

The Rhode Island 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.

The core goal of the Rhode Island Starting Points initiative has been to bring attention to, and capture support for, young children and families, particularly in the area of quality early care and education. Through strong public/private partnerships with advocates, Rhode Island Starting Points has been successful in working for the passage of legislation to improve child care and increasing investments for young children and their families. The governor's support—combined with strong state agency leadership; support from local foundations and other funders; a vision about how to use welfare reform to drive broader changes for low-income children and families; and a strong advocacy/policy organization (RI KIDS COUNT)—has made it possible to build on prior accomplishments with an ambitious policy agenda that has resulted in significant expansion of Rhode Island's basic child health and child care benefits.

THE GENERAL POLICY CONTEXT

Governor Lincoln Almond, who is near the end of his second term, has been a strong supporter of investing in economic development and education. As such, he has recognized the importance of a strong early childhood agenda and has actively championed this cause. His involvement with the National Governors' Association's Early Childhood Committee has also been helpful in supporting this agenda in Rhode Island.

Welfare reform has also had a significant influence on the course of Starting Points efforts in Rhode Island, providing a catalyst to heighten the attention on child care and child health. Rhode Island has one of the most progressive welfare reform policies in the country. The Family Independence Program, Rhode Island's name for its welfare program, guarantees low-income families access to child care and has expanded access to

health care. In addition, Rhode Island is one of only five states that maintains cash benefits for children once their parents reach the five-year individual lifetime limit set by the federal welfare block grant Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Rhode Island is a small state with a group of leaders committed to creating and sustaining a vision and plan for their state's young children. Although Rhode Island's population is largely white, the state continues to grow more diverse as it is effected by nationwide trends. This is particularly true in major urban centers, where there is a more significant population of minority children under the age of 18 (56 percent in Providence, 49 percent in Central Falls, 21 percent in Pawtucket, 19 percent in Newport, and 15 percent in Woonsocket).*

THE RHODE ISLAND STARTING POINTS INITIATIVE

Initiative Leadership and Auspices

The major partners involved in the Rhode Island Starting Points initiative are the governor's office; the Departments of Health, Human Services, and Education; the United Way; the Rhode Island Foundation; and RI KIDS COUNT. Initially, leadership was vested in the Departments of Education and Health, and the initiative was centered on developing a focus on young children in a parallel statewide school-linked initiative known as Community Opportunity Zones (COZs).

Currently, although the fiscal agent continues to be the Department of Education, day-to-day leadership has come from the staff of RI KIDS COUNT with significant fiscal support for the project coordinator from the Rhode Island Foundation. The Rhode Island Foundation has also provided support for the public engagement campaign and for staffing for the initiative.

* Source: www.rikidscount.org

Site-Specific Starting Points Goals

As a way to achieve the overall Starting Points goals, the Rhode Island Starting Points initiative focused on five major site-specific goals:

GOAL 1: Improve access to quality child care programs.

GOAL 2: Improve the accessibility and quality of health care for all low-income young children and their families.

GOAL 3: Track the benefits of state investments through early childhood outcome indicators.

GOAL 4: Promote integrated, comprehensive, and family-friendly services and supports for young children and their families.

GOAL 5: Develop and implement public engagement strategies designed to leverage public and private financing over the long term.

Site-Specific Activities and Accomplishments

GOAL 1: Improve access to quality child care programs.

Develop and implement a legislative agenda focused on improvements in child care and school readiness

- Enacted Starting Right legislation in 1998 that includes provisions to:
 - Increase the child care entitlement to cover children in families with incomes up to 225 percent above the poverty threshold; and
 - Provide health coverage for family and center-based child care providers who serve children receiving state subsidies (applies to centers in which 50 percent or more of children receive state subsidies).
- Enacted, as part of an Educational Reform bill, an Early Childhood Incentive Fund that provides \$6.3 million to school districts serving high concentrations of at-risk students. These funds can be used to reduce educational inequities from preschool through the third grade and can be put toward all-day kindergarten, child care programs, infant/toddler programs, and programs that serve children with health or developmental risks. (Initially the fund could only be used for school-aged children.)
- Scaled up professional development and accreditation efforts and expanded the state's professional development system, CHILDSPAN.

Promote partnerships to implement legislative agenda

- Involved more than 100 community leaders, child care providers, and health and education leaders in the implementation of Starting Right.
- Created networks of family-centered child care in partnership with the Family Child Care Association and the Department of Human Services.

GOAL 2: Improve the accessibility and quality of health care for all low-income young children and their families.

