

# States Can Encourage Early Childhood Partnerships

By Susan Wilson

## The State Role in Early Childhood

States are increasingly the focal point for early childhood policy and programming. In 1995, the federal child care funding streams were consolidated into the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) to make states the recipients of a flexible child care block grant. The Fund is used by states for child care subsidies to families, numerous child care infrastructure and support programs and quality improvement initiatives. As the number of families receiving welfare payments has continued to drop, states have also been able to use federal TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) funding for child care services, often by transferring this funding to their CCDF account.

The other major early childhood program, Head Start, expanded dramatically in the past decade. With more than three times as much funding as CCDF, it remains a federal to local grant, that does not go through state government. In 1990, the Head Start Bureau, anticipating the pivotal role of the states, began experimenting with establishing a state presence, and created a grant program to fund an office in states. The purpose was to foster collaboration between Head Start and state services and to improve early childhood programs in general. Each state now has a Head Start-State Collaboration Office and, in some states, this office has facilitated impressive new initiatives in early childhood services.

More recently, states have been developing their own pre-kindergarten initiatives. Forty-two states now have some level of identifiable programming and others are being contemplated. This proliferation of state-funded pre-kindergarten programs has brought the needs of early childhood care and education into even sharper focus. New dollars, a broadening interest of policymakers and the public, and an expansion of the availability of programs are welcome additions to this growing system.

### *Issues*

Child care was initially seen as providing a safe place for children while their parents worked, but the second purpose of helping children develop has gained equal prominence in the thinking of funders, providers and parents. The funding systems and supports for early care and education still reflect the two purposes, resulting in programs that can afford to adequately serve one purpose or the other, but have difficulty serving both purposes.

Attention to the need for education, school readiness and care of young children has raised important issues for the early care and education system. More families need care that lasts up to 10 hours a day on a full year basis. Too many families are forced to piece together child care providers to cover the work day. Continuity of care is so crucial for children and parents that moving children between programs is rarely considered an acceptable solution. Another challenge for the system is to incorporate into programs the effective family-centered model of Head Start with its family involvement and comprehensive family services, but traditional child care centers and school-operated

preschools usually lack the resources and expertise to provide this level of services on their own.

As exciting as we find the state initiatives, and the expansion of Head Start and child care, they have also precipitated a crisis in staffing and facilities in many communities, which, in turn, is constraining the capacity to expand as quickly as administrators and legislators demand. The impact of staff turnover is particularly disturbing, since young children need consistent, caring adults. State agencies and community providers find they need to address professional development in order to upgrade the available teaching staff, but higher teacher qualifications, without higher compensation, will only continue the revolving door of staffing. In addition to these issues, states have extensive work to do on standards, child outcomes and other accountability measures.

### *Building partnerships*

If there is one area of agreement in the fragmented field of early care and education, it is that, for the foreseeable future, building partnerships among agencies, systems and funding sources is the way to achieve financial and programmatic goals in early childhood services.

At the current stage of development in this field, no single funding stream, governmental or private entity, or method of delivering services can provide the broad array of options that children and families need, nor meet the combined goals of child development and support for working families. Each part of the system brings its priority values, its resources and its expertise. Fortunately, they coincide at many points and they can complement each other where they differ. The common wisdom is that the strengths of all the players, when used properly, will create a strong and vital service system. Getting there is the trick.

### *State lessons*

Documentation of innovative partnerships on the local agency level is emerging. There have been few efforts, however, to formally catalog the best strategies and most productive ways to view the role of the state, though lessons learned by state managers are shared in conference workshops and personal conversations. The Children's Defense Fund's document, Seeds of Success, is the most helpful view of state prekindergarten initiatives produced thus far. (Karen Schulman, Helen Blank and Danielle Ewen, Children's Defense Fund, 1999)

As a planner in the Connecticut Department of Social Services, Child Care Team, I had the opportunity to experience the building of a state prekindergarten program that was jointly funded by the state Departments of Social Services and Education. Interested in reflecting on this experience, I have sought out discussions of state partnerships at national meetings. More formally, I have attempted to broaden my understanding by interviewing state administrators, federal regional officials and technical assistance staff about their perspectives on state collaboration in early childhood.

