from dream to reality

The Growth of Early Learning in Kansas City

A report from the Mid-America Regional Council’s Early Learning Department
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 by successfully rallying tremendous leadership, resources, funding and community will to improve the start that the youngest children in the community receive.

This story began 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 little support to help programs improve their quality.

Fast forward to 2006. Tens of millions of dollars from the public and private sectors have been invested in an early learning system in Greater Kansas City. Facilities have been upgraded, thousands of hours of technical assistance have been provided, teacher education has improved and turnover has decreased – all significantly contributing to an increase in the quality of early childhood programs and children’s readiness for school.

There have been countless planning processes across the U.S. to improve the quality of early childhood programs. Why has the effort in Kansas City turned into something significant? This report tells the story of how a system of high quality early learning has been built.

This document is a summary of a more extensive report on the history of early learning in Greater Kansas City. A PDF of the complete report can be downloaded at www.marc.org/mcel. For additional copies of this report, call 816/474-4240.
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 nonprofit that convened people to develop community responses to quality of life issues.

The multitude of geopolitical boundaries in Greater Kansas City made addressing child care problems 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 anything of substance to be accomplished.

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. 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. In 1989, MARC created the Metropolitan Council on Child Care (now the Metropolitan Council on Early Learning, or MCEL).

In hindsight, the decision to form 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, the environment 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 was – and still is – primarily privately run and made up of thousands of individual business owners, including churches, homes, nonprofit and for-profit agencies. Developing initiatives that could bring organization, standards and quality to this diverse industry was a significant challenge.

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. Early philanthropic investments in the early learning system 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.

While many early childhood leaders remember this time as a period of great anticipation, others look back with frustration. Much time had to be spent agreeing on definitions, debating the merits of focusing on children from birth to five or birth to age 12, and other philosophical issues. 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.

It was out of this beginning that four major initiatives emerged that would have a major impact on the quality of early learning in the region. Those initiatives were: Partners in Quality; the Accreditation Project and Quality Rating System; the Fern Webster Professional Development Fund; and the Compensation Initiative.
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. A number of organizations and businesses immediately 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: Administration for Children and Families, Region VII office; Civic Council of Greater Kansas City (comprised of the leading CEOs in the community); Early Childhood Higher Education Consortium; Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation; Francis Child Development Institute and Francis Family Foundation; Greater Kansas City Association for the Education of Young Children; Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce; Greater Kansas City Community Foundation; 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; Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership, University of Missouri-Kansas City; and Partnership for Children.

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

Over time, PIQ 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, which altered the power of the group and its ability to move forward. While there were surges in PIQ’s effectiveness and engagement, there were other times when interest in protecting individual turf outweighed the willingness to contribute to community solutions. Attendance fell off dramatically during these difficult periods and the purpose and effectiveness of the group was questioned by many key leaders.

Despite those roadblocks, PIQ played an invaluable role in creating an early childhood system in the community. 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.
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 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.

A model was created that would address the major barriers to quality improvement through providing technical assistance, teacher education and facility improvement grants. These priorities evolved into the Accreditation Project (technical assistance), the Accreditation Fund (facility improvement grants) and Fern Webster Professional Development Fund (teacher education).

Between 1996 and 2005, 153 grants were awarded to centers and homes seeking national accreditation. The grants to centers averaged $20,000 and grants to family child care homes averaged $6,000. Common expenditures included playgrounds, minor facility renovations to meet health and safety issues, learning materials and classroom furnishings (such as cubbies, child and adult size tables, chairs, soft furnishing and soft flooring).

In 1998, an ambitious goal was set of getting 100 centers in the metropolitan area nationally accredited. 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 represents approximately 25 percent 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 the inception of the project, 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, peer-to-peer mentoring and monthly support group meetings.

**Impact at a Glance**

The Accreditation Project was started in ten years ago when Greater Kansas City had just 15 nationally accredited child care centers. By 2006, there were 140 nationally accredited centers and 44 nationally accredited family child care homes. More than $10 million has been invested in improving program quality through technical assistance, facility improvement grants, and teacher training.

