
**Building Trust, Developing Community:
Lessons from North Carolina's Smart Start Initiative**

Prepared by:
Smart Start Child Well-Being Study Team
Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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*This report was written by Jana Fleming and Sean Doig, with the assistance of
Donna Bryant, Kathleen Bernier, Pamela Van Dyk, and Debra Torrence.*

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Introduction

With the growing emphasis on the importance of young children's early experiences in determining later successful life outcomes, several states and communities are implementing initiatives designed to improve the lives of young children and their families.¹ Many of these new initiatives recognize the complexity of children's needs and capacities and offer a multi-component, comprehensive approach to addressing child well-being, rather than a more traditional single-strategy approach, such as providing teacher training alone.² For some of these initiatives, states are also "reinventing government" by setting broad goals and allowing local community members to decide how best to meet those goals, instead of mandating uniform state-developed strategies.³

Exactly how do communities make decisions about ways to meet their goals for children and families? In an effort to answer this question, researchers at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center sought to learn more about the decision-making processes involved in a community-based early childhood initiative in North Carolina. A study was conducted to investigate the factors that contribute to effective decision-making in the North Carolina Early Childhood Initiative—better known as Smart

¹ Knitzer, J., & Page, S. (1998). *Map and track: State initiatives for young children and families*. New York: National Center for Children in Poverty.

² Knitzer, J., & Page, S. (1996). *Map and track: State initiatives for young children and families*. New York: National Center for Children in Poverty.

³ Osborne, D., & Gaebler, T. (1992). *Reinventing government: How the entrepreneurial spirit is transforming the public sector*. Plume: New York.

Start. Of particular interest was to enhance our understanding of local decision-making processes in order to report on the factors that most heavily influenced decision-making during strategic plan development.

Understanding the keys to successful community-based strategic planning is especially important as more programs for children across the country are being funded through block grant arrangements with local decision-makers. This paper was written as a resource for those seeking to better understand decision-making within community-based organizations. The perspectives of nonprofit executive directors and members of boards of directors are represented. We believe these perspectives contain useful information regarding how an organization can build both internal and external capacity to be effective in meeting its mission. Key factors and challenges to local decision-making are presented as well as lessons learned. The goal of this document is to offer basic information about how communities decide on ways to meet their common objectives.

An overview of the Smart Start initiative is provided below, followed by a description of the methods used in this study to examine local decision-making and profiles of five community-based organizations.

An Overview of Smart Start

Smart Start was established by the North Carolina General Assembly in 1993 as a partnership between state government, local leaders, service providers, businesses, and families to better serve children under six. The primary goal of Smart Start, as stated in the legislation, is to ensure that all children enter school healthy and prepared to succeed. Progress on the following four sub-goals is expected to lead to the primary goal: (a) the quality and affordability of child care will be improved, (b) families will be more supported in their roles as the primary teachers of their children, (c) counties will make resources available to children and families, and (d) state and local agencies will engage in collaborative decision-making concerning young children and their families.

Smart Start works like a block grant. The state allocates funds to local nonprofit corporations—called partnerships—established specifically for the purpose of administering Smart Start. Each local partnership Board of Directors consists of at least 19 members representing groups mandated by the Legislature, including human services, health, child care, public education, higher education, business, the faith community, and parents of preschoolers. Additional members may also be appointed at-large. The local partnership boards are responsible for developing a plan to meet their own community's needs and for enhancing their community resources. Typically, these plans include proposals for improving and expanding existing programs for children and families, as well as designing and implementing new programs.

Twelve local partnerships were competitively selected to participate in Smart Start in 1993. Those partnerships spent several months developing their local plans before receiving funds to implement the programs that they determined were needed in their communities. In each of the three years that followed, twelve new partnerships were funded. By 1996, there were a total of 47 partnerships, representing 55 of the state's 100 counties. (Partnerships are organized at the county level. Most partnerships consist of a single county. However, there are several multi-county partnerships.) In 1997, the remaining 45 counties came into the Smart Start network, bringing the total number of partnerships to 82.

The overall Smart Start budget has grown each year, from \$24 million in 1993-94 to \$220 million in 2000-2001. The amount of funds received by a partnership is based on a formula that takes into account such factors as the population of children under age 6, the local poverty rate, and public funding available in each community. In the current operating year, the smallest partnership received slightly over \$100,000, while the largest received \$17 million.

It is up to each local partnership to develop a strategy to use its funds to address community-level need for services for young children and their families. While specific programs differ from county-to-county, Smart Start funds can only be used to support programs and services that fall into one of three core areas: child care, health, and

family support. In addition, there are specific goals that each partnership is expected to work towards within each of the core areas. Local partnerships are also required to spend 30% of their funds on child care subsidies. Although these requirements limit the scope of local partnership activity, there is still quite a bit of variation in the specific strategies partnerships employ to meet the Smart Start goals. (A complete description of the core areas and goals is provided in Appendix I.)

The programs funded by Smart Start are expected to be those that will best help each local partnership reach its desired outcomes. The “healthy and ready to succeed” mission was set by the Legislature. The broad goals mentioned above were established by the Board of Directors of the state-level non-profit organization that manages the Smart Start initiative, called the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC). The NCPC was established by the Legislature in 1993. It has the responsibility of administering the Smart Start funding, overseeing local partnership activities, providing limited technical assistance to local partnerships, and raising a 10% match of private funds. The Smart Start legislation also requires that 70% of the total Smart Start allocation is spent on child care-related activities.

The local partnerships are required to submit a plan to the NCPC for approval prior to the disbursement of funds. Each plan must contain documentation of the local partnership’s specific goals and objectives, a description of how those goals and objectives were developed, a description of the programs that will be funded with Smart Start monies, and a set of outcomes on which the local partnership will evaluate its progress. Plans outlining operating funds are submitted in April of each year. Each plan undergoes an extensive review during the month of May and is approved for funding in June, sometimes after modifications requested by the NCPC. Local plans can be modified at any time during the year with approval from the NCPC. In 1997, the NCPC moved to a 2-year funding cycle for the 24 partnerships that had been involved since the early years.

With 82 different partnerships, there have undoubtedly been 82 unique ways of arriving at each year’s plan. During the plan development process, some partnerships

undertake extensive consensus-building activities and considerable data collection to better understand their local needs and resources. Others use work groups or committees to accomplish the major part of the work. While decision-making in some partnerships is smooth and almost unanimous, others experience contentious debates. Yet, although the local partnerships demonstrate a diverse set of components that impact and influence their decision-making, a close examination of the strategic planning process in several partnerships reveals a number of common themes.

Examining Local Partnership Decision-Making During Strategic Planning

Although Smart Start and other comprehensive community-based initiatives may offer appropriate strategies for addressing community needs, little is known about why these initiatives are effective.⁴ In an effort to shed light on this matter, the present study examined the decision-making process in several local Smart Start partnerships. Our primary goal was to enhance our understanding of the factors that most impact decision-making during the strategic planning process. Of particular concern was to understand the processes used by key decision-makers to make choices about what actions the community would take to assure child well-being. This was done by looking closely at the decision-making process from the perspective of the Executive Directors and the boards of directors in five Smart Start partnerships.

The selection of the five partnerships involved several steps. To start, a comprehensive review of local partnership strategic plans was conducted. This involved developing a coding system for identifying themes related to decision-making and activities aimed at enhancing child well-being. The strategic plans generally include six major sections: (1) Vision and Mission Statement, (2) Strategic Planning Process, (3) Current Realities, (4) Organizational Plan, (5) Identified Needs, and (6) Continuing Activities. A list of common themes within each section was developed from a review of 25% of the 1999 strategic plans. That review resulted in the creation of a coding scheme, which is described in the following paragraph.

Actual coding of individual plans involved recording whether or not the plan included information requested in each section and identifying the absence or presence of common themes. The plans were coded to identify the steps taken in creating the plan, how decisions were made about what to include in the plan, and who was involved in the planning process. In addition, critical context variables and county descriptors were coded, as well as the methods and results of the partnership's needs assessment, its current goals and objectives, and its new and continuing service benchmarks and activities. Plans were also rated on overall strength. There were three possible ratings:

⁴ Kubish, A.C., Weiss, C.H, Schorr, L.B., & Connell, J.P (1995). *New approaches to evaluating community initiatives*, J.P. Connell, A.C. Kubish, L.B. Schorr, & C.H. Weiss. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute.

strong, medium, or weak. Strong plans were ones that had well-defined answers, provided data to support decisions, and were complete. Weak plans were ones that used broad statements, made little use of empirical data, and were unorganized and hard to follow. Plans that were neither strong nor weak received a rating of medium. (A copy of the strategic plan coding form is provided in Appendix II.)

The results of the strategic plan review were used in part to guide the development of the second data collection strategy, which involved surveying the Executive Director and board members about their partnership's decision-making process. The Executive Directors and board members of each of the 82 partnerships were invited to complete the survey. Participants were given the option to complete it on the Internet or by hand and mail it in. Questions on the survey related to how the partnership defines well-being, what activities the partnership is funding, the processes used to make those funding decisions, and key influences in that decision-making process. (A sample of the survey questionnaire is provided in Appendix III.)

Following the large survey effort, local partnerships that had been in existence for more than 2 years (thereby having some "history" in decision-making) and that had 8 or more respondents to the survey were reviewed for consideration in the in-depth study. A total of 12 partnerships fit these criteria. The final selection of five partnerships was based on an objective assessment that took into consideration the strength of the strategic plan (as assessed during the plan review), survey respondents' reports of their familiarity and involvement in the planning process (as reported on the surveys), and the partnership's risk assessment (as determined by the NCPC).⁵ Within each of the 12 partnerships, each of the three criteria was rated on a 9-point scale, for a total score high of 27 points. The five partnerships with scores over 20 were selected for further review. This final group includes representation from both urban and rural areas.

