

The North Carolina Starting Points Initiative

Note: The following profile describes one of the 11 sites that were funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York as part of the Starting Points initiative. It was developed in conjunction with the Learning from Starting Points project, an assessment of the four and one-half year initiative, and approved by the Starting Points site as of July 1999. For more information see *Learning from Starting Points: Findings from the Starting Points Assessment Project*, prepared by Dr. Jane Knitzer with the assistance of Fida Adely and published by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University, 2001. This publication is free on the NCCP Web site: <<http://www.nccp.org>> or copies are obtainable at \$5.00 each prepaid at NCCP Attn. Publications, 154 Haven Avenue, New York, NY 10032. For further information, e-mail: nccp@columbia.edu, fax: 212-544-4200, or phone: 212-304-7195.

North Carolina's Smart Start is a comprehensive, community-based initiative enacted in 1993 designed to assure that every child enters school healthy and ready to succeed. Starting Points has been an integral part of strengthening the technical assistance capacity of North Carolina's Smart Start initiative. The North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC), a public/private entity that manages and supports the Smart Start initiative, has utilized Starting Points funds to develop a technical assistance plan for the organization, assess the needs of local partnerships for technical assistance, and help meet those needs. NCPC has also used Starting Points to help disseminate information about Smart Start best practices in a publication series.

Smart Start was enacted through legislation that was passed by the North Carolina General Assembly in July 1993. This legislation also established NCPC and has mandated that Smart Start funds be used in three areas: child care and education, health care and education, and family support and education. Although Smart Start seeks to be comprehensive, there is an emphasis on child care. Thirty percent of Smart Start funds must be used for child care subsidies and 40 percent on other child care related activities.

Smart Start is implemented through partnerships at the community level. Local partnerships are nonprofit organizations with boards comprised of local officials from departments of health, mental health, and social services, as well as Head Start and local school systems. They may also include local elected officials, people from the faith community, business leaders, child care providers, and parents. Each partnership works to meet the goal of helping all children enter school healthy and ready to learn by assessing the resources and needs of their community. Based upon this assessment, local partnerships develop comprehensive plans with the help of NCPC. Plans are designed to draw

together existing resources and Smart Start funds to create a system of comprehensive service for young children. Each of these partnerships is unique in its make up, strategies, and technical assistance needs.

In Phase I, the North Carolina Starting Points grant was used to assess technical assistance needs, develop a technical assistance and evaluation plan for the initiative, and begin to address the technical assistance needs of the 12 initial partnerships. In Phase II, technical assistance efforts were continued with a new emphasis on documenting and disseminating best practices with the goal of: supporting new local partnerships still getting off the ground; sharing ideas and approaches with other reform efforts in other states and communities; promoting best practices; and contributing to quality assurance in Smart Start.

THE GENERAL POLICY CONTEXT

The Smart Start initiative has been supported and strengthened by strong state leadership and, in particular, by the vision of Governor Jim Hunt. Weeks after taking office in 1993, Governor Hunt convened a group of experts to develop an early childhood initiative that was the basis for the Smart Start initiative. Governor Hunt was a champion for Smart Start from the onset and played a significant role in building needed support for the enacting legislation. He was particularly effective in building support among business leaders who helped garner support among General Assembly members.

Other circumstances helped to push this legislation forward as well. There was an obvious need in the state for improvement, as North Carolina's children were not fairing well in national comparisons. One in four children under five years of age lived in poverty in 1993. North Carolina was among the 12 worst states in terms of child health and well-being indicators. Furthermore,

studies showed that the quality of existing child care was poor. At the same time, North Carolina's economy was booming. Unemployment was down, new industry was coming into the state, and the state had a budget surplus. Finally, with the decrease in unemployment, as well as the anticipated impact of welfare reform legislation, there was an increasing need for child care.

THE NORTH CAROLINA STARTING POINTS INITIATIVE

Initiative Leadership and Auspices

The Starting Points grant was administered by NCPC and has been primarily used to build capacity through technical assistance to local partnerships.

Site-Specific Starting Points Goals

As a way to achieve the overall Starting Points goals, the North Carolina Starting Points initiative focused on two major site-specific goals:

GOAL 1: Ensure that local partnerships have the leadership capacity and knowledge to implement the goals of the Smart Start initiative.

GOAL 2: Implement a system for documentation and dissemination of Smart Start best practices.

Site-Specific Activities and Accomplishments

GOAL 1: Ensure that local partnerships have the leadership capacity and knowledge to implement the goals of the Smart Start initiative.

Develop leaders and knowledge capacity

- Funded technical assistance vouchers of \$5,000 each for 34 local partnerships. Vouchers were used to implement technical assistance plans and identify technical assistance needs. These vouchers gave local partnerships the ability to address technical assistance needs particular to their own organizations that would be difficult to address at the state level.
- Raised significant new resources (\$307,570 in 1998) in public and private funds for technical assistance grants to 32 counties to provide support and technical assistance for the development of new local partnerships; obtained \$1.5 million in state funding in 1999–2000 for technical assistance in collaboration.
- Created a technical assistance vendor list for local partnerships.

- Hired and trained an evaluation coordinator to organize Smart Start's training and evaluation efforts, including:
 - Assessing technical assistance needs of local partnerships;
 - Developing a comprehensive training program; and
 - Providing training to local partnerships on how to develop and measure outcomes.
- Established the Early Childhood Leadership Program for executive directors of local partnerships. The program, which is coordinated by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, includes monthly meetings and retreats with local and state staff.
- Developing an assessment tool for local partnerships to measure their developmental needs in a variety of areas.
- Developing an 18 to 24 month leadership-training program aimed at local directors and board chairs and a Rural Leadership Fellows program that will bring community leaders from around the state and the country to work and live in rural parts of North Carolina.

GOAL 2: Implement a system for documentation and dissemination of Smart Start best practices.

Use publications to spread knowledge and build quality

- Documenting best practices related to program design, management, governance, financing, and community mobilization. The purpose of this documentation is:
 - To support new local partnerships;
 - To share ideas and approaches with other interested states and communities; and
 - To build more quality assurance into the initiative.
- Developed a package of user-friendly how-to materials based on best practices documentation. The package, titled *Smart Start Tool Kit 2000*, addresses the following topics: child care, family support and involvement, health support, needs and resources assessment, fiscal and contracts management, planning, and evaluation.