

Early Childhood Cabinet Local Listening Forums Community Feedback Report (DRAFT) November 2006

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OVERVIEW

From September through early October 2006, approximately 945 citizens participated in 14 Local Listening Forums throughout Connecticut to learn about the Governor's Early Childhood Cabinet's report, "Ready by 5 & Fine by 9: Connecticut's Early Childhood Investment Framework." The forums were used to gather citizen input on their vision for young children and the assets and challenges that exist in communities that may impact the ability to reach the goals articulated in the Framework. At the end of the forums, participants voiced their general feelings about the process, which were overwhelmingly positive. While some left feeling overwhelmed by the presenting challenges, most participants were excited, energized and optimistic, not to mention informed.

The vision for children in the state may well be summarized in one comment supplied by a participant: "All children have access to everything they need to grow and learn." The common themes heard across the forums were as follows:

- Parents must be partners in all aspects of their child's care and education.
- Parents and caregivers need information about child development, expectations and services.
- Information and services must be culturally competent.
- There needs to be coordinated planning for services for children and families with control of resources at the local level.
- There should be universal access to quality preschool.
- Society must place higher priority on early childcare and education.
- Early childhood education workforce should be trained and paid appropriately.

Participants had the opportunity to voice any concerns they had about the early childhood environment and the framework, including its goals, values and top ten priorities. Many challenges and assets were mentioned in achieving the 5 R's – Ready Families, Ready Schools, Ready Community, Ready State, and Ready Workforce – that may be useful to the Cabinet as they move into their implementation phase.

LOCAL LISTENING FORUM PROCESS

Fourteen Local Listening Forums were conducted throughout Connecticut from September 12th through October 5th 2006. The statewide organizing of the forums was coordinated by the Community Results Center/United Way of Connecticut with funding from the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund. The planning, recruiting and conducting of the local forums was done by local United Ways in 10 communities, Bridgeport was coordinated by the Office of the Mayor, Killingly by Northeast School Readiness / EASTCONN, New London/Ledyard by LEARN, and Stratford by their School Readiness Council. Discovery Collaboratives, funded by Graustein Memorial Fund, played crucial roles in the

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forums in planning and outreach, as well as many other community members. Below is a list of where forums occurred, the date they took place and the approximate number of participants.

Town	Address	Forum Date	Approx. # of Participants
Bridgeport	City Hall Annex	9/28	40
Danbury	Scholastic Library Publishing	9/19	55
Greenwich	Temple Sholom	10/4	117
Hartford	The Village for Children & Families	9/26	100
Killingly	Killingly Public Library	10/4	20
Ledyard	Ledyard Middle School	9/26	102
Meriden	John Barry Elementary School	9/28	52
Milford	Pitney Bowes	9/27	60
New Britain	Lincoln School	9/16	35
New Haven	Wilbur Cross High School	9/26	113
Norwalk	Grace Baptist Church	10/5	58
Stratford	Stratford Academy	10/5	41
Waterbury	Waterbury Club	9/28	77
Windham	ECSU – Child & Family Development Resource Center	9/12	75
TOTAL			945

While the format of each forum varied slightly from one another, they all presented the report through a common PowerPoint presentation developed by the United Way of Connecticut (see Appendix A). After the presentation, most forums broke participants into small groups for discussion of three questions:

1. *What is your vision for children in our community?*
2. *What are the most important community assets for children and families in our communities? How do these assets match the goals and strategies defined by the Governor's Early Childhood Cabinet?*
3. *What may hinder our progress in reaching the goals? What challenges do you foresee?*

The presentation was available in English and Spanish. Forums presented the Spanish version in varying formats, which included providing the printed presentation only, projecting the English and Spanish presentations simultaneously, and providing separate presentations and discussions in Spanish. One community also provided a Portuguese discussion session.

In addition to the forums, the United Way of Connecticut also developed a website (<http://ecforums.communityresultscenter.org>) to post information about the dates, times and locations of forums, fliers advertising the forums, the ability to RSVP for an event, copy of the full report for downloading, and the capability for people to provide feedback on the report anonymously.