Pre-kindergarten initiatives, quality improvement efforts, professional development systems, inclusion initiatives and state supplements to Head Start are becoming common occurrences. These partnerships are requiring collaborative action between state and local levels, but also among state agencies and state and federal regional offices. State education and human service departments are still new to the collaboration process, so

sharing the experiences that states have had with these efforts is useful. This paper will attempt to frame ways that state officials can enhance their partnerships and participate effectively with their other state and local colleagues.

## **State Collaboration Initiatives**

Two clear messages come from investigation of state collaborative initiatives:

- States must create stakeholder tables to bring the interests together.
- States must build a collaborative process to address the complexity of the system.

### **Stakeholder Table**

Every state will approach this task differently, because the key stakeholders and their roles and interests are different from state to state. Some states will frame a broad-based forum on early childhood issues. Even though these initiatives usually identify some priority areas for their work, they depend on extensive public awareness and advocacy to be effective and therefore need many stakeholders, some out of the ordinary, such as libraries and housing authorities. Oftentimes, these efforts are structured with a small policymaking body and a larger, more inclusive recommending body or several work groups. Such initiatives lend themselves to broad systemic issues, where the programming, funding and authority is fragmented.

In other instances, the state will focus on a limited section of the early childhood arena and include a segment of the stakeholders. This can be a more manageable approach, requiring fewer staff resources. Participants are rewarded with quicker and more tangible results. It also paves the way for subsequent efforts that will extend into other issues with some shifting of the players.

With either approach, organizers should consider including Head Start-State Collaboration Directors and staff from Regional offices of the Administration for Children and Families that direct Head Start and child care federally. They can be especially helpful by:

- Convening partners and including parents
- Helping Head Start to the planning table
- Facilitating outside consultation and resources, and
- Reviewing policies.

The technical assistance partnership that the Head Start and Child Care Bureaus created, called QUILT (Quality in Linking Together: Early Childhood Partnerships), can be particularly helpful as facilitators of state planning. Staff from QUILT facilitated some Connecticut discussions, which allowed the partners to establish better relationships through new understandings about their respective programs and to do creative problem solving. The state of Maryland has used supplemental Head Start collaboration funds to establish a QUILT support position to help the state and local programs create partnerships.

States should also find effective ways to bring the voices of families and providers to the table. It takes a commitment in principle and concerted effort to ensure that families and caregivers are given voice. An efficient way of reimbursing family members for their child care, transportation and other expenses is an inexpensive and meaningful gesture to

parents and may actually be the difference between their participating and not being able to participate. Beyond representing families at meetings, these vital participants can be helped to inform other parents and to gather input from individuals and groups of parents. Providers, particularly family child care home providers, must also be supported. Offering payment for substitutes and alternative ways to participate, such as electronic mail can keep providers involved. The scheduling of meetings is of course crucial for participation by parents and providers.

### **Collaborative Process**

The process of collaboration must be carefully designed and carried out. Effective collaboration results from hard work at both the big picture policy level and the detailed procedure level. State partners need to take the time to learn about each other. They can easily fall into the traps of presuming that they know how their respective programs operate, or they may fear embarrassing themselves or their colleagues by uncovering their actual lack of knowledge.

#### *Identifying priorities and values*

Stakeholders are able to identify priorities and values of the partners if they do so consciously. Work by Sidney Gardner, through the Center for Collaboration for Children at Fullerton State University, has shown that the values of individuals and institutions cannot be assumed. He has developed an assessment tool that helps collaborators of children's services articulate and compare those values. In the field of early childhood, it is often the order of priorities, rather than actual conflict of values, that distinguishes partners. Discovering and talking through that hierarchy can open communication and help the partners negotiate their differences.

Generally state child care administrators are commissioned to be concerned about working parents and families on TANF. They certainly want to improve the quality of care of children, but must also stretch dollars to fund as many families as possible. They value supporting viable community providers. However, they are constrained to keep new initiatives in line with the level of funding of other child care programs they support. In most cases the largest state child care program is the subsidy program and it drives much of the thinking of child care administrators.

State department of education managers place a high priority on the quality of educational programs. They are concerned about achieving outcomes during school years and transitioning youngsters to school. The constituents of departments of education are public schools, so they must be included as service providers and a role for superintendents must be defined in new initiatives. They support linking to education programs such as Even Start and Schools of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. They usually have a more consultative rather than directive relationship with schools, a relationship that they want to preserve. Giving guidance to service providers is more comfortable for these departments than creating and enforcing regulations.