⁵ This last criterion refers to an assessment conducted by the NCPC in 2000 to measure each local partnership's management capability. "Risk" was assessed through a review of indicators related to the presence and experience of critical staff, the total number of subcontractors, and compliance in submitting reports and in satisfying legislative mandates regarding spending.

For each of the five partnerships selected for in-depth study, additional information was collected during phone interviews with the Executive Director and key board members who had been identified as active participants on the board. The interview questions were aimed at getting more detailed information about specific aspects of the board's decision-making, as well as to learn about the challenges faced by the partnerships. Interviewees were also asked to offer words of wisdom for others pursuing similar initiatives. (A copy of the interview protocol is provided in Appendix IV.)

The information collected from each of the five partnerships was reviewed to identify themes that emerged across the plan reviews, survey responses, and phone interviews. Because the primary goal of this project is to gain insight into *local* decision-making, the findings were analyzed by partnership. A profile of each of the five partnerships selected has been created, and includes demographic characteristics of the county.⁶ Within each profile, the components that most heavily influenced decision-making in the partnership are divided into three categories: keys factors in local decision-making, challenges faced by the partnership, and lessons learned.

Local Partnership Profiles

One of the hallmarks of the Smart Start initiative is its vision for communities to work together to improve the lives of young children and their families. This study found that partnerships across North Carolina have readily embraced this vision as well as the Smart Start mission to ensure that all children enter school healthy and ready to succeed. Included here are profiles of five partnerships, summarizing the Executive Director and board members' perspectives on how they have managed to come together to work collectively towards fulfilling their mission. While the real names of the partnerships are not used here and gender pronouns have been changed in some instances, all information in the profiles is reported as collected during this study.

⁶ All demographic characteristics presented are for the year 1998, unless otherwise noted. Characteristics related to the status of young children and child care were provided by the North Carolina Child Advocacy Institute's *Knowledge Exchange* database. All other county information was provided by the North Carolina Department of Commerce, *1999 County and Regional Scans*.

Allen Partnership

Representing over 4% of the state's total population, Allen County is one of the largest, more industrialized, and wealthy counties in North Carolina. A quarter of the population has at least a college education and the remaining three-quarters are high school graduates. The average annual wage is nearly \$5,000 above that of the state overall, and its unemployment rate is well below the state mean. The outlook over the coming years is also favorable. Allen has a projected annual growth of close to 10%, far above the statewide projection of 1.3%. A major interstate crosses the county and 100% of the population lives within 10 miles of a 4-lane road. This presence of major highways, coupled with a recent expansion in available industrial space, ranks the county at the top of the state in terms of industrial growth potential.

Despite its outstanding economic strength and viability, Allen rests near or below the statistical center on many measures used to evaluate the quality of life for young children and their families. A county with more than 30,000 children ages 0-5, in 1998, almost 17% were living in poverty and receiving Food Stamps (comparable to 16% statewide), and approximately 9% had no health insurance. There were over 150 regulated early care and education programs in the county, serving approximately 13,000 children. Close to 60% of those programs had the state's "A" rating (as compared to 54% statewide), and 22% had the higher "AA" rating (as compared to 29% statewide). Only 19% of the children attending regulated child care programs were in "AA" licensed centers.⁷

Although Allen County is equipped with an array of local resources and the prospect of a bright future, the accomplishments of the Partnership are the result of a lot of hard work from dedicated citizens. It is generally acknowledged that partnerships in

⁷ Up until September 2000, North Carolina had had a 2-tiered child care licensing system. Programs meeting basic health and safety standards, building regulations, and program components received an "A" rating. Programs meeting additional requirements regarding staff-child ratios, increased square footage per child, and enhanced program components were granted a "AA" rating. Faith-based programs had the option to be exempt from the full licensing

high resource counties struggle to find a place among the multitude of existing programs and services that have a similar mission and goals. The survey responses and interviews reveal some of the strategies the Allen Partnership used to overcome this challenge.

Key Factors in Local Decision-Making in Allen County

According to board members and the Executive Director, one of the greatest assets working for the Allen Partnership is trust. The board members trust each other and they trust the Partnership staff. As described by one board member, this sense of trust is fostered by an annual board retreat,

An annual day long retreat is invaluable for envisioning, building trust, and sharing knowledge. It facilitates shared decision-making . . . and a common vision.

The result is a board whose members have a collective mission and who believe they are all committed to similar goals and outcomes. One outgrowth of this confidence in each other is that members are willing to voice their opinions and engage in constructive debate. In a county as large and diverse as Allen, there are often dissenting views at the table. These differences are something the board actually seeks out. One board members explained,

It's important to bring in people who don't necessarily agree with you. It's hard to do sometimes. But, different perspectives yield a better product.

Board members see this willingness to openly discuss issues as a by-product of their trust in one another and one of the keys to the board's strength.

Both the Executive Director and the board members believe that this sense of trust extends beyond the Partnership board and into the larger community. Even though the Allen Partnership has been in existence for only 3 years, board members believe that all across the county there is faith in the Partnership and its goals. "There is trust

requirements, but were required to meet basic health and safety standards and be registered with

out there in the community for our work," one board member explained. Both she and the Executive Director cited the community's trust as central to the Partnership's recent successful weathering of an unexpected disappointment. In the last round of funding, the Partnership received significantly less money from the state than was expected. This meant that the Partnership had to alter its strategic plan and substantially reduce the amount of funding allocated for some activities. As described by one board member,

We had to go back to [the sponsors of] our funded activities and ask them to cut back and hone down their requests. They all did it without question and no one tried to get more.

The Executive Director believes that this immediate cooperation to make budget cuts is evidence of community-wide trust in the board and the fairness of its decision-making process.

It is important to note that the Partnership made a concerted effort to cultivate the community's trust. This was done in part by "keeping tabs on needs and concerns" in the county "and addressing them right away." The Partnership stuck to this principle even though it often diverted the staff's attention from other tasks. The Executive Director sees having the trust of the larger community as being central to the Partnership's current and future success. In her own words,

Building the trust with the community and among board members is key. We've laid the foundation to meet the needs. [We were able to] do this because we had built the trust.

Another reason that the Partnership has the trust of the community may stem from its efforts to engage and involve the community in discussions about needs and services. In the past, the organization has done community outreach to get a wider range of input in identifying needs in the county and for decision-making in general. Outreach activities have included community surveys, focus groups, and less structured group meetings. One of the Partnership's most successful activities was the convening of a task force to identify needs around particular aspects of child development. The Executive Director described the ad hoc task force as an opportunity to bring people together "to talk about the system and where the gaps are." The impact of this effort has

the State.

benefited more than just the local Partnership. The group has continued to meet and has begun to keep track of services provided across an array of delivery systems, along with information about clients using the services. The Executive Director sees this as “a huge systemic change. This effort has diffused tensions, cutting across service delivery lines.”

Although the Allen Partnership board incorporates strategic planning in its meetings throughout the year, the foundation for planning is laid at its annual retreat. At that time, the board identifies areas to target and convenes committees to develop goals and strategies within each area. Those committees are then expected to meet on a regular basis, reporting back to the board periodically. In a county as large as Allen, honing in on particular needs and identifying specific strategies to address those needs can be extremely time-consuming. Again, the Executive Director credited trust and a shared vision for its success in making it through this process. She believes that one of the benefits of having trust within the board and in the community is increased patience with the decision-making process. “Anytime you do a strategic planning process it is going to be time consuming,” comments one board member. As the process stretches out and the workload multiplies, people will become frustrated. However, the Executive Director has found that “there’s much more patience with the chaos if [everyone knows] where you’re headed.”

Allen Partnership board members and the Executive Director cited community-wide trust and a shared vision as the factors that had the most impact on their decision-making as they developed their 1999 strategic plan. In making its final determination about what activities to support, the Partnership board reported that it relied most heavily on assessments of needs and gaps in services, the documented outcomes (or “track record”) of groups requesting funding, and the knowledge and leadership of the Executive Director. Using that information as a guide, the Partnership funded activities in each of three core areas: child care, family support, and health. Child care activities related to improving program quality, offering school readiness and enrichment programs, providing teacher training, and enhancing compensation for teachers and program directors. The family support and health activities had a clear focus on the

infant and toddler years, and included newborn visitations, new parent education, and prenatal care. Projects were also funded to increase the availability of subsidized child care and to provide health services (including dental, vision, and developmental screenings, as well as nurses in child care programs).

Challenges Faced by the Allen Partnership

It is clear from the Executive Director's comments that Allen County's wealth of service providers and organizations can have its drawbacks. She believes that in smaller communities, a Partnership's charge is to bring together various agencies and interest groups to work for the common good, and that individual relationships are often the key to successful planning and implementation. This is not the case in a large, urban county such as Allen. In her own words,

Counties of different sizes and those that are predominantly urban, versus rural, approach the decision-making process in a different way.

For instance, in small counties, there is more of a presence of inter-relationships at the social and political levels to be concerned about. Who will you see at church? Who don't you want to cross?

Whereas in large counties it's more about how we can make systems changes—the systems might not even exist in smaller counties.

The systems change issue is further complicated by the fact that large counties typically have one or two central urban centers. This is something that the Allen Partnership struggles with. There are county-level issues related to services and systems, as well as big city issues with a separate (but related) set of services, systems and funding. It can be challenging for the Partnership to adequately access needs across urban and rural areas and to develop strategies that are fair to both. Once again, the board has found that trust goes a long way in solving this problem. "It's a trust issue. We're trying to figure out how to balance resources in both [urban and rural areas]."

Despite the repeated declarations of the board's trust and commitment, there is a sense of frustration and disengagement among some of the board members and in the

community. The Allen Partnership continually faces a challenge in getting a quorum at board meetings and there were committees that did not meet at all last year. It may be that the organization of the board and its membership policies undermine board participation. Until recently, the Partnership did not allow members to identify designees to fill their place on the board. In a county with such a large service area, agency heads and program directors had a difficult time prioritizing attendance at the Partnership board meetings. While the Executive Director believes the initial decision to disallow designees was necessary for the Partnership to build a solid base of support across the community, she acknowledged that the time had come to change that policy. There is hope that this new board composition will solve the previous problems of board member participation in general and meeting attendance in particular.