The recorded notes from these forums and the website were transmitted to the United Way of Connecticut for aggregation and analysis for this report. This report incorporates the feedback from thirteen of the forums. Greenwich's forum was a panel discussion and did not gather feedback to the questions at the initial event. Subsequent focus groups were scheduled but results from those groups were not available in time for this report. For a complete compilation of the feedback from the forums, see Appendix B.

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This report is an aggregation of feedback received from the local listening forums and reflects what participants understood from the framework in comparison to their own experiences and perceptions. This report did not attempt to confirm validity to any thoughts presented in the forums. It should also be noted that because all discussions were moderated by different individuals, groups may have responded slightly differently to questions based on how they were posed and guided by the moderator. Therefore, that is why the feedback is categorized by themes with associated challenges instead of by the specific questions posed.

FORUM RESULTS

As noted in the Overview, the feedback from the forums uncovered major themes, which are described in more detail below. The details also include the corresponding challenges described by participants in achieving this vision. Of all the themes described below, it is worth mentioning that the two that occurred predominantly in the feedback were treating parents as partners and getting information to parents about child development and expectations.

Parents are treated as partners in all aspects of their child's care and education

Of all the themes, this was the most predominant. As noted by participants, parents are the decision makers for their children and their care, and it should not be an option as to whether a parent/guardian is involved. Care providers and educators should be communicating with parents/guardians from the beginning of their care of that child to learn about the child and build a relationship with the family. As one participant described, providers/educators need to learn about what makes that child wonderful, what is important to the parent about the child coming to pre-k, and what are the parent's goals for the child? In terms of the school system, participants felt there is less communication or ability to communicate with teachers about a child in this setting, and there needs to open communication between teachers and parents.

Participants recognize that there are many factors that may impact their ability to be fully involved including parental mental health issues including maternal depression, cognitive limitations, educational levels, language barriers, work/time pressures, literacy levels, and being a teen parent; however, the suggestions were to work with families and support the family instead of blaming or trying to fix the family. For communities that have Family Resource Centers, these were often sited as good places that helped families feel comfortable and should be expanded.

All parents and caregivers receive information about child development, expectations and services

Parents and caregivers all need information about child development and the expectations of child development from schools and other systems caring for children. Information is also needed to inform families about services and how to use the services. Participants feel that dissemination needs to start from birth, if not before. There were some participants that felt information about child development should be taught in high school, which would address the need to get information to teen parents. Communication needs to stress the importance of parents as the child's first teachers.

Community assets that could assist in getting information to parents and caregivers were through Kith and Kin providers, though they said more needs to be done to tap into this resource. Other access points included doctor's offices, grocery stores, Family Resource Centers, hospitals and 2-1-1. Participants noted that pediatricians and nurses still need more education on child development and available resources for families, like Birth-to-Three.

Culturally competent and sensitive information and services to families and children

Throughout all the themes, the varying languages and cultures represented in Connecticut's communities needs to be factored into and addressed in communications and programming for children and families. It is important that materials are available in languages that reflect the demographics of the community. In addition, there need to be programs and activities in the community that are also reflective of the cultures of that community. Participants raised the issue that there is a lack of cultural sensitivity in current materials and programming and also a lack of any materials and programming that reflects diverse populations. Spanish-speaking participants expressed their frustration in the lack of information and programming available in languages other than English and the lack of cultural awareness. There was also recommendation made to expand the diversity of the workforce to be more reflective of the communities they are serving.

Coordinated planning of services for children and families with control of resources at the local level

Participants felt that in order to better serve families, there should be more local control over decisions regarding program planning, resource allocation and information dissemination. The planning from these local entities would take into consideration the diversity and any changing demographics occurring and work to ensure that adequate resources are available for families and providers to meet the community's needs. By provider, this means childcare providers (home and center-based) and other services that support families with young children. The local entity, like existing School Readiness Councils, would receive funding to allocate to the community. This local entity would also seek other funding from businesses and philanthropy to support local services. This entity could also act as a buffer between families and state bureaucracy. Participants felt this could be done regionally, but there was some apprehension as to how the region is defined.