**Lessons Learned**

- Verify that programs are in good standing with licensing prior to investing time and funding.
- Get formal commitments from key organizational leaders – directors, boards, teachers – to ensure all levels of leaders are committed to quality improvement.
- Provide flexible support tailored to address specific needs in each program.
- If a program is not showing sufficient progress toward specific goals, remove them from the process and focus resources where they can have a measurable impact.
- Support should be delivered incrementally based upon progress toward goals.
- Training technical assistance consultants is an important part of creating consistent quality improvement.
- Organizations with particular expertise or resources should be engaged in targeted ways to support the quality improvement work.
- Quality improvement is harder and takes more time than most people think.
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 quick transition and lack of communication created 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.

Over time, these issues have been addressed and the system continues to improve. 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 to 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 QRS, 72 had completed at least two QRS assessments by the end of September 2006. The majority of these programs increased their QRS scores at their second rating.

A broad community planning process identified the need to develop a quality rating system that would provide incremental quality benchmarks for child care programs. After extensive research by MCEL into other state rating systems, a 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. An individualized quality improvement plan based on the program’s scores was also produced as part of the rating process.

Local 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 the implementation of QRS into very low-quality programs serving children from low-income families. Another $1 million ELOA grant, numerous grants from local foundations, and adoption of QRS by many 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 just substituting QRS for accreditation – there were many growing pains in implementing QRS.

By 2003 it was becoming clear that the programs that wanted to achieve national accreditation had either met the benchmark or were well on their way. However, there was concern that staking the quality mark solely on accreditation was insufficient.

There was evidence that the field would benefit significantly from specific benchmarks in the quality improvement process that incrementally worked toward the highest quality of services. In short, the leap from barely licensed to accreditation was 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.

The quality rating system

The capacity to produce individualized, high-quality improvement plans is invaluable. Consistent quality improvement plans are more effective and efficient than relying on the varying skills of coaches to individually produce program quality improvement plans. Quality improvement plans make it easier to hold individual programs responsible for their own progress over time. An 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. A liability of QRS is that it is not a national standard, making securing some foundation funding difficult.

lessons learned
In 1996, the Kauffman Foundation approached MCEL and asked it to convene community leaders to develop a multifaceted professional development initiative. 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.

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 evolved into a 15-hour course to build the skills needed to be a strong director.

A small scholarship fund named for Fern Webster, a longtime Kansas City early childhood educator, was moved to MCEL. The Kauffman Foundation committed $1 million over three years toward the Fern Webster Professional Development Fund in the fall of 1996. In order to qualify for a Fern Webster scholarship, recipients agreed to continue working directly with young children after completing school for the same period that they had received the scholarship.

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.

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 funding from foundations that focused their grants on specific community-based early learning programs. The scholarships are now called Metropolitan Council on Early Learning Scholarships.

**Lessons Learned**

- A scholarship program’s ability to directly bill colleges for student costs helps the colleges, ensures better recordkeeping, and helps students who do not have to worry about getting reimbursed.

- Requiring all students to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA) enables limited scholarship funds to be stretched even further.

- Professionals who have worked toward degrees have repeatedly stated the tremendous impact education has had on their teaching practice and understanding of children and families, and personal self-esteem.

- Data appear to support the idea that teachers who participate in the compensation initiative stay in the classroom longer than teachers with degrees who do not have access to this support.
In 2000, a partnership was formed to improve early learning services in Johnson, Leavenworth and Wyandotte counties in Kansas. The partnership received a grant from Smart Start Kansas, a new funding source through the Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund, to target high staff turnover by improving teacher salaries. The Partnership provided hourly wage increases to staff at 17 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 initiative was modeled on a similar project in the state of Washington, which provided incremental hourly wage increases based on a salary schedule that factored in 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 Tri-County Smart Start initiative also provided funding for flexible benefits, which were 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 in early learning organizations.