Lessons Learned from the Allen Partnership

The Executive Director and Allen Partnership board members are in agreement that having the trust of the community is one of the keys to overcoming the many obstacles that one confronts in a large county. The board also had advice to share about the importance of being prepared before engaging in community outreach, and the importance of having a strong board and Executive Director.

In an effort to garner community support and interest in the Partnership's work, one of the first things the board did was seek input from the community to help identify specific objectives and goals. Unfortunately, the Partnership did not realize that before seeking community input, it needed to be ready to respond to the requests and suggestions made. The Partnership's initial efforts at community outreach yielded more information than the board could deal with at the time. The Executive Director describes this as "the effort being ahead of where the board was." The board was equipped with a lot of information about what needed to be done in the county, but did not have a well-defined process for decision-making and strategic planning. It became clear that as a result of the outreach efforts, they had raised hopes in the county and then had to let people down. Fortunately, they were able to apply the information to later planning and were then able to continue the process of relationship building.

The Executive Director and board members alike attributed much of the Partnership's success to having a knowledgeable board that consists of people who understand both local and state issues. Board members also praised the work of the Executive Director and her staff. It seems that time after time she managed to pull together the disparate interests across the county. She credited her achievements in part to having gained the trust of the community and in part to her being comfortable with "chaos and struggle." She thinks her belief that "there is no perfect decision-making" makes her a risk taker—which she maintained is critical for surviving in the chaotic and multifaceted environment she operates within. She asserted, "Sometimes you just have to jump in and do something."

Bates Partnership

Bates County is considered by many to be one of the beacons of North Carolina. With an unemployment rate close to 1% and burgeoning growth (including a 16% population increase in the 1990s), the county has much to recommend it. Home to a major public university, 84% of the population has at least a high school education and over 45% is college educated, ranking it near the top in the state. This positive outlook is reflected in the overall conditions for children and families. The median family income is \$12,000 higher than the state figure. In 1998, over half of the 65 licensed child care programs had a "AA" rating, and 34% of the 3500 children in child care in Bates County were in a "AA" licensed program.

Despite these generally impressive numbers, the county does face interesting challenges. Much of its population growth can be attributed to an immigrating immigrant population. With slightly more than 100,000 residents, a surprising 14% live in poverty (higher than the statewide average of 12.5%). And during the 1990s, the real wages actually declined moderately, in contrast to the rest of the state which saw a 3% increase. In 1998, of the approximately 7,000 children ages 0-5, almost 13% lived in poverty and over 9% had no health insurance.

Home to one of the more ethnically and economically diverse populations in the state, Bates County had made significant strides in addressing the needs of its children and families long before Smart Start. The survey responses and interviews provide insight into how the Bates Partnership carved a niche for itself in this already highly productive community.

Key Factors in Local Decision-Making in Bates County

The Bates Partnership Executive Director and board of directors credit its success in strategic planning to its comprehensive community-based planning process. Admittedly a “very elaborate process,” it has several different parts that involve intensive work for up to 6 months. However, each component provides board members with different information that they feel is crucial in making good decisions.

At the center of the process is the work of several program committees comprised of board members, as well as parents and other people in the community. The committees are responsible for identifying needs in the areas of child care, health, and family support and for determining strategies to address critical issues. Committee work involves gathering information through focus groups as well as extensive reviews of possible strategies for service delivery, including making site visits to prospective service providers. The planning process also involves: (i) convening task forces to explore specific topics in depth; (ii) conducting a county-wide conference to inform the public about the Partnership’s work and to get feedback to help in future planning; (iii) soliciting feedback on parent/consumer satisfaction; and (iv) intensive input and involvement of board members. These are parallel processes, and all but the last includes an array of community members outside the board.

Although complex, board members believe the process is actually orderly and efficient. There are “clear guidelines and a timeline” for completing each component. In addition, as one of the more mature Smart Start partnerships, Bates has had over 5 years to evolve into an effective and stable organization. Board members believe the process runs smoothly because of the hard work of an intelligent and insightful leader,

as well as continuity within the Partnership. The Executive Director and other key staff have been around from the beginning. They come to the process with a wealth of knowledge and experience, serving as a primary resource for the program committees and playing an effective role in keeping track of the progress within each component of the planning.

The resourcefulness of the staff is augmented by an experienced group of board members which, over the years, has developed confidence and deep trust in one another's work. One board member believes that this sense of confidence and trust is another key reason the planning process works. Much of the effort to gather background information to guide decision-making is done by the program committees. While the board poses questions, the work of the committees is rarely challenged because board members "trust that [committee members] are doing their homework." This delegation of authority has enabled the board to make the most efficient use of its time. Additionally, the Partnership hires outside experts to serve as facilitators to guide the board through decision-making at various stages in the process.

According to the Executive Director, although the decision-making and planning process evolved over a few years, the groundwork for the Partnership's current decision-making was laid at the outset. During its first year, the board made a commitment to being community focused and took time to establish "cornerstone criteria for funding." The Partnership decided that it would only fund activities that were outcome-based, encouraged collaborative efforts, and integrated parent input at every step. "These are our values," asserted the Executive Director. She explained further,

All our services have these integrated in them. They have shaped the board's decision-making. Sometimes I wish it wasn't so elaborate, but it has resulted in good community involvement and we've stayed true to our constituents.

One advantage of this complex process is that it has facilitated the development of a strong tie between the partnership and the larger community. There is broad agreement that the Partnership's decision-making process is completely community based. In the words of the Executive Director,

The board and staff don't try to drive [the decision-making process] in any way. It comes from the people; and the board really acts on it. In making funding decisions, the board is responsive to community needs. This has given us credibility in the community.

We are well regarded as a planning group for children and families. And the County Commissioners love us because we give them information and come with resources in hand to address the problems.

The county-wide conference is perhaps the exemplar of the Partnership's community outreach efforts. This day-long event open to the public, provides an opportunity for the Partnership to inform the larger community about its work. Attracting close to 150 attendees, the conference includes large and small group work sessions around targeted goals. Reaching a diverse array of people—law enforcement, housing, journalism, economic development—this conference provides the Partnership with perspectives outside the traditional child and family services arena. This year, the Executive Director expects the conference “will be more [about] affirming the Partnership's work than raising new issues . . . because the issues are starting to coalesce.” This shift in the focus of the conference is a clear sign that the Partnership has moved beyond the initial steps of foundation building, and has advanced to being a stable and respected organization in the county.

While each component of its strategic planning process provides useful information to the board, the program committees' recommendations were cited as one of the key influences in decision-making. The board believes strongly that because of the broad-based community input and collective expertise that goes into those recommendations, they accurately reflect what is needed in the county. In addition, as described by the Executive Director, the Bates Partnership relies heavily on evaluation results,

The annual evaluation process involves each new agency/activity submitting an evaluation plan, [there is] monitoring throughout the funding cycle and an evaluation report at year's end.

Programs that do not reach their projected goals are given guidance as well as time to remedy problems. Nevertheless, in the past the Partnership has had to “drop programs because of failed or flawed program outcomes.”

Board members are particularly concerned that every dollar spent is on an activity for which there is documented need, is serving the maximum number of children feasible, and is likely to have a measurable impact on child outcomes (based on existing research). They agreed that activities related to child care, family support, and health are most likely to impact well-being. In 1999, the Partnership funded projects to improve child care quality, enhance teacher education, and make more good quality subsidized care available. Its family support efforts included parenting education and literacy courses, as well as the services of a family resource center. The Partnership is also funding preventive health care efforts. Board members mentioned a desire to support projects related to home visiting and transportation, but are not doing so at this time.

Challenges Faced by the Bates Partnership

While the planning and decision-making processes at the Bates Partnership stand out for their efficiency and effectiveness, the partnership struggles with many of the same problems faced by others. In the interviews, board members spoke of the difficulty in getting full board participation and keeping people engaged in the process. And it was pointed out that the problem of getting people involved extends to the larger community as well. "Parent participation is low," noted one board member. "It's hard for parents to be involved and committed because of other obligations." The Partnership also faces problems when bringing in new board members. There is an expectation that new members get involved right away. Yet, even for people who are familiar with Smart Start, the real work of the board can be daunting. In the opinion of one member,

You come to your first board meeting and get thrown into the work. But it takes a year to really understand how it all operates and know what's involved.

While the Executive Director and board chair make a point of meeting with all new board members, there is a belief that more on-going mentoring is needed. The board is currently exploring different strategies for orienting new members.

As is the case in many partnerships, the strategic planning process is impeded by the lack of current statistical data describing the conditions of children and families and the services available to them. The Bates Partnership's extensive planning process helps overcome this obstacle to some extent. However, the Executive Director noted that its strategic planning process is "resource and labor intensive. It costs money and takes a lot of staff and consultant time." There is a belief that some of this work could be alleviated if reliable data were consistently available on both a statewide and local level.

Another data-related challenge for the Partnership concerns finding ways to identify specific needs within its diverse population. The county includes suburban, rural, wealthy, and low-income areas. This makes it difficult to get an accurate survey of the needs of the county—aggregated statistical data cannot capture the inequities. In an effort to address this problem, the Partnership recently added a task force to look at needs geographically.

The Executive Director and board members also described a challenge they face because, unlike many other partnerships, the Bates Partnership does not provide direct services. This means that whenever a need is identified, the Partnership must partner with an agency (or other entity) that has the capacity to provide the required services. If the Partnership cannot locate an acceptable provider, it will not be able to address the need. The Executive Director explained,

We're dependent on the capacity of the agencies to address any identified need. Our decision-making can only go as far as we have community partners.

At this point in time, the board has no desire to change its policy regarding providing direct services. Board members believe there are too many service providers in the county already. Rather than further fragment the system by expanding the number of providers to deliver services, they prefer to strengthen the capacity of existing providers

to deliver services. Given this position, the matter of locating capable providers to implement strategies developed by the Partnership will likely pose a challenge for years to come.