Participants acknowledged the current state of uncoordinated services and felt that a local entity would serve to help coordinate these services. People felt that there should be one point of entry for children into the early care system and one place that information is consistently accessible. Related to uncoordinated services and of particular concern to participants about the framework were where Kith and Kin and home daycare providers fit into the work going forward. They provide much of the childcare in communities, but the plan does not talk about how they continue to be incorporated.

Universal access to quality preschool

Participants felt that all children deserved access to quality preschool. There was split opinions about whether the state should provide universal, mandatory preschool or universal access to preschool. However, participants were pleased to hear the Cabinet goals addressing all children and not just at-risk children. It is also important to note that throughout the forums, it was clear that a value participants held was that of parental choice in deciding what type of programming would be optimal for their child and family. In terms of quality preschool, many related pieces were discussed and are presented below.

Participants voiced concern about the Cabinet's priority to expand support to preschool slots for those at or below 185% Federal Poverty Level as this seemed to be a contradiction of the goal. (It should be noted that some participants took this to mean a reduction in the number of slots in existent School Readiness communities versus the intended completion of school readiness in existing communities plus additional slots for those in the remaining communities at or below 185% FPL.) There was concern that this will set up a segregated system by socio-economic status, which participants noted was more harmful than helpful. Concern was also raised about whether there would be further

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consideration to this income guideline when thinking about areas of the state, like Fairfield County, where the cost of living is higher and more difficult for families that are above 185% FPL.

The issue of quality was discussed in a number of ways from wanting to know more about how “quality” is being defined to the need to evaluate programs based on quality and the best ways to do this. It is not clear from the transcripts that everyone was using “assessment” the same, so it is difficult to summarize this feedback. Participants did feel systems should be held accountable for the services they provide, but there is apprehension as to the best methods for measuring this.

Participants have concerns about a real or perceived push toward greater importance of academic achievement at the preschool level to the detriment of physical, social and emotional development of children. This was a concern with preschool overall and came up in terms of how children would be assessed. General feelings were that this should be observational and not a written test. Participants suggest that the state be certain to understand why they want to assess children and consult with experts in this decision process.

From participant feedback, access includes the availability of slots (capacity number), affordability and transportation. Participants noted the lack of quality, affordable slots available for preschool aged children, in addition to infants and toddlers. Another large issue was around transportation, which was discussed in urban, suburban and rural areas.

Society places higher priority on early childcare and education

Participants discussed the overall lack of urgency and importance society places on early childhood illustrated by insufficient family leave policies, work environments and expectations, and inadequate public awareness campaigns and messaging. This lack of importance contributes to the myriad of problems the Cabinet is trying to tackle. Multiple participants mentioned the importance of voters participating in budget decisions at the local level to impact local education budgets. At all levels, family, community, state and national, people need to be educated about the importance of this time of life for a child. Through this, society can build agreement and ownership of goals and work together to address them. Participants recommended the development of a marketing plan for broad-based public awareness that would also incorporate aspects of getting information to parents/caregivers about child development.

Early childhood education workforce is trained and paid appropriately

Forum participants felt that providers of early childhood education should be adequately trained, though there was not consensus on what that level of training should be. Feedback was consistent in that the workforce is not adequately paid, and that programs are not equitably funded. The challenges participants raised are as follows:

- Lack of degree programs in higher education for early childhood.
- Providers need to be compensated commensurate to their level of education, however, funding should not be spent to cover teacher costs by reducing the number of slots.
- Jobs at childcare centers are stepping stones to jobs in the school system. Stopping this would require better pay and benefits for workers, but how is this addressed given other mentioned challenges?
- The workforce may “credential itself out of capacity.” There are many barriers for those currently in the workforce to going back to school. There will be some loss to the workforce because workers are not able to or do not want to go back to school. Particularly for the older

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workforce, for those with many years experience, this will be lost through credential requirements.

- Need to look into new ways of recruiting into the workforce.

Specific comments related to top ten priorities:

During the forums, participants made specific comments about the top ten priorities, at times. Below is a summary of these comments by priority.

- *Assure fiscal support for high-quality preschool for all 3- and 4-year olds in families at or below 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Level, and increase this income eligibility standard as state resources permit.*

As mentioned above, there is some confusion that this will decrease the number of slots in School Readiness communities. There is support for targeting at-risk families first. There is a lack of facilities/space that will need to be addressed, and quality needs to be defined.

