

Leaders' Collaborative Key Messages

Overview and Focus of the Leaders' Collaborative (as presented to ED Forum in October 2011)

A cohort of twelve Local Partnership executive directors and five NCPC staff are participating in an intensive leadership program called the Leaders' Collaborative. The purposes are to:

1. Create a shared vision statement for the Smart Start system and Local Partnership organizational excellence.
2. Develop benchmarks for Local Partnership organizational excellence, with ideas on how to implement.
3. Actively use data to drive equity in decision-making for local service delivery strategies.
4. Share knowledge about early childhood systems and collaborative leadership with peer Local Partnerships.
5. Seek support for the shared vision and benchmarks of organizational excellence from peer Local Partnerships.

In addition, the full group participated in training on the significance of Community of Practice in improving the wellbeing of children, families, and communities. Finally, six of the Local Partnerships are leading Community Forums for Equity as we work to increase learning, development, and achievement for all children—especially those from vulnerable communities.

Background and Request for Input from the ED Forum members

The Leaders' Collaborative had their first session on August 1-3, the Community of Practice training on August 29-31, the Equity training on September 20-22, and their second Leaders' Collaborative session on October 2-4. There are three more sessions scheduled for December 7-9, January 9-11, and February 8-10. The six Partnerships in the Equity project will be holding their community forums in the coming weeks.

The group began with discussions on leadership, the current realities for Smart Start and the NCPC, and ways to talk about a future that would help everyone grow and develop. A framework was discussed and adapted from a Build report on Evaluating Systems Initiatives, authored by Julia Coffman, which focuses on ways to develop a comprehensive and dynamic approach to working together on issues of importance to communities. The Leaders' Collaborative is suggesting this frame as a starting point, described below, and seeks the ED's input. Also described here are statements of intention by the Leaders' Collaborative to help renew and restore relationships among and between Partnerships and the NCPC as we move forward.

Proposed Framework for Systems Strengthening and Building

- The Leaders' Collaborative work is to promote Smart Start early childhood systems strengthening, which includes early learning, family support and health. Systems' strengthening is an organized effort to improve a system and its impact. It represents the next level of strategic thinking for Smart Start as a community, and the Leaders' Collaborative will offer recommendations through this frame for this transformative process. More detail is presented below.
- We recognize that our 77 partnerships are diverse in their community needs, leadership and strengths as local nonprofit organizations, and value each and every one as an integral component of this statewide network of resources for children. We will be inviting everyone to sign-on with active and supportive leadership for systems strengthening.

Proposed Principles for Relationship Renewal

The Leaders' Collaborative recognizes the recent challenges to the Smart Start family, specifically the breakdowns in communications, trust and unity, the significant loss of funding from the legislature and the continued scrutiny and potential future losses of state funding and credibility. We are committed to designing an early childhood system building initiative on behalf of all, with these principles in action:

1. Honor each Local Partnership's ability to manage their non-profits resources to maintain a presence in their community.
2. Invite each Local Partnership and the NCPC to recognize the impact of their actions on the whole of the system, and renew our collective commitment to the greater good.
3. Hold the possibility for shifts in thinking and action among us all through the engagement in the Leaders' Collaborative planning process and a new frame for system-building based on strengths.

The Leaders' Collaborative believes that it is important for us to deal with tensions and shift to trust-building. We can see where there were communication breakdowns around our scenario planning and legislative actions, as well as other exchanges. We acknowledge the fears and concerns and wish to address them directly as an opportunity to shift the energy and renew relationships. We invite every Local Partnership to strengthen trust and commitment in their communities, across Local Partnerships, and with the NCPC. We believe that based on our shared commitment to children, we can move the whole system forward and create a defining moment for ourselves.

We know that Local Partnerships, each one an independent nonprofit organization with a board of directors responsible for its own decision-making and resources, is facing significant challenges due to the recent cutback in funding from the legislature. Given the on-going uncertainties it is an important time for each Local Partnership to consider their options for the strongest service delivery strategies with the resources they have or can independently generate, and for the NCPC leadership to consider a variety of planning scenarios that will cause the least harm and greatest opportunity to serving children across the entire state. We believe that the successes thus far in each of our 100 counties provide the foundation for future accomplishments and the necessary community-based demand for resources and action.

Preliminary Vision/Frame

1. We propose the premise that our early childhood system of services, which includes early learning, family support and health, is a foundation of NC's education system and the underpinning of our economic future.
2. We propose that adopting a systems framework will allow us to strengthen or develop new capacities to impact children at both the local and statewide levels, shift our focus to new ways to create impact, and foster stronger relationships in our communities and with each other.
3. We propose that we all take on a "greater good" perspective to elevate our thinking on ways to positively impact all children across the state and to recognize new opportunities to expand our relationships within and across our diverse communities.
4. We propose that Local Partnerships take on or reaffirm their role as convener of the broader community of organizations that serve young children to deepen relationships, leverage resources and engage community members. This intentionally moves our role and identity in the community far beyond the act of distributing Smart Start dollars only.
5. We propose that the NCPC emphasize their role as broker/connector for access to local, state, federal and national resources (both technical assistance and funding); strategic thinking for legislative and other policy options; strengthening local partnership capacity building, empowerment models and facilitative leadership; and, garnering resources for new initiatives.
6. We propose using a system framework that includes the components of:
 - **Context** To improve the public will and political environment that surrounds the system so it produces the policy and funding changes needed to create and sustain it.
 - **Components** To establish high-performance programs and services within the system.
 - **Connections** To create strong and effective linkage, integration, alignment and/or coordination across system components.
 - **Infrastructure** To develop the support systems needed to function effectively and with quality.
 - **Scale** To ensure a comprehensive system is available to as many people as possible so it produces broad and inclusive results for children and families.

More detail will be shared about the preliminary vision/frame for discussion in large and small groups at the ED Forum, and the leaders' Collaborative appreciates the opportunity to be in this exchange.