Lessons Learned from the Bates Partnership

Bates Partnership board members cite continuity, expertise, and community-wide collaboration as important features of their collective work. In the very beginning, the board outlined a specific focus for its work and a strategy for planning and decision-making, and has stuck to this process over the years. The Executive Director believes that “remaining constant” is an important part of their success. Similarly, board members commented that the continued presence of familiar faces among the Partnership staff and board has greatly facilitated their working together effectively. This continuity in process and among the people involved in the process is complemented by the expertise of those individuals. One board member advised “recruiting the best people you can” for both staff and board positions and to “nurture” them. She goes on to add the importance of nurturing grantees as well. And for her, nurturing involves helping people through the process and educating them about all that they need to know to do the job well. She concluded her comments on this topic by saying,

If you do this, then you know you will be delivering services that will prepare children to attend school healthy and ready to learn.

Board members referred repeatedly to the importance of collaboration across the community. The Partnership strives to build a connected system of services in its county and knows this can only be done if it has the widespread support and cooperation of a variety of agencies and organizations. The Executive Director observed that another key element in the success of this system is knowing what the community needs. The Partnership achieves this through meaningful community involvement that includes broad representation from the diverse facets of the county. This includes people of different cultural and economic backgrounds, as well as perspectives outside the early childhood field. The board especially emphasizes the need to include the perspectives of the primary recipient of services—parents of young children. The general sentiment

of the Executive Director and board is that only by partnering with primary service providers in the county can the Partnership hope to address the needs its community identifies.

Chaney Partnership

A small, rural county located in the mountains of North Carolina, Chaney languishes behind most of the state economically. In the 1990s, the population growth was almost half of the state average (8% versus 14%). Both real wages and employment increased at rates lower than the state mean in 1998, and its unemployment rate of 7% was more than double the statewide figure. While over half of the population has a high school education, only 8% hold a college degree. In the coming years, the county's population is expected to grow at a faster rate than the state average, but its economic growth will be limited by the lack of available industrial space and access to major highways and airports.

This county of 24,000 residents has an overall poverty rate of 18% and the median family income for two parent families is more than \$13,000 less than the statewide figure. Of the approximately 1400 children ages 0-5, in 1998, close to 25% were living in poverty and 12% had no health insurance. Yet, in spite of these depressed conditions, a surprising 79% of the 14 licensed child care programs in the county had a "AA" license, and over half of the 900 children in child care were enrolled in "AA" centers. The unexpected availability of good quality child care is just one example of how the Chaney Partnership has made a positive impact on children in that county. The survey responses and interviews reveal some of the strategies that led to this Partnership's accomplishments.

Key Factors in Local Decision-Making in Chaney County

Part of the Chaney Partnership's success rests in critical steps that the Partnership took at its inception. The Executive Director believes that state-sponsored

collaboration training, coupled with tenacious leadership, laid the groundwork for long-term progress.

I would say the decision-making process works because of the strong foundation built in the formative stages of Smart Start. The combination of the early collaboration training, an excellent coach, and a strong local leader . . . set the stage for how the board would conduct business.

It is my understanding that the board did not submit their first plan on time because they felt they were not ready; so they took the time to do good, solid strategic planning. We got off to a strong start and it has been easy to work with from there.

Board members agreed that its early work “set a precedent for all the strategic planning cycles that followed.” And as described by one member, at the core of this planning process was community input, a strategy the board still relies on heavily.

Because of the initial process, we continue to pull people together from the community. We look carefully at community needs, we then look at what the current realities are, and finally where the gaps are.

Having been in existence for more than 5 years, the Chaney Partnership has had time to develop and refine its decision-making and planning process. While the fundamental aspects remain constant, over the years the process has been streamlined. The Partnership learned that “with board members participating at a hands-on level, decision-making was taking too long.” The board now makes extensive use of committees comprised of board members, agency staff, and community members (most of who are participants in programs the partnership funds). Throughout this process, the board has vested a great deal of responsibility in the Executive Director. She and Partnership staff play key roles in advising the committees and assisting with information gathering. According to one board member, “this change has made a huge difference” in terms of efficiency of operation. She goes on to say that in her experience, “as an organization grows, the board has to rely more heavily on organization staff to carry out the work.”

The board's approach to decision-making reflects a larger tradition of cooperation and collaboration in the county. "The leaders in Chaney County learned long ago that cooperation works better than protecting ones turf," explained the Executive Director, "the spirit of cooperation is evident in both board and committee work." Not surprisingly, this spirit comes through in decision-making. One board member noted that, as a rule, decisions are made through consensus. And while differences of opinion exist between board members, the desire to work cooperatively to achieve the Partnership's goals ultimately brings the group together on issues. In her own words,

We have consensus as a board. Of course, there are always individuals who might not agree with each and everything that we have to decide on. But when we leave the room, we all are in agreement about what we need to do or what decisions have been made.

Another key ingredient in the Chaney Partnership's decision-making process relates to the trust that exists among the board members, and between the board and the Executive Director. The general sentiment among board members can be summed up in one person's description of the board as "pro-active," and having "excellent leadership [among both] board and committee members." They believe that an annual retreat contributes greatly to their developing and maintaining this trust and respect.

In talking about the work of the Executive Director, board members made it clear that they have tremendous confidence in her and are quick to say that she is doing an "excellent job." Likewise, the Executive Director has deep trust and confidence in the board. She believes "the board is very engaged." To illustrate this point, she talked about the board's decision to not change its monthly meeting schedule. The board considered meeting every other month, but ultimately decided that "they needed a meeting every month even if there was no business except sharing information." The Executive Director admitted that this is time-consuming, but strongly believes that it is worthwhile.

Chaney Partnership board members and the Executive Director believe that strong leadership, active board member involvement, and effective use of committees

were the factors that most significantly impacted their decision-making as they developed their 1999 strategic plan. In determining what activities to fund, the board relied heavily on an assessment of community need and the performance of currently funded projects. As described by the Executive Director, one of the Partnership's goals is to "deliver more intensive services rather than the touch everyone approach. The board is very committed to making an impact." It wants to do the most it can for children and families given its resources and capacity to delivery services.

Towards this end, the Chaney Partnership is currently funding activities in the areas of child care, family support, and health. Support is being provided for a variety of activities related to increasing the availability of good quality child care in the community. Activities include efforts aimed at classroom quality improvement, teacher training, and increased teacher compensation. The Partnership is also working to increase the supply of good quality care for low-income families and parents needing infant/toddler care or who work second or third shift. A variety of family support efforts are funded, including parenting education, literacy, and home visitations for new parents. The Partnership also supports preventive health screenings, immunization efforts, and dental care. Board members expressed a desire to increase support for each of these activities, especially the health-related initiatives.

Challenges Faced by the Chaney Partnership

Despite having made tremendous strides in bringing the community together to expand services for children and families in Chaney County, the Partnership faces challenges as it tries to increase its presence and impact. These challenges largely relate to issues of community input, board participation, and accessing useful data.

Perhaps of primary concern to the Executive Director and board members is the need for greater community involvement. In describing the need for greater community input, one board member explained,

We have . . . a large cross-section of the community on our board. This is good in a community like ours. Yet, we wish we had more input from program participants—those who are actually receiving the services.

The Partnership openly recognizes that people have busy lives and that it can be difficult to squeeze in extra commitments. However, board members view community input as crucial to their planning because they rely heavily on the community's help to identify needs and develop program strategies. The board also expressed a desire to get more input from community agencies and organizations. One board member noted,

Our challenge is to make them aware of what is going on so they can partner with us.

As the Partnership builds its own capacity to serve the community, it depends greatly on the community resources to help support service delivery. In a small, low resource county like Chaney, locating space for programs is difficult. It is imperative that the Partnership link up with entities throughout the county who might have space available to house Smart Start funded activities.

The Executive Director and board members also noted challenges they face as a small county with limited human resources. The Partnership often has difficulty scheduling meetings and getting adequate board support to carry out its work. This involvement is impeded in part by the demands that are placed on many board members, not only by the Chaney Partnership, but also by other local organizations. As described by the Executive Director,

Because we are a small community, the pool of folks we have to draw from is limited. It is the same group involved in most of the boards and agencies in the county. That means that people are really stretched and overworked.

She goes on to explain that she's grown to accept that progress is often slow and that they must plan far ahead to get the work done.

The Executive Director also described the challenges faced in orienting new board members. As is true in most counties, the Partnership relies heavily on board member participation. So, with each board member turnover, the Partnership inevitably

loses some ground. The Executive Director tries to reduce this by meeting with new board members frequently and having senior members mentor the new ones.

Additionally, as is true in so many of the partnerships, Chaney's planning efforts suffer from the lack of current statistical data on child and family well-being. The county makes up for this shortcoming by relying on the expertise of its board and committee members.

Lessons Learned from the Chaney Partnership

The Chaney Partnership board members and Executive Director had advice to offer related to building a strong relationship between the board and Executive Director, as well the importance of working diligently to achieve community-wide collaboration.

The Executive Director believes that one of the keys to her successful communication with her board overall is that she has taken time to develop a relationship with each board member individually. Admitting that this takes a lot of time, she believes it is time well spent. As she described this process in her own words,

I think it is helpful to talk to each individual board member about the priorities they see for the county. Find out where they are coming from, inform them about the Smart Start mission and [goals for] systems change.

I like to meet over lunch. I have learned a great deal by doing this and the board has learned a great deal about me. It is always an interesting exchange, even when we were at opposite ends of the spectrum.

The Executive Director also has several strategies for enhancing her relationship with the board as a whole. One is to hold annual board retreats. There is a 2-day long retreat for the full board and a separate day-long retreat for the executive committee. The presence of a facilitator at those sessions allows the Executive Director to engage with the board on a different level. The Executive Director has also found it useful to think of the board as *her* "program." She considers each board meeting to be a program event. She engages the executive committee of the board in designing each program,

but she implements it. This strategy works well to provide a definite focus to each meeting and a clearly defined framework for the Partnership to accomplish its goals.