- *Address state reimbursement inequities for center-based preschool programs.*

Feedback supported that reimbursement needs to be equitable based on the requirements of the program.

- *Develop a multi-year early childhood workforce professional development plan to assure compliance with state law and selected national certification programs.*

See comments above under “Early childhood education workforce is trained and paid appropriately.”

- *Provide health, mental health and education consultation to preschool programs to enhance the skills of directors and teachers for meeting the comprehensive needs of children.*

There was little feedback provided around this priority. One group from one forum commented that this priority comes across as offensive to directors and teachers, they questioned who would provide this consultation and whether childcare coverage would be provided by the state to allow for this professional development.

- *Support the design and implementation of the kindergarten assessment.*

As one participant put it, which captures much of the feedback, “what is the impact of the assessment on the developmentally appropriate care and education of young children?” Participants want the state to be clear about what will be assessed, why, and how it will be used. A couple participants mention the possibility of using the preschool benchmarks and assessments already developed.

- *Develop a comprehensive strategic plan for serving infants and toddlers.*

There was little feedback specific to this priority; however general feedback regarding the need to address services for families of young children speaks to its support.

- *Ensure that HUSKY children receive regular well child visits and an annual developmental assessment.*

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Feedback regarding HUSKY was concern about the difficulties families experience in finding doctors and dentists accepting HUSKY. They also felt that developmental screenings should be able to be conducted in other settings outside the pediatrician's office such as community health centers.

- *Provide all families and caregivers (including non-custodial parents) with information about child development, prenatal through age 8*

See feedback under "All parents and caregivers receive information about child development, expectations and services."

- *Expand eligibility categories in the Birth-to-Three Program to include mild developmental delays and environmental risks.*

There was much support for the expansion of the Birth-to-Three Program noting that the current eligibility criteria is too narrow and leaves many children in need of services and further behind when they reach kindergarten. Participants mentioned that physicians need to be more informed about Birth-to-Three services.

- *Support local communities in developing birth-to-5 councils (e.g., using School Readiness Councils) for planning and monitoring early childhood services.*

See feedback under "Coordinated planning of services for children and families with control of resources at the local level"

Community Assets

Participants named many real and potential assets that exist in their local communities and statewide from specific organizations and programs to common ways of thinking. One of the assets mentioned was the process of the Cabinet in terms of the level of energy that is being invested in this area. While people are wary about the sustainability of this effort in terms of political interest and potential funding, they are hopeful. At the local level, there many processes that are underway that participants were aware of and pleased with, which include:

- Bridgeport's Blueprint (though they note help is needed to get through their next steps)
- Collaborative work in Danbury
- Strong community bonds in support of collaborative work in eastern Connecticut
- Many ongoing coalitions with leadership and funding in Norwalk

For the most part, participants listed specific organizations and programs operating in their communities that have been assets or have the potential of being more of an asset. The list below is the common organizations and programs mentioned by participants.

- Family Resource Centers
- School Readiness Councils
- Discovery Collaboratives
- 2-1-1 and local United Ways
- Birth-to-Three
- Institutions of higher education
- Even Start

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- Boys and Girls Clubs
- Nurturing Families Network (some felt should be expanded beyond first-time mothers)
- Public schools
- Childcare providers (licensed center and home, Kith and Kin)
- Libraries
- Hospitals
- Many individually named organizations and programs at the local level

CONCLUSION

The resounding understanding of participants was that regardless of what experiences precede a child's entry into kindergarten, they will all appear at the kindergarten door with certain expectations placed on them. In order to best meet those expectations, participants voiced the importance of society (nationally and locally) being more supportive of families raising children, treating parents and caregivers as full partners in the care and education of their child, and ensuring they all have information about child development and expectations. In saying all families, they mean beyond socio-economic status and are including teen parents, immigrant families, and non-English speaking families.

Furthermore, that there be local planning, decision-making and resource allocation that reflects the needs of communities, and that these services are coordinated and support families and local service providers. This includes providing access to childcare and preschool (number of slots and affordability) at the same time the state is valuing the workforce by funding programs equitably and paying individuals fairly.