

The Vermont 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.

In Vermont, Starting Points has contributed to existing efforts to support young children and their families, particularly in child care quality-improvement efforts. In Phase I, the main Starting Points partners were the governor's office, the Agency of Human Services (AHS), the Department of Education, and the Vermont Community Foundation (VCF). During Phase II, Community Partnerships and the Parent Leadership Alliance also joined the partnership. Community Partnerships are regional partnerships of parents, community leaders, service providers, and academics, modeled after the State Team for Children, Families, and Individuals. The Parent Leadership Alliance is an alliance of groups that are committed to making sure that parents' needs are met and addressed.

The initiative builds on an evolving framework for state and community partnerships to promote the well-being of young children and families in Vermont. The State Team for Children, Families, and Individuals was established in 1994 and is chaired by the deputy secretary of the Agency of Human Services. It is made up of key program directors from most of the state programs, the statewide services networks, the Parent Leadership networks, and Starting Points. The team consists of age-focused workgroups, including the Early Childhood Workgroup—a large informal group of people concerned about children in Vermont. Around the time the Starting Points initiative first began, the Early Childhood Workgroup established an Early Childhood Steering Committee to do regular planning around early care and education. Soon thereafter, 12 Early Childhood Councils were established to plan and coordinate early childhood activities regionally. The councils are made up of parents (half of the membership), providers, other community leaders, and individuals involved in higher education.

THE GENERAL POLICY CONTEXT

Vermont is a small, progressive state that has understood the importance of early childhood development and has been a leader on this issue for many years. With the election of Governor Howard Dean in 1991, the state began a long-term planning and implementing process to ensure the healthy development and school readiness of every child. Governor Dean continues to be a strong supporter of these efforts. Vermont has also been committed to results-based decisionmaking and community participation in the development of indicators to track the well-being of Vermont's children, families, and communities, pursuant to a legislative directive.

Vermont is a small rural state, with limited resources and deep pockets of poverty. The population is largely white. The state has a history of strong local politics. There is no regional or county governance, but rather local control at the city, town, and village level. Consistent with this, state efforts to strengthen early childhood services have been brought to the local level through Early Childhood Councils and Starting Points Child Care Networks.

THE VERMONT STARTING POINTS INITIATIVE

Initiative Leadership and Auspices

Vermont's Starting Points initiative is a partnership of the governor's office, the Agency of Human Services, the Vermont Community Foundation, Community Partnerships, and the Parent Leadership Alliance. The deputy secretary of the Agency of Human Services is the Starting Points director. The Vermont Community Foundation is the fiscal administrator of the Starting Points grant.

Site-Specific Goals

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

GOAL 1: Improve quality, affordability, and access to child care and integrate this focus into ongoing efforts to create a unified system of early childhood services.

GOAL 2: Improve private and public sector policies for young children and their families.

Site-Specific Activities and Accomplishments

GOAL 1: Improve quality, affordability, and access to child care and integrate this focus into ongoing efforts to create a unified system of early childhood services.

Improve the quality of child care through professional development

- Developed and supported 11 community-based Starting Points/Child Care Networks in the 12 regions of Vermont. Each of the networks is comprised of six to 10 clusters of providers. Some are clusters of family care providers and others center-based providers. The goals of these networks are:
 - Organizing providers;
 - Facilitating peer-to-peer support;
 - Providing professional development opportunities;
 - Connecting family care providers with centers to afford them more professional opportunities; and
 - Linking networks of providers with local Success by Six initiatives.*

Some of the results achieved through these networks are:

- Strengthening collaboration between family child care providers (FCPs) and centers;
- Increasing linkages with kindergarten teachers, particularly around school readiness issues; and
- Family child care providers participating in shaping of training and increasingly seeing themselves as professional caregivers.

- Established of the Child Care Fund of Vermont in the Vermont Community Foundation to support quality improvement efforts in child care by providing grants to Starting Points/Child Care Networks for:
 - Professional development opportunities;
 - “floating” substitutes so that providers can attend training, seminars, etc.;
 - Increased home visiting by care providers;
 - The establishment and expansion of a library of books, toys, and other resources that providers and centers may use; and
 - Funding accreditation efforts.

Leverage resources and support for quality child care

- Child Care Fund of Vermont (CCFV) has also worked to raise public and business awareness of the importance of child care. CCFV works toward this goal by:
 - Conducting focus groups with business people about child care;
 - Launched the Child Care Counts campaign, building on the I Am Your Child Campaign, which targets the business community;
 - In partnership with the magazine *Vermont Business*, established a business honor role in 1997;
 - Public speaking to different business groups; and
 - Soliciting financial support from businesses (small amounts because most businesses are small in the state of Vermont).

Develop programs

- Developed a cross-system initiative—Children’s Upstream Project—building on existing regional early childhood councils, to promote new partnerships linking the early childhood community with planners and providers from the mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, and child health agencies.

* Success by Six is a state initiative that works closely with schools and health care providers in the community.

GOAL 2: Improve private and public sector policies for young children and their families.

Improve quality of programs

- Enhanced the efforts of the Early Childhood Workgroup and the Early Childhood Steering Committee as part of the State Team for Children, Families, and Individuals to focus on:
 - Formulating core standards for center-based child care;
 - Enhancing opportunities for professional development in the early childhood field;
 - Developing strategies to integrate resources;
 - Ensuring public awareness of the importance of early childhood and the resources available to enhance child development; and
 - Ensuring that service systems and outcomes are assessed in a unified manner.

Increase attention to indicators and data about young children and their families in Vermont

- Developed benchmarks for a unified system of early childhood services. Used the Starting Points Child Care Networks and the local early childhood councils as vehicles to help build consensus around the benchmarks and to identify indicators.

Currently in the report *Social Well-Being of Vermonters 1998* these benchmarks and indicators for young children and families are:

- Pregnant Women and Newborns Thrive as measured by prenatal care, and low birthweight;
- Infants and Children Thrive as measured by infant mortality and childhood immunizations;
- Children are Ready for School as measured by kindergarten readiness; and
- Children Live in Stable, Supported Families as measured by child poverty, births to single parents, payment of child support, establishing paternity, children covered by health insurance, child abuse and neglect, children living in substitute care.

Engage the public to support the needs of young children and their families

- Supported How are the Children?—a legislative awareness campaign. This campaign includes activities such as the Month of Young Children, Stand for Children events, provider recognition nights, legislative breakfasts, open houses, and walk-a-thons. The campaign helped to build interest in the parent/community leadership training offered through the Vermont Parent and Community Leadership Training program.