In its effort to address successfully the needs of all children in Chaney County, board members emphasized that “true collaboration is critical” to effective strategic planning and decision-making. For them this means board members coming to the table with the interests of Smart Start at the forefront of their thoughts—putting aside all other agendas. As described by one member,

This means not just working together as a group, but actually putting your hands in your pockets, laying the contents on the table, and then pulling your hands back and leaving what is there on the table.

And in order to do this effectively, board members must keep their focus on the Partnership’s primary goals. As one board member explained,

Every time we go through our strategic planning process, we reflect on our vision and mission statements.

The Partnership has found this to be a useful strategy for keeping individuals with varied allegiances focused on working collectively. While both the Executive Director and board members acknowledge that this process is time-consuming, again, she strongly believes it is worthwhile and pays off in the long run. She advised,

Take time to do thorough strategic planning. Taking time can save time!

Dawson Partnership

Dawson is a small, rural county located on the coast of North Carolina. With close to 12,000 residents, Dawson has fewer than 800 children ages 0-5. Slightly over 65% of the population have a high education and 12% are college educated. Although real wages and employment increased by a faster pace than the state average in the 1990s, Dawson continues to suffer from a high poverty rate (20%) and a median family

income that is \$7,000 lower than the statewide figure. There has been no recent investment in building new industries or expanding existing ones, and zero percent of the population lives within 10 miles of a 4-lane road (the closest interstate is 80 miles away).

The impact of the county's weak economy has had an impact on the economic and health security of its youngest residents. In 1998, over 25% of children aged 0-5 lived in poverty and more than 16% had no access to health insurance. However, despite these depressing conditions, the status of child care in Dawson County more closely mirrors the state means. There were 7 regulated child care programs serving slightly more than 300 children. Of those programs, over 57% had the state's lower "A" rating, while 29% had the higher "AA" rating. Almost 48% of the children were enrolled in "AA" licensed programs, a figure far above the statewide mean of 28%.

It's against this backdrop that the Dawson Partnership is working for the well-being of children ages 0-5. Survey responses from the Partnership's board members and the Executive Director, combined with follow-up interviews, reveal some of the components of this Partnership's decision-making process.

Key Factors in Local Decision-Making in Dawson County

Members of the Dawson Partnership board of directors attribute much of its success in decision-making to its regular and frequent meeting schedule and the commitment to open and honest communication. Like many of the other partnerships, Dawson's strategic planning process takes place all year long. The planning committee works alongside other committees throughout the year to identify strategies for addressing needs in the county. There is continuous discussion back-and-forth as committee members question proposed activities and seek out facts and other information to guide their decision-making. As described by one board member,

There are questions raised and [each proposed activity] is discussed. We often ask for something different or for more information. We want to have all the facts and information before we vote on an activity.

Ultimately, a county-wide strategic plan is drafted and presented to the full board for final approval. This regular, face-to-face contact over the past 4 years has allowed board members to get to know one another which, in turn, has created an atmosphere in which board members can speak freely. In the words of the Executive Director,

We respect one another; we listen to one another. We collaborate within the board. We come to the table talking and sharing information.

Strangely enough, it's the county's small population and limited resources that may be among the most significant factors influencing the Dawson Partnership's strategic planning process. Both the survey responses and the interviews identify the advantages of these particular characteristics.

The small population has meant that the Partnership must draw on the same pool of people who are involved in other county-level efforts aimed at improving the lives of young children and families. It is typical for Partnership board members to serve on the boards of other nonprofit organizations in the county. The result is that members of the Dawson board have a good sense of what other nonprofits are doing, which community needs are not being met, and what organizations might be willing to collaborate with the Partnership on specific projects. Dawson has done a superb job of getting the key players to the table, which has led to the board's having a realistic understanding about what's possible in their community. As one board member described it,

Because we're small, most of the people on our board sit on other community boards together, and so, we know what's going on in the county.

The fact that there are limited resources has also fed into the willingness of agencies and organizations across the county to work together towards common goals. While larger urban counties may experience a sense of competition among various agencies and organizations, board members believe that a small county is dependent on cooperation to get the most out of the available resources. The Executive Director

expressed that, “one of [the] Partnership’s strongest suits is dovetailing with other efforts.” The possibility of true collaboration requires a cohesive board, a strong executive director, and a dedicated staff to turn the possibilities into reality. The general consensus among Dawson board members is that they have the benefit of all three.

For the Dawson Partnership, open and honest communication, an informed board, and a spirit of cooperation are the factors cited as having the most impact on the board’s decision-making in developing its 1999 strategic plan. As was true in other partnerships, Dawson’s board cited that it gets key information to inform strategic planning from agency-level needs assessments, existing data on the conditions of children and families and the services available to them, and an evaluation of currently funded projects. Relying on these information sources, the Partnership identified child care and family support as areas of primary focus, with special emphasis on increasing services for low-income families. It funded activities related to improving child care quality (through facility upgrades and teacher training) and parenting skills (through home visiting and other projects aimed at enhancing parent-child interactions). Other funded activities related to kindergarten readiness, mental health, and a comprehensive community needs assessment. Board members also expressed a desire to support projects that were focussed on health, but currently are not doing so.

Challenges Faced by the Dawson Partnership

The greatest challenges faced by the Dawson Partnership board relate to there being a lack of current data on the status of children in the county as well as limited human and financial resources. Board members expressed frustration over having to rely on outdated information as they grapple to identify issues to address and to prioritize their spending. Currently, they “depend on board members to bring the needs and perspectives to the table.” But both the board and the Executive Director would like a consistent source of empirical data to rely on in decision-making. The Executive Director also stated a desire for more systematic input from the community to get its assessment on how well the Partnership is doing and what needs are going unmet. The

Partnership is currently planning a comprehensive needs and resources assessment that would include direct surveying of community members.

Although the qualities of a small rural county can foster a strong and effective partnership, Dawson Partnership board members pointed out that those same qualities can also work to undermine the successes. There being a limited pool of people to draw on for community projects has its benefits as discussed in the previous section. It can also mean that people become overextended in their commitments—a sentiment shared by other small partnerships. The result can be a board that has members who do not routinely attend meetings or who are not following through on other obligations to the board. As expressed by one board member, "It's difficult for folks to commit as much time to the committee work as needed."

Additionally, a partnership in a small county may find that tensions between board members can have major repercussions. In Dawson, one member who was serving in a mandated position recently took a step back from her involvement on the Partnership board because of her frustration with another board member. She believed that one person was too heavily influencing decision-making. She explained,

That person . . . considers herself an expert on children. She got what she wanted—a lot of money. I'm no longer the [committee chair] as a result of this.

This frustrated board member ended up designating a member of her staff to represent her on the board. Whereas, on the whole, members described the board as being cooperative and respectful; this is an example of what can happen when differences between individuals arise. In a small county, the loss of a key board member at the table can greatly impact the work of the board overall. And finding a comparable replacement can be challenging.

Dawson Partnership board members were quick to point out that problems faced by small counties extend beyond board membership and participation. In an economically weak community like Dawson, the internal fundraising prospects are extremely limited. Board members expressed frustration at having relatively little money

to address the needs in the county and noted that efforts to seek additional funds can be exhausting for an already overextended group of individuals. In the words of one board member, "In a small rural community you have a grant that pays for all of it or you have nothing." The board is currently joining with other agencies and organizations in the community to write grants seeking funds from entities outside the county.

Lessons Learned from the Dawson Partnership

Members of the Dawson Partnership board feel lucky to be involved in a strong and successful organization. In addition to the key factors in local decision-making, the survey responses and interviews contained useful information to help others trying to mirror Dawson's successes.

Perhaps first and foremost, the board members praised the work of the Executive Director and attributed their ability to work effectively to her open communication style and superb organizational skills. They credited the Executive Director for keeping the committees on task and facilitating the overall decision-making process. It is because of her that they work so well together. For her part, she admitted that she tries to be "honest and respectful" in her work with the board. She has also learned the value in having patience and "not to jump at everything." She says her success is in part due to her ability to remain calm and take time to think through a matter before responding too quickly.

The board and Executive Director also stressed the importance of continuity. Year after year, they try to maintain continuity within the board membership as well as in the planning process. They have learned that, given the competing demands on board members' time, it is expeditious to have some consistency in who is making decisions and how they go about decision-making. The partnership is only now being faced with having several members rotate off the board. One board member is hoping to institute a more expanded orientation for new members that would involve pairing a new member with an old one for a short time. The goal would be to provide the new member an historical perspective on the Partnership's work and a more intensive introduction to its

policies and procedures, all of which should ease the overall transition and prepare new members to participate more fully.

A final lesson learned from the board relates to the importance of keeping the betterment of the community at the center of their discussions. During board meetings, the Dawson Partnership board members are committed to focusing their effort on improving the lives of young children. This is their “reason for being,” and seems to shape not only what they do, but also who they are together.

Epworth Partnership

Epworth County has experienced few of the benefits of the economic boom that hit North Carolina in the 1990s. During that decade, this rural, western county had only a 1.5% population increase, while the statewide increase was close to 14%. And although real wages increased at a faster pace than the state average, the county’s average wage and its poverty rate still rank Epworth among the lowest in the state. The future outlook for the county does not look much better. Its population is slightly under 10,000, and that number is projected to decrease over the next decade. With just slightly more than half of the county’s adult population having a high school education—the statewide average is 70%—Epworth ranks close to the bottom in the state on that variable as well. Not surprisingly, employment options are also grim. Over 39% of the county’s workforce is in manufacturing, yet there is little expected growth in local industry. Currently, there is no available space in existing industrial buildings and none of the county’s residents live within 10 miles of a 4-lane road.