#### *Understanding systems*

State collaborators need to understand each other's systems in enough detail to identify the stumbling blocks to partnerships and the possibilities for meaningful system change. For example, to understand the various funding streams, one needs to know their

purposes, rules for eligibility, distribution mechanisms, standards, staff qualifications, decision-making, reporting and monitoring.

The fiscal and operational workings of potential funding partners is also important. For example, one funder may only give out grants, while another works on a purchase of service basis with unit payment for actual services. The implications of those methods are significant for a local provider that is trying to blend funding or for the state agencies who want to combine funds to be given jointly. Including fiscal staff from the different state agencies in some of the early discussions is very helpful in bridging systems.

Most states do not have a consistent state policy around early childhood standards, so when two departments attempt to collaborate, they have to understand the standards that each uses and negotiate standards for any new programming. Likewise, state departments will have to understand the standards followed by Head Start or local school districts when trying to grant funds to these providers. Accommodating these varied policies is tedious but important work, that cannot be ignored.

#### *Developing consensus on purposes*

State initiatives may have multiple purposes. State partners who want to pave the way for state and local collaboration may want to promote goals such as school readiness, family employment, family support, or community development. In so doing, they may want to maximize dollars to meet the goals, grow the supply of care or expand the availability of full-time care. Enhancing the quality of care and education, or expanding the scope of services to include health and family services may be the agenda. It may be important to include a broad range of community providers or to promote community design by allowing diverse options. Giving access to children with disabilities and children from low and moderate income families (working or not working) will be reflected in policies depending on the goals or purposes of the initiative. The partners may want to develop the early care and education workforce, provide good transitions for preschoolers into school systems, meet the needs of children with disabilities, or ensure continuity of care for children and families. Research and evaluation goals may be included, such as determining the impacts of various options on children or on family self-sufficiency and functioning. State partners need to come to consensus and clearly articulate the purposes and goals of their initiative.

#### *Understanding local programs*

To successfully design state programs that help local agencies partner or blend funding, state partners need to understand how a local program approaches partnerships. They should understand where these partnerships work and where they do not. They should find out what motivates the local program to partner. They should have a realistic view of the experience and capacity of the local providers to manage services that are fiscally and programmatically complex, and then adapt their policies and timetables to build capacity.

#### *State policies that affect partnerships*

There are many state policies and procedures that can facilitate or hinder partnership building at the local level. State partners should scrutinize their policies together. When creating or altering state funding, the mechanism that will be used to fund programs, (i.e. grants, per unit contracts) is important. Likewise, states may develop fiscal policies around allocating funding, retrospective reimbursement, and funding shortfalls. The

amount of the grant or rate of payment is a crucial factor for local programs. With any of these policies, the financial viability of the local project may be at stake.

A key set of decisions for states occurs in determining which entities will be eligible as providers. Some states have chosen to only fund schools or community providers, but others have opened eligibility broadly. Funding may go through an intermediary body on the local level, e.g. county or town or school board and require a new community governing board. States may further specify the way in which community input will be addressed in allocating and designing local projects.

States may also set eligibility for participation in their programs. They may specify a targeted group of children and families or require universal eligibility. States such as Georgia, Ohio, Massachusetts, Oregon, New York and Connecticut can claim movement toward universal coverage, but they define eligibility very differently. The age of children who will be eligible and how age will be determined are key. Conversations about which child is a Head Start child or a child care child and so forth may happen even in an integrated classroom, where the families and children are oblivious to the source of funding. When the funding sources are specifically purchasing service for particular children or categories of children, programs are obligated to track those children and allocate costs accordingly. The rules around how eligibility is determined and redetermined affect the budgeting of programs and the continuity for the child. Redetermination rules can oblige programs to terminate a child or find flexible funding to pick up the cost to retain him or her. This is a major design element that will affect local programs dramatically.

A potentially explosive issue is whether family fees will be charged. The rules or institutional norms of existing programs on whether families should pay a portion of the cost of services are often in conflict between the education and child care arenas.

