

Building an Early Care, Health and Education System

“Just what constitutes the set of basics for an early care, health and education system and why are they so important? The basics are found at the very core of every critical policy question that must be faced as policymakers and advocates seek to expand American early care, health and education. How should quality services be incentivized? How can we break down the heretofore segregated approach to services? Who should take the lead in administering and/regulating such efforts? How do we know that such efforts are working and for what population do services work best? What will such efforts cost? Where is it best to invest scarce resources? And finally, what actually constitutes a system of early care, health and education?”

These questions, and scores like them, can only be answered when we understand that early care, health and education, like all other services, is comprised not only of the direct services that parents and children receive, but also includes an infrastructure that uniquely enables the direct services to function effectively and efficiently. Together, it is the infrastructure and direct services that comprise the system of early care, health and education” Adapted from Sharon I. Kagan, Ed.D., Back to Basics: Essential Components of an American Early Care and Education System

System building is not easy, it takes dedication, willingness to be open and it takes people wanting to **change**. It takes everyone’s efforts. Iowa is taking the steps necessary to build a system for early childhood. A commitment for change must be made for our youngest citizens.

The role for Community Empowerment has been the ‘convener’ of current early childhood groups as we all work to build a system for early care, health and education in Iowa. To begin the necessary steps, Community Empowerment received a grant from North Carolina’s Smart Start Initiative.

North Carolina Smart Start Technical Assistance Grant

Iowa is one of the five states/communities to receive a \$150,000 technical assistance grant to help strengthen and expand Iowa’s state and local partnership for providing quality care and education for young children in Iowa. The Technical Assistance Grant comes from the North Carolina Smart Start National Technical Assistance Center.

A formal assessment of Iowa’s early childhood capabilities in leadership; strategic planning; accountability; existing resources; organizational development at the state and local levels; and public support was conducted in March 2002 by the Smart Start team. The technical assistance plan for Iowa builds upon and strengthens what has already been accomplished in Iowa by local community empowerment boards. The following areas are the focus of the technical assistance plan:

- Develop a comprehensive, compelling and unifying vision for all of Iowa’s young children;
- Strengthen and build on accountability for results at the state and local levels;
- Deepen and broaden the public will to support early childhood issues;
- Strengthen leadership to increase support for Community Empowerment and Iowa’s vision for early childhood in Iowa;
- Expand organizational capacity to meet Iowa’s vision for young children.

Under the direction and facilitation of this grant a compelling and unifying vision statement has been developed. *“Every Child, beginning at birth, will be healthy and successful.”* Over 400 stakeholders across the state provided input into development of the vision and goals for the system. Numerous organizations and groups have adopted or endorsed the vision and goals.

The Early Childhood Core Stakeholders Group.

The Early Childhood Core Stakeholder Group was originally brought together for the initial assessment by the Smart Start Grant. This group has become an integral piece in developing an early care, health and education system. Currently this group is working on system development and implementation through the designated components of the system.

“Grounded in the belief that our work is not about “other people’s” children, but about everyone’s child, we cannot do anything less than provide high quality early childhood education to all children who need it; provide first-rate health care for all children; support families, the most important teachers of young children; and devote the resources- both public and private- to give every child the chance to be truly ready for school and for life. In order to do this, it takes committed individuals like you, who are willing to do more than attend a meeting now and then. It takes ‘doers’ who will take the Early Childhood message to state and local lawmakers, community meetings and civic groups. It takes Speakers Bureaus, advocacy teams, public awareness and fundraising committees. In North Carolina we like to say, speak loudly, speak often and speak with one voice. One of the most important benefits you bring to this board is your voice.” The above is a quote from Karen Ponder, Director of the North Carolina Partnership for Children, in a message she gave to the Iowa Empowerment Board in July 2003.

Building a system and a movement is all about leadership. And leadership is problem solving. It demands great and purposeful energy. It is teaching, embracing and including. Leadership is, in the words of President Theodore Roosevelt, “to dare mighty things.” Leadership is a reminder that the greatest stories in human history are those of individuals who made a great difference on behalf of others.

Early Childhood Comprehensive System Grant

The Iowa Department of Public Health, (IDPH) Bureau of Family Health, received an Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Grant from Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). IDPH and Iowa Community Empowerment are partners developing a comprehensive plan for an early care, health, and education system. The grant is a two-year planning grant.

The goals and objectives of the grant build on the system planning work that has been started from Iowa’s technical assistance grant from North Carolina’s Smart Start Technical Assistance Center. The Early Childhood Core Stakeholders Group will act in an advisory capacity for this grant.

The Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems grant will focus on three goals:

Goal 1 – Continue to develop a single comprehensive plan for Iowa’s early care, health, and education system.

Goal 2 – Develop strategies to assure inclusion of critical components in an early childhood comprehensive system plan.

- Medical Home
- Mental Health
- Early Care and Education
- Family Support and Parenting Education

Goal 3 – Strengthen Leadership to increase support for Iowa’s vision for early care, health, and education.

The Iowa Early Care, Health and Education Congress

In 2003, the second joint early childhood conference was held. Community Empowerment joined the Iowa Child Care and Early Education NetWork to host this wonderful learning opportunity. This year’s theme was *Uniting for Iowa’s Young Children: Equals Economic Growth*. Over 400 people attended the two-day event that featured nationally-known speakers: Joan Lombardi, an expert on early childhood education, Mildred Warner, an economist and assistant professor at Cornell University, Kim Ellis, speaker for the Ruby Payne poverty education organization and Rob Grunewald, a Regional Economic Analyst with the Federal Reserve Bank.

Collaborative Outreach with the Urban Education Network

Community Empowerment, along with the Departments of Economic Development, Education, Human Rights, Human Services, Public Health, Workforce Development and the Child & Family Policy Center, and Iowa Business Council are collaborative partners with the Urban Education Network as they produce a study on financing an early care, health and education system for Iowa. The goal for completion of the study is Spring 2005.

***Collaboration** involves parties who see different aspects of a problem. They engage in a process through which they constructively explore their differences and search for (and implement) solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible. Relationships evolve toward commitment to common [vision], mission, comprehensive communication and planning, pooled resources, and shared risks and products. (Evaluating Collaboratives. U of WI Extension).*

Since 1999, local Community Empowerment Areas have used collaboration within their communities to enhance existing services and develop services to fill gaps for children, 0- 5 years of age and their families. The intended results are healthy children, children ready for school, safe and supportive communities, secure and nurturing families, and safe and nurturing child care environments.

At the same time at the state level, collaborative decision making is made by the state empowerment board, while the state departments of education, public health, human rights and human services provide staff resources to provide technical assistance to local areas.

In January 2000, when Iowa Empowerment received a Smart Start technical assistance grant, a broader more meaningful sense of collaboration began. With an Early Childhood Core Stakeholder Group made up of 40 representatives from a wide variety of education, health and human service organizations, the work began toward the development of a comprehensive early care, health and education system for Iowa's young children and their families. In 2003, the work continued as the core stakeholder group and 300 additional stakeholders across the state developed and adopted a common vision, goals, and a conceptual framework for such a system.

This work has grown to build an even larger collaborative partnership between Community Empowerment and other entities all working toward the vision, *Every child, beginning at birth, will be healthy and successful.*