The lack of resources that hinder the county economically are also reflected in the conditions for young children and their families. The median income for two parent families is more than \$10,000 below the statewide figure. There are fewer than 600 children ages 0-5 in the county. In 1998, over 16% of those children lived in poverty and more than 14% had no health insurance. There were 6 regulated child care programs serving more than 150 children. While a third had a “AA” rating, half were exempt from licensure. Yet, close to 40% of the children attend “AA” licensed centers.

Comparable to Dawson County in size and economic outlook, Epworth has employed a number of similar strategies in its effort to make its Smart Start Partnership effective. Building strong relationships across the county and cultivating a spirit of community-wide cooperation and collaboration are key ingredients to the success of both of these partnerships. The Epworth Partnership's survey responses and interviews provide insight into what was involved in building a base of support in that county.

Key Factors in Local Decision-Making and in Epworth County

Early on, the Epworth Partnership worked hard to include the larger community in its strategic planning process. Board members wanted to be assured that they were not "focusing on one group's agenda, but were addressing everyone's needs." This was done primarily through a series of public forums held throughout the county. As described by one of the board members, "we started in the community and met with individuals. Some were targeted and some were not." The sessions were attended by service providers, parents, and other interested citizens.

This effort to reach out and meet with people on their own turf proved to be quite advantageous to the Partnership and has had positive long-term effects. It immediately gave the Partnership a broader presence and a heightened level of credibility, especially in the smaller towns. In the words of one board member,

I think going into the neighboring communities gave us more buy-in with the citizens. We had key leaders in each of the smaller communities facilitate group meetings. We served light meals and had people come after work. It was more like a family event than a [public forum].

The meetings were successful in making people feel involved in the planning process. In addition, board members believe the small public forums revealed needs that might have gone unnoticed in larger county-wide meetings or in discussions that only tapped community leaders. Following the meetings, the board felt equipped with sufficient information to target programs and services to specific communities based on actual need.

It goes without saying that this approach was feasible in Epworth because the county is small and sparsely populated. The board believes that size plays a role in other aspects of the way the Partnership functions and makes decisions. Faced with limited resources, agencies and groups from across the county are motivated to join together to achieve larger goals. As expressed by one board member,

Sometimes I think it's easier for smaller communities to work together. We have less money and so we have to cooperate to make sure that it is spent properly.

This small, rural county also has a fairly homogenous population—a factor that the Executive Director believes helps in decision-making. She emphasizes in particular the widespread presence of the faith community. In her opinion, having commonly held values often shapes the Partnership's objectives and makes it easier to agree on activities to fund. To illustrate this point, the Executive Director described how the Partnership came to focus on teen pregnancy.

We are a rural community and may be more religious than some other communities. For this reason, I think the board members might add family values [to Smart Start's definition of well-being].

"Family support" is where we tend to focus on family values. For example, [we focus] on teen pregnancy even though we have one of the lowest pregnancy rates in the state. Our Partnership wants to have no teen pregnancies.

Having been in operation for more than 4 years, cooperation and working together as a team are touted to be the hallmarks of the Partnership's successful decision-making. Much like other Partnerships, Epworth's strategic planning process takes place throughout the year, with the bulk of the work being done by board committees. Throughout this process, board members work cooperatively, sharing in the effort to prioritize needs and identify ones that the Partnership might impact. To aid decision-making, board members rely heavily on each other's expertise, as well as that of other leaders across the county, and the Partnership's Executive Director and staff. The Executive Director credits the success of this process to the fact that all critical

decision-making is done by *consensus*, which she believes is essential in a small county.

Decision-making works best when you can achieve consensus. With smaller counties, you just have to do this more than with larger counties.

The Executive Director goes on to explain that a failure to reach consensus can actually undermine the decision-making process, even if only one or two people are in disagreement.

Epworth Partnership board members expressed a sincere commitment to working together to improve the lives of children and families throughout the county. One way they do this is by staying focused on their mission and supporting activities that “are good matches with its goals and objectives.” The board members agree that the community forums played a critical role in helping them identify specific objectives.

In this low resource county, the Partnership sees itself as a vital link for early intervention in children’s lives. Working cooperatively as a team and garnering community input were cited as key factors in decision-making during strategic plan development in 1999. The board’s ultimate decisions about funding were heavily influenced by available data and other information documenting need, an assessment of currently funded projects, and the cost effectiveness of an activity.

Board members cited access to child care, parent education, home visiting, and health care as having the greatest impact on child well-being. Currently, the majority of activities funded are in the areas of child care and family support. In child care, the board was particularly interested in assuring that low-income children had access to care and were receiving the type of care they needed. Funded activities included increasing child care subsidies for low-income families, offering school readiness and enrichment programs, and providing support for classroom substitutes. Family support efforts include expanding the services offered by its family resource center, such as home visiting, parenting education, adult literacy courses, and abuse prevention. Support was also provided for health screenings and to assist with donations of books and computers

to local libraries. Board members expressed an interest in funding efforts more directly aimed at improving the quality of child care, offering more services for children with special needs, and addressing the transportation needs in the county. But such efforts are not included in the Partnership's current plan.

Challenges Faced by the Epworth Partnership

Although board members believe that Epworth's small size often leads to greater cooperation than is likely in larger counties, they also echoed the Dawson Partnership's sentiment that the actions of individuals can have long-term repercussions in small counties. One of the greatest challenges for the Epworth Partnership's Executive Director is negotiating individual personality differences and organizational structures that she believes "are immutable to change." Because the success of the Partnership depends on the cooperation of agencies and individuals across the county, the Executive Director recognizes that nurturing those different relationships is critical. And that this is especially true for those individuals and agency representatives who sit on the board.

While the Epworth Partnership has worked to create a collaborative spirit within its board, like many other Partnerships, it struggles to maintain that spirit in the face of changes in board membership. The board recently experienced quite a bit of turnover in both mandated and appointed positions. As a consequence, the Executive Director feels as though in many ways she is starting over. She reflected,

A lot of what Smart Start is about is gone with the old board members. We have lost some of our "shared history." It is scary to me to think about not having that shared history.

The Executive Director believes she has a long task ahead to educate the new members not only about the Partnership's specific work but also about Smart Start in general. She is very concerned about how the recent changes in board make-up will impact the Partnership's work. In her opinion,

There are many new board members that will need to be educated. But the devil is in the details really. We don't have any goals regarding young children that anyone would disagree with. It's how decisions about programming happen and how the money is allocated that can lead to problems. That's when difficulties arise.

Other significant challenges faced by the Epworth Partnership relate to resources available to the board to guide its decision-making. Like so many other counties, the board would like more current statistical data about the conditions of its children and families. In addition, the Executive Director expressed a desire to look more systematically at how the programs and activities they fund impact the communities and individuals being served. While the Partnership has established benchmarks for its activities and tries to measure their overall success, she admitted that this is a great challenge and that the board is not satisfied with its progress in this area.

Lessons Learned from the Epworth Partnership

The Epworth Partnership board members agree that interagency communication and community collaboration have been central to their accomplishments. And for them, this was largely achieved by keeping child and family well-being at the center of their thoughts and as the focus of their action. One board member offered the following advice,

Keep [the Partnership's] overall goals in mind. Don't worry about what you're supposed to do versus what I'm supposed to do. We accomplish so much more when we work as a team rather than working separately and only to meet our own needs.

As described previously, the community forums were a critical element in the Partnership's laying a foundation for effective communication and collaboration. While the Executive Director acknowledged the success of that effort, she also offered advice about a preliminary step that she wished the Partnership had taken.

Don't ignore publicity campaigns. We started out thinking that we needed to do more substantial, hands-on service.

Looking back, I think that our progress has been stymied by the general ignorance about the important developmental needs of children. If I had

to do it all over, I would have spent funds on an on-going campaign to [educate the public].

She goes on to add that one of the Partnership's toughest challenges might have been that of educating the people in effect changing their minds about what children need to grow and develop optimally.

Conclusion

Exactly how do communities make decisions about ways to meet their goals for children and families? It is apparent from the partnership profiles that there is no one best way for communities to come together to make decisions effectively. However, a surprising number of common themes emerge across the partnerships. The six most prevalent factors reported to have a positive influence on local decision-making are highlighted below, followed by a short discussion of common challenges partnerships faced.

A strong executive director is critical. Partnerships agree that the executive director is the driving force of a local partnership's mission. Successful decision-making hinges on this person's leadership and management skills. Board members see an effective executive director as not only having extensive knowledge about the needs of children and families, but also being able to negotiate across various sectors in the community to bring everyone together to work collaboratively.

Intensive involvement of board members. An active and involved board of directors is critical to effective decision-making. Partnerships find that board members who feel trusted and respected are more likely to be actively involved. One way to foster the development of trust and respect is by encouraging honest communication and providing opportunities for board members to spend time together outside the regularly scheduled meetings. (For example, during board retreats.) Partnerships also find that they can get more out of individual members by streamlining and targeting members' responsibilities, thereby asking for less of each member's time. An effective way to do this is by utilizing a committee structure in decision-making. Other strategies used by partnerships to encourage involvement of board members include using a facilitator to help guide the decision-making process, and selecting board members who are knowledgeable about key issues in the field and bring both local and state perspectives to the table.

Identify common goals from the start. The local partnership boards are largely made up of volunteers whose primary professional interests do not rest in Smart Start. Making the purpose of the board's work and commitment clear from the beginning helps keep this disparate group of members focused on working collectively to achieve the partnership's mission. Some boards accomplish this by actively asserting that their purpose in working together is to focus their efforts on improving the lives of children, and then making this the centerpiece of all they do. Partnerships believe that identifying common goals from the start is key to "true" cooperative decision-making. It allows each board member to come to the table with the interests of Smart Start at the forefront of his thoughts, putting aside all other agendas.

Invest time in planning. Although careful planning is time-consuming, it pays off in the long run. Partnerships that took time up-front to develop a planning process and then stick to it, report that they reap the benefits for years. Improving child well-being is a long-term endeavor. Many board members believe that the most successful strategic planning takes place when there are clearly defined long-range goals.

