subject to the whims of foundations, if a serious effort is not made to obtain public investment in both Kansas and Missouri.

The leadership of hundreds nonprofit organizations, foundations, businesses, and other community groups has created tremendous opportunity for young children. Those who have dedicated countless hours, and in many cases their careers, to this initiative, have created a wonderful opportunity for Greater Kansas City’s children and families. Tens of thousands of lives have unquestionably been improved through this effort. The foundation that has been built is strong. But far too many children and families are not being served.

If any community can accomplish the goal of ensuring all children enter school prepared to succeed, it is Greater Kansas City. It will be exciting to watch how the next chapter of this endeavor unfolds.

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