The compensation initiative required tight documentation of funding to ensure it 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. This due diligence was time-consuming for staff to oversee, but ensured all funding was spent appropriately.

The impact of the compensation project has been significant. Annual turnover dropped from an average of 87 percent to 15 percent among teachers receiving the compensation support. The salary scale provided tremendous incentive for teachers to go back to school to complete credentials and/or college classes.

• Relatively small increases in wages significantly reduce turnover and attract and retain degreed teachers. 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. 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. 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.
• Many programs cite compensation funding as the most critical assistance they have received from the community’s investment in early learning.
There are many lessons to be learned about Kansas City’s experience in attempting to build a system of quality early learning throughout the metropolitan area.

- 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.

- Partnerships between funders and nonprofits must be open, honest and truly collaborative for them to be maximized.

- Collaboration for collaboration’s sake is a waste of precious time and resources.

- Use different methods to get buy-in. Sometimes a carrot works and sometimes a stick is needed.

- Ongoing institutional capacity is needed to sustain progress over time.

- Strategic linking of initiatives creates bigger impact.

- Under-promise and over-deliver.

- Create many ways for individuals, foundations and businesses to invest in the early learning system.

- True collaboration is impossible when agencies are competing against each other for limited funds.

- Engaging multiple interests and funding sources to support various pieces of the system helps the work to weather changes over time.

- Information gaps will be filled with flawed information. Communicate thoughtfully and repeatedly to all stakeholders.

- Don’t reinvent the wheel. Learn from others and adapt the work to serve your community.

- There is such a thing as too much planning.

- Investment in evaluation enhances the work.

- Using a regional focus enhances the initiative.

- The change process is not linear. Just because something was tried once does not mean it should not be attempted again.

**next steps**

The early childhood leaders in Greater Kansas City have much to be proud of. They could easily rest on their laurels. 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 recommendations were tackled with the same energy and focus that has been demonstrated in the past, Kansas City could become a model that could inspire early childhood system-building in communities around the country.

- Additional focus must be brought to measuring and improving children’s outcomes.

- Assessments 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.

- On-site consultation to help teachers enhance their teaching skills must be enhanced through training and careful oversight.

- The preparation of teachers and the higher education system must be improved.

- Connections with two critical partners – school districts and legislatures in Missouri and Kansas – must be strengthened.

**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 exciting endeavor unfolds.**
The author would like to extend a special thanks to the hundreds of professionals in Greater Kansas City who care for and educate our young children. It is through their efforts that this incredible system of quality early childhood care and education is being built.

A special thank you to the civic, business and philanthropic communities in metropolitan Kansas City for their dedication and commitment to helping the efforts to establish a community-wide system for quality early learning for all children.

Many people made invaluable contributions to this report. They include: Dr. Karen Bartz; Dr. Jim Caccamo; Alinda Dennis; Ramona Downs; Susan Duffey; Dr. Kathy Fuger; Dr. Stacie Goffin; Doris Hallford; Jerry Kitzi; Lyn Knox; Kyle Matchell; Dr. Marie McCarther; Nancy Mitchell; Marlene Nagel; Marcia Nicely; Dean Olson; Gina Pulliam; Connie Pyles; Laura Reinsel; Dr. Carol Scott; Shirely Stubbs-Gillette; Dr. Kathy Thornburg; Betsy Vandervelde; and David Warm.

The Metropolitan Council on Early Learning would like to thank Greater Kansas City’s philanthropic community for the generous contribution it has made to this effort. Those funders include: Citigroup; Durwood Foundation; Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation; Francis Family Foundation; George K. Baum Family Foundation; Greater Kansas City Community Foundation; H & R Block Foundation; Hall Family Foundation; Hallmark, Inc.; Heart of America United Way; Jacob L. and Ella C. Loose Foundation; U.S. Department of Education; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; and the states of Missouri and Kansas.