Involve the broader community. Partnerships find that in order to achieve community-wide change, the voices and interests of the larger community must be represented in all aspects of planning and decision-making. This involves broad representation from diverse facets, including people of different cultural and economic backgrounds, as well as perspectives outside the child and family services field. In many instances, the only way to get a sense of actual needs in the community is through community involvement. This can be done through community-wide meetings, site visits to prospective providers, and active efforts to seek input from parents of young children. Partnerships agree that the key element of success in systems change is knowing the needs in the community and garnering widespread support and cooperation from a variety of local individuals, agencies, and organizations. In short, the *community* must be at the heart of a community-based initiative.

Building trusting relationships. The success of Smart Start depends on the cooperation and collaboration of a multitude of people. Building trusting relationships

among board members, as well as across various factions in the county, is the key to getting broad-based support and cooperation. Open and honest communication is at the core of building trust. Boards accomplish this internally by the ways they approach decision-making. One commonly used strategy is to make decisions through consensus. A critical step towards building trust at the community level is through community involvement. Partnerships have found that people are more trusting of its efforts and activities if their input is sought.

In addition to these six factors that had a positive influence on local partnership decision-making, three dominant themes arose regarding challenges faced by the local boards. These are the lack of good data, the effort to get full board participation, and the on-going struggle to get meaningful community involvement. Each of these is discussed briefly below.

Partnerships believe that their effort to make sound decisions based on the needs in their community is greatly hindered by the absence of reliable data on the conditions of children and families. While some partnerships attempt to fill this void by going out and gathering information on their own, those efforts are no substitute for the up-to-date, comprehensive data that the partnerships desire. Without such information, it is difficult for a local partnership to track conditions over time, to identify trends, and to begin to understand the root causes of some of the needs in its community. Although the partnerships acknowledge that this type of information could simplify their decision-making during strategic plan development, in its absence, they make use of the expertise of their board members and seek community input to provide information on existing resources and needs.

The other challenges commonly experienced by partnerships are, admittedly, much less daunting. By-and-large, partnerships have been quick to learn ways to enhance board participation by adjusting meeting schedules, streamlining the strategic planning process, altering the responsibilities of board members, and having veteran board members mentor new ones. Perhaps a local partnership's most significant resource for strategies to address this issue is other local partnerships. Similarly,

partnerships turn to one another to learn about new approaches to garnering and sustaining community involvement.

Taken together, the factors that influence decision-making and the partnerships' strategies for dealing with challenges offer insight into how individual communities come together to agree on ways to meet common goals for young children and their families. It is important to point out that having a strong executive director and involved board members are essential for all the other factors described above to be developed and maintained. The local profiles also show that the process through which an organization approaches decision-making develops in relation to several conditions. These include the demographic characteristics of the county, the age of the organization, and its general stage of development.

The experiences reported here make it clear that the success of North Carolina's Smart Start initiative relies heavily on the internal operations of the local partnerships. Each of the local partnerships profiled in this paper has readily embraced the Smart Start mission *to ensure that all children enter school healthy and ready to succeed*. While they adopt slightly different strategies to meet this broad goal, perhaps what is most striking are the similarities in their thought and decision-making processes. Whether this relative uniformity in process is the result of a successful campaign by the NCPD, or simply the trademark characteristics of successful decision-making in community-based initiatives remains unknown. What is clear however, is that each of the partnerships reviewed here has made great strides towards improving the lives of young children and their families in North Carolina.

Both new and mature community-based organizations are invited to use this document as a resource to guide their actions, as well as to gauge their own development. This paper offers useful information for individuals seeking to better understand decision-making in community-based organizations. The perspectives of key players in the process are represented. While it is important that these perspectives be shared, they also need to be broadened to include those of service providers and recipients of services. Our hope is that this document will generate further discussion

about decision-making in community-based initiatives and will stimulate continued sharing and learning.

APPENDICES

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APPENDIX I

Smart Start Core Area & Goals

Developed by the North Carolina Partnership for Children

CHILDCARE AND EDUCATION

- Childcare subsidies
- Improving quality and availability of child care
- Children with special needs
- Teacher education, compensation and support

One of the goals of all local partnerships is to make high quality child care available for all children who need it. Over 30 percent of Smart Start funds are used to assist families in purchasing child care. Subsidies may be paid for care in any licensed child care center and registered family child care home which parents choose.

Paying Subsidies for Child Care

In order to support the cost of higher quality child care, some local partnerships subsidize the care at a rate which is higher than the county market rate. Most partnerships have also raised the eligibility limit for subsidies to help working poor families.

Increasing the Availability of Child Care Spaces

Many communities do not have adequate child care and are adding additional spaces through a grants program. Sometimes more spaces are added for particular age groups, such as infants and toddlers, or for children whose families work extended hours.

Improving the Quality of Child Care

A major focus of Smart Start is to improve the quality of all child care. One project which has been very successful assesses the quality of a child care classroom using a nationally-recognized environmental rating scale. Following the classroom assessment, a plan is developed to improve the classroom learning environment. Smart Start grant funds are also used to purchase needed equipment and materials for classrooms and playgrounds.

Inclusion of Children with Special Needs

Educating teachers and giving technical assistance is working effectively with children with disabilities and is encouraged through Smart Start. One project purchases special equipment to enable children with disabilities to function more easily in classrooms with typically developing children.

Teacher Education and Support

Smart Start initiatives designed especially for teachers have emerged because of the high turnover rate and low wages paid to teachers of young children. Career ladders are being developed that link training and education to certificates, diplomas and degrees. The T.E.A.C.H (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) Early Childhood Project assists child care teachers and directors in furthering their education by linking a higher level of education to better compensation.

HEALTH CARE AND EDUCATION

- Immunizations
- Health Screenings
- Parent Education
- Access to Health Care
- Dental Care

In order for a child to enter school prepared for success, the child must be healthy. Activities that improve health include preventive health care, direct treatment, and health education.

Support for Immunizations

One of the challenges of getting young children properly immunized is making immunizations accessible to them. Through Smart Start, communities set up satellite sites in rural areas and provide immunizations in convenient locations. Outreach nurses care for children's health needs in child care programs and follow up to assure that immunizations are given on time.

Health and Developmental Screenings

Some local plans include health and developmental screenings in child care programs. Besides the health benefits for the children and convenience for working families, children are more comfortable in these settings. Smart Start screenings include vision, hearing, speech, developmental, and dental. Correcting problems early gives children a better chance of future school success.

Education for Parents and Child Care Providers

A variety of educational opportunities in health-related areas are available to parents and child care providers. These include First Aid and CPR training, nutrition education, and training about infectious disease. Special programs are available to parents of newborns, including teen parents, to help them care for their newborns and learn about child development.

FAMILY SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

- Child Care Resource and Referral
- Family Resource Centers
- Literacy Programs
- Transportation
- Parent Education
- Support for Teen Parents

Many Smart Start programs provide families with information, education, and other services to help their children be prepared for success in school.

Child Care Resource & Referral Services

Child care resource and referral services are a critical part of each Smart Start community. These programs offer a broad range of services and technical assistance to families, child care providers, and businesses. Families can talk to a counselor at their local child care resource and referral agency and learn about high quality care and find out where it is available.

Family Resource Centers

Many local partnerships have discovered that the most effective way to serve families is to provide needed services in family resource centers located within targeted communities. These centers range in size and services offered. In one rural community, a family resource van visits small communities regularly, taking enrichment programs and health services to isolated areas.

Family Literacy Programs

Children who grow up in families that are literate are more likely to be good readers. Through Smart Start, family literacy programs are helping family members learn to read and are encouraging them to read to their young children.

Transportation

Because many of North Carolina's children live in very rural areas, transportation is a barrier to getting the services they need. Smart Start partnerships are funding ways to make transportation available to children and their families.

APPENDIX II

Smart Start Strategic Plan Code Form

1. Overview

Vision

Yes No

Same Different

Mission

Yes No

Same Different

2. Strategic Planning Process--STEPS TO CREATE THE PLAN

Length of partnership-defined planning cycle _____ not mentioned

HOW Board meeting--once a year decision process
 Board meeting--ongoing decision process
 Board retreat
 One-time community forum/meeting
 Series of community meetings/task force
 Included service providers
 Included parents

WHAT

Review of current activities
 Review of goals/objectives/vision/mission
 Review of planning process
 Review of Smart Start requirements, including core service areas
 Review of data/needs
 Review of literature to create plan (not for funding decisions)

Other, specify key phrases

3. Strategic Planning Process--HOW DID THEY MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT WHAT TO INCLUDE IN THE PLAN

No description of how decisions are made
 Cost-effectiveness
 Program outcomes/program effectiveness
 Literature
 Best practices
 Other , specify key phrases

Brainstorming
 Meet goals/partnership level outcomes
 Consensus
 Vote
 Approved by board
 Approved by subcommittee

4. Strategic Planning Process--WHO WAS INVOLVED

How many total? _____ missing

Who was NOT involved? nobody

Other, specify key phrases

Detailed listing
 NCPC listing (community, business, faith, parents, public/private human services agencies)
 No listing

5. Current realities—CRITICAL CONTEXT VARIABLES/COUNTY DESCRIPTORS

No context variables mentioned
 Broad
 Total population
 Population changes
 Ethnicity/language
 Hispanic population
 Rural-isolated
 Economic (child care market rate, subsidy use, working mothers, loss/gain of jobs, unemployment, income, income spent on child care)
 Collaboration/community involvement
 Partnership participation with community boards/committees, planning, governance

Partnership participation in sharing resources (ex., staff, funds, office space, tasks) with community partners
 Early childhood
 Children under 6 years
 Households with children under 6 years
 Number of licensed/registered child care facilities
 Number of children enrolled in licensed/registered child care facilities
 Number of high quality (AA or accredited) facilities
 Number of children enrolled in high quality (AA or accredited) facilities
 Number of child care teachers/directors
 Number of children not in care