Develop and promote a legislative agenda focused on improvements in child health

- Enacted RIte Care health legislation in 1994 that:
 - Increased the entitlement to cover children under age 19 who live in families with income of up to 250 percent of the poverty level, parents with incomes of up to 185 percent of the poverty level, and pregnant women with incomes of up to 350 percent of the poverty level;
 - Provided coverage to early care providers (See Starting Right);
 - Increased state Medicaid match expenditure to implement the expanded Medicaid entitlement; and
 - Provided an immunization surcharge to cover the cost of vaccines.

Promote community-based partnerships to implement legislative agenda and improve access to and the quality of health care

- Created and maintained active partnerships among community agencies, state departments, foundations, and insurers to improve child health. This included an outreach campaign to promote enrollment in Right Care and immunization programs.
- Expanded a parent consultant program in the Rhode Island Department of Family Health to provide parent mentors and to help get parental feedback on health programs. Parent consultants have helped to bring a consumer perspective on planning and implementation to the department.

Working with parent consultants, the Department of Health launched a public awareness campaign to reach out to parents of young children about the importance of immunizations and the danger of lead poisoning.

GOAL 3: Track the benefits of state investments through early childhood outcome indicators.

Increase attention to indicators and data about the status of young children in Rhode Island

- Highlighted attention to young child indicators through the Rhode Island KIDS COUNT report and produced special reports focused on young children.
- Made data and analyses readily available on the RI KIDS COUNT website. (www.rikidscount.org.)
- Created early childhood-specific data and reports including an ongoing and widely disseminated series of issue briefs on early childhood.
- Produced a report, “Building an Early Care and Education System in Rhode Island,” that documents the availability, affordability, and quality of early care and education in all communities.

Create and implement new statewide goals and indicators

- Adopted an outcome-focused approach in the Children’s Cabinet with three core goals: (1) all children shall enter school ready to learn; (2) all children/youth shall leave school prepared to lead productive lives; and (3) all children/youth shall be safe in their homes, neighborhoods, and schools.
- Developed and continue to track a set of state indicators to assess progress toward the school readiness goal. The indicators are percentages of:
 - Women with delayed prenatal care;
 - Babies born at low birthweights;
 - Children appropriately immunized by age two;
 - Children under age six (and under age 18) with health insurance;
 - Children under age six living below the poverty line; and
 - Children with elevated lead levels.

These indicators will be included in the annual Rhode Island KIDS COUNT report for the entire state. Other indicators to be included are: the percentage of children with unrecognized or untreated vision, hearing, or chronic health problems at school entry; and the percentage of children aged three to five years of age who are enrolled in an early childhood education program.

GOAL 4: Promote integrated, comprehensive, and family-friendly services and supports for young children and their families.

Develop and improve programs

- During Phase I, Rhode Island Starting Points, with funds from the Carnegie Corporation, the United Way, and the Rhode Island Departments of Health and Education, funded nine partnerships in low-income communities to foster local capacity to support families with young children, building on existing COZ Family Centers. This effort has led to an increased focus on parental leadership and parents’ involvement in governance, as well as greater recognition by school superintendents of the importance of parental leadership. In addition, it has engaged new partners in early childhood issues and created partnerships between parents and local agencies. COZ Starting Points sites have also been a focus for outreach efforts, ensuring that state investments are reaching young children in low-income communities through Starting Right and RIte Care.
- With technical assistance from Starting Points, the COZ Family Centers are developing a set of core standards and best practices that will ensure high standards of performance and service to the community.
- During Phase II, targeted explicit resources through the legislature to promote comprehensive services in child care and to increase the number of Head Start slots.

GOAL 5: Develop and implement public engagement strategies designed to leverage public and private financing over the long term.

- With funding from the Carnegie Corporation and the Rhode Island Foundation, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT has produced a series of Issue Briefs on early childhood and published a special report, *Building an Early Care and Education System in Rhode Island*. This report documents the affordability, availability, and quality of child care in Rhode Island. These documents are intended to engage the public and focus the attention of policymakers and community leaders on the needs of young children
- Rhode Island KIDS COUNT convened several high-profile meetings and forums of elected officials, community leaders, policymakers, and advocates to strategically focus attention on young children. These included:

- A forum on brain development held February 1998 co-sponsored by the Education Commission of the States, the governor’s office, and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education;
- A forum on the health and education of young children held October 1998 co-sponsored by the Health and Education Leadership for Providence; and
- A panel on early care and education held January 1999.