Head Start has pioneered a family-focused approach to early childhood development and since its beginning has tried to meet the comprehensive needs of children and families. The constellation of services has changed over time and differs from community to community. Those services would address health, mental health, disabilities, family support and literacy and, sometimes, adult education and training. It is not possible to replicate this approach without allocating significant and consistent resources. Even where the expectation is that services will be garnered through referrals to existing programs, it takes staff and funding to have a family-focused operation in an early care and education program. State administrators who do not know Head Start intimately, sometimes think of comprehensive services in superficial ways, without understanding that it involves a philosophy and a practice of family partnership and requires program resources.

There are numerous other design elements that state agencies must address in order to develop programs that are compatible with the range of providers that may wish to partner. Here are a few more:

- How quality will be ensured, e.g. staff qualifications, accreditation, licensing, monitoring, regulations, what allowances will be made and resources available to transition to compliance with standards
- What data will be documented, for what purposes and how key elements are defined

- The evaluation required
- The delivery models allowed, e.g. full-time, part-time
- The scope of services that will be included, e.g. family services as well as child care and education
- How the initiative will address development of facilities
- Whether parent involvement is required and how it is defined.

### *The process of process*

Colleagues have consistently advised that successful collaborations result when the stakeholders take the time to develop their relationships. They need to invest time to understand the priorities, the mindset and the programs of their partners. Most collaborations find they need to use a skilled facilitator at some point. Using one from the beginning should be considered. Facilitators can help the process by highlighting commonalities and differences, forging consensus and paying attention to language and meanings.

States have fallen into the trap of moving too quickly to develop new programs. Connecticut was under tremendous pressure to put children into new school readiness slots. The legislation was signed at the end of June, 1997, the request for proposals was out within a month and many programs began in September. This timetable did not give state staff time to thoughtfully consider options and create policy, much less get to know each other. The experience for provider agencies and communities was chaotic. Rhode Island, in contrast, has given grantees for their new Network Development Grants for Comprehensive Child Care Services Networks a year to 18 months to build the child care networks.

On the other hand, it is important to show tangible progress in designing and implementing new programming. Concrete agreements that are put into a memorandum of understanding among stakeholders can keep partners feeling positive while the agreements themselves provide an important tool for managing the initiative.

States must also resist the temptation to create programs cheaply. Poor quality results from not investing adequately in needed facilities, management systems, staffing levels and compensation. They affect whether the goals of the program will be achieved. States like Connecticut and Rhode Island have estimated that full-day, full-year high quality programs with comprehensive services require \$10-15,000 per child to operate. That may be a conservative estimate, if the foregone wages of underpaid staff were included.

Finally, states should allow for innovation. Partnerships have an inherent strength in that they can produce creative thinking. The variety of perspectives can result in locally designed approaches that state staff would not conceive of. Taking advantage of that creativity is one of the best arguments for partnerships.

### **Checklist for States Involved in Partnership Planning**

1. Does your state have a stakeholder table to bring the interests together to develop partnerships?
2. Has your state involved the Head Start-State Collaboration Director and the Regional office of the Administration for Children and Families?
3. Has your state asked QUILT to assist in the partnership planning process?
4. Are the voices of families and providers strongly represented?
5. Do the stakeholders have a process to learn about each other?
6. Have the stakeholders been able to identify priorities and values of the partners?
7. Do the collaborators understand each other's systems?
8. Is there consensus among the state collaborators regarding the purposes of the initiative?
9. What providers will be eligible for funding?
10. Do state partners understand how local programs operate?
11. How will local funding decisions be made?
12. Has attention been paid to fiscal policies, eligibility and family fees?
13. Will the program attempt to serve the comprehensive needs of children and families and how will these be defined?
14. Will there be common standards for programs?
15. Have the stakeholders addressed quality assurance, data collection and evaluation?
16. How will the initiative address models of delivery, scope of services, development of facilities and requirements for parent involvement?
17. Have the state agencies and other stakeholders developed written agreements?
18. Is the state adequately investing in facilities, management systems, staffing levels and compensation?
19. Can the initiative promote and reward innovation?
20. Have the partners taken the time to shape the collaboration through mutual respect and understanding?

## **About the Author**

Susan Wilson is a policy planner in the state child care administrator's office in the Connecticut Department of Social Services. She has focused on early childhood and family services for much of her 30 year human services career, with an emphasis on program development, planning and policy analysis. She has a Masters Degree in Social Work in community organizing and urban planning from the University of Pittsburgh and has just returned to Connecticut from Washington, DC where she was a National Head Start Fellow, placed in the Head Start Bureau in the Department of Health and Human Services.