Other, specify key phrases

6. Current realities—METHODS AND RESULTS OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT

METHOD No data mentioned
 Existing data--state
 Existing data--local
 Collected data—partnership/contract
 Collected data--collaboration
 Workforce study
 Family needs assessment
 Targeted to children<6 years & their families

RESULTS *Family related*
 Teen parents
 Parents of children with special needs
 Special populations of parents (single, father, grandparent)
 Hispanic families
 Geography gaps
 Access (transportation, don't know about)
 Availability
 Lack of parent knowledge: child development
 Help with parenting (stress, isolation, etc.)
 Other, specify key phrases

RESULTS *Child care related*
 Child care environment
 Increase licensure levels
 Child care provider education levels
 Professional development compensation
 Professional development incentives
 Health insurance/benefits for providers
 Increase salaries
 Salary supplements
 Availability of care
 Availability of care--special type (infant/toddler, spec. needs, shift)
 Vacancy rate
 Subsidy waiting list
 Children not in care

RESULTS *Health related*
 Dental
 Insurance
 Access to primary care
 Availability of primary care

7. Organizational Plan—BOARD AND COMMITTEE DEVELOPMENT

How many on board? _____ missing
 How many committees? _____ missing

Board training about decision-making process
 Board orientation to Smart Start
 Not mentioned
 Other, specify key phrases

8. Organizational Plan—OTHER, SPECIFY KEY PHRASES

9. Current realities—GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

GOALS

Yes No
Same Different

OBJECTIVES

Yes No
Same Different

10. Current realities—SERVICE BENCHMARKS AND ACTIVITIES CHART

How many readiness benchmarks? _____
How many child care benchmarks? _____
How many health benchmarks? _____
How many family support benchmarks? _____
How many community/systems benchmarks? _____
How many administrative benchmarks? _____
How many other benchmarks? _____
Total number of benchmarks _____

All children/families/providers Targeted children/families/providers

KINDERGARTEN READINESS, rates of diagnosed problems at K entry, ESL, developmental gains, cognitive, language, social, emotional, behavioral, motor

Child Care QUALITY, licensure increases, environmental ratings, playground safety, quality enhancement, provider education, provider training, provider salaries, provider benefits, educational supplements/incentives, turnover

Child Care AVAILABILITY, spaces for special needs, spaces for infants/toddlers, spaces for shift/evening/weekend care, spaces for sick children, spaces for geographic needs, high quality spaces, family child care spaces

11. Activities—CONTINUING ACTIVITIES CHART / NEW ACTIVITIES

How many readiness activities? _____
How many child care activities? _____
How many health activities? _____
How many family support activities? _____
How many community/systems activities? _____
How many administrative activities? _____
How many other activities? _____
Total number of activities _____

Child Care ACCESSIBILITY, subsidy waiting list, CCR&R quality indicators, CCR&R locating care/knowledge of options, special needs, Hispanic, low-income
Child Care AFFORDABILITY, provide or increase subsidies, scholarships, percent of income to child care
CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS, maintain services, provide services
FAMILY SUPPORT, access to resources, availability of resources, respite care, child abuse/neglect, help with parenting (reduce stress/isolation, increase confidence/support), parent knowledge about child development, parent involvement in child's education, adult literacy, child-focused literacy (read to child)
HEALTH, primary health provider/medical home (well-checks, routine care), developmental screenings, vision/hearing screenings, dental screenings/services, immunizations, insurance, safety (car seats, fire alarms, helmets), breastfeeding support
COMMUNITY/SYSTEMS, comprehensive integrated collaboration, community needs assessment, community-wide indicators, public awareness, advocacy
POORLY DEFINED: met goals for individual, met goals of program, satisfaction with services, increase number served

Other, specify key phrases

12. Activity Outcomes—CONTINUING ACTIVITIES CHART / NEW ACTIVITIES

How many readiness outcomes? _____
How many child care outcomes? _____
How many health outcomes? _____
How many family support outcomes? _____
How many community/systems outcomes? _____
How many administrative outcomes? _____
How many other outcomes? _____
Total number of outcomes _____

All children/families/providers
Targeted children/families/providers

KINDERGARTEN READINESS, rates of diagnosed problems at K entry, ESL, developmental gains, cognitive, language, social, emotional, behavioral, motor
Child Care QUALITY, licensure increases, environmental ratings, playground safety, quality enhancement, provider education, provider training, provider salaries, provider benefits, educational supplements/incentives, turnover
Child Care AVAILABILITY, spaces for special needs, spaces for infants/toddlers, spaces for shift/evening/weekend care, spaces for sick children, spaces for geographic needs, high quality spaces, family child care spaces

13. Signatures
How many signatures? _____ missing
Whose signatures are missing?
Other, specify key phrases

14. What else would you have liked to know for this partnership about the decision making process or definition for child well-being?

15. Rate the overall strength of this plan:

strong
(well defined, organized)

medium

weak
(broad statements, little use of data, unorganized)

Comments:

Child Care ACCESSIBILITY, subsidy waiting list, CCR&R quality indicators, CCR&R locating care/knowledge of options, special needs, Hispanic, low-income
Child Care AFFORDABILITY, provide or increase subsidies, scholarships, percent of income to child care
CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS, maintain services, provide services
FAMILY SUPPORT, access to resources, availability of resources, respite care, child abuse/neglect, help with parenting (reduce stress/isolation, increase confidence/support), parent knowledge about child development, parent involvement in child's education, adult literacy, child-focused literacy (read to child)
HEALTH, primary health provider/medical home (well-checks, routine care), developmental screenings, vision/hearing screenings, dental screenings/services, immunizations, insurance, safety (car seats, fire alarms, helmets), breastfeeding support
COMMUNITY/SYSTEMS, comprehensive integrated collaboration, community needs assessment, community-wide indicators, public awareness, advocacy
POORLY DEFINED: met goals for individual, met goals of program, satisfaction with services, increase number served

Other, specify key phrases

APPENDIX III

Survey Questions

We are interested in what your Smart Start Partnership wants for its children and about your views on what children need in the first five years in order to do well in life. We are also interested in how your Partnership makes decisions about what Smart Start projects and activities to fund. Remember, we want to know what you believe personally.

- *Q.1. How involved were you in creating your Smart Start Partnership's Strategic Plan? **(Check one.)**
 very involved somewhat involved not at all involved
- *Q.2. How familiar are you with the partnership organizational sections of your Smart Start Partnership's Strategic Plan? **(Check one.)**
 very familiar somewhat familiar not at all familiar
- *Q.3. How familiar are you with the projects and activities sections of your Smart Start Partnership's Strategic Plan? **(Check one.)**
 very familiar somewhat familiar not at all familiar
- *Q.4. In your own words, what do you think is your Partnership's definition of child well-being?
- *Q.5. If different, what is your personal definition of child well-being?
- *Q.6. Where do you get information to form your opinions about child well-being?
- *Q.7. Of all the Smart Start projects and activities aimed at helping children succeed that your Partnership is funding, in your opinion, which 3 or 4 are most likely to have the greatest impact on child well-being? Either list the title of the project or briefly describe the project.
- *Q.8. If you could spend your Smart Start funds on any projects or activities for children birth through age five, which 3 or 4 projects or activities would you most want your Partnership to fund that would result in well-being for young children?
- *Q.9. Partnerships have a variety of ways to decide what projects and activities to fund. Below is a list of the most common types of meetings, information considered, participants included, and other factors. Which of these apply to your Partnership's decision-making both this year and last year? **(Check all that apply.)**

Meetings to Discuss Funding Decisions

- Once-a-year Board Meeting or Retreat
- Periodic Board Meetings (3-4 times a year)
- Every Board Meeting
- Once-a-year Committee Meeting or Retreat
- Periodic Committee Meetings (3-4 times a year)
- On-going Standing Committee Meetings

Information Considered

- Review of Own Partnership's Current Funded Activities
- Review of Other Partnership's Current Funded Activities
- Review of Smart Start Requirements

- Review of Child and County Data or Needs
- Review of Best Practices
- Review of Decision-Making Processes
- Cost Effectiveness

Non-Board Members Included in the Strategic Plan Decision-Making Process

- Community Agency Staff
- Smart Start Service Providers
- Parents
- Others, specify _____

Other Factors That Affect How Funding Decisions Are Made

- External Political Influence
- Heavy Influence of One Board Member or Agency
- Heavy Influence of Executive Director
- Other, specify _____

- *Q.10. What other things influenced your Partnership's decision-making?
- *Q.11. Of all the items identified in questions 9 & 10, what most influenced your Partnership's decision-making about what activities and projects to fund?
- *Q.12. How long did it take you to answer this survey?
- Less than 10 minutes
 - 10 to 20 minutes
 - 20 to 30 minutes
 - 30 to 40 minutes
 - 40 to 50 minutes
 - 50 to 60 minutes
 - More than 60 minutes
- *Q.13. Please tell us the location of the computer you used.
- Work
 - Partnership
 - Home
 - Library
 - Other, specify _____
- *Q.14. Do you have any other comments you would like to make? If so, please use the space below.

APPENDIX IV

Interview Protocol

1. Would you briefly describe your strategic planning process briefly?
2. Has that process changed much over the years?
3. Do you believe any part of it needs changing/improving?
4. What makes your partnership's decision-making process work? (*What has to be in place? Who is involved and in what capacity?*)
5. Are there parts that don't work well?
6. What challenges/dilemmas do you face?
7. How do you deal with those challenges?
8. Is there anything that would make this process be more effective?
9. In your survey responses, you mention that ____ and ____ were key influences in your partnership's decision-making. Can you say a bit more about each of those? Were they good or bad influences?
10. Are most of your board members in agreement that the primary goals and objectives of the partnership are to assure that children are healthy and ready for school?
11. Is there any information or other resources that you wish had been available to help in decision-making?
12. Are there any words of wisdom you'd like to pass along to others interested in knowing why your partnership is successful at effective decision-making?