



Strengthening Kindergarten Transition for Children in Tough Neighborhoods

A MAKING CONNECTIONS PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE MATCH BETWEEN
DES MOINES, IOWA AND VANCOUVER, WASHINGTON

PEER TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE LEADS TO ACTION

*Part of a Series from the
Technical Assistance Resource
Center of the Annie E. Casey
Foundation and the Center
for the Study of Social Policy*

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation

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Center for the Study of Social Policy

The Center for the Study of Social Policy, based in Washington, D.C., was established in 1979 with the goal of providing public policy analysis and technical assistance to states and localities. The Center's work is concentrated in the areas of family and children's services, income supports, neighborhood-based services, education reform, family support, community decision-making, and human resource innovations. The Center manages peer technical assistance as part of the Foundation's Technical Assistance Resource Center (TARC).

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BACKGROUND

Making Connections, an initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, works in communities across the country to improve outcomes for children and families who live in tough neighborhoods. The initiative seeks to link people who live in these neighborhoods with economic opportunities, social networks, and effective services to improve the lives and well-being of children and their families. Residents play active roles in all aspects of the work to transform their communities.

As an integral part of the initiative, the Foundation makes technical assistance available to the *Making Connections* sites to help them achieve their goals for families and neighborhoods. Peer technical assistance—connecting people who are engaged in the work of *Making Connections* with communities around the country that have successfully achieved similar goals—enables the sites to learn firsthand from other’s experiences and apply it to the unique conditions in their own communities.

On February 21–23, 2006, a team from the *Making Connections* site in Des Moines, Iowa, traveled to Vancouver, Washington, for a peer technical assistance match. Participants from Des Moines wanted to learn more about how to connect school readiness efforts—including family, friend, and neighbor care; other child care; Head Start; and preschool programs—with public school kindergarten programs. Over a two-day period, the team visited a community learning center and met with residents and staff from Educational Service District (ESD) 112, a regional service organization in southwest Washington, and schools working with the Support for Early Learning and Families (SELF) initiative across Clark County. This report describes some of the topics discussed during the match and summarizes the lessons learned and the next steps that participants from Des Moines committed to take as they move ahead in their work.

SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR THE MATCH

Des Moines is Iowa's largest and most diverse city. The *Making Connections* neighborhood areas, where the child poverty rate is three times the state average, are located in the heart of downtown Des Moines. The West Side *Making Connections* neighborhood includes the city's Enterprise Community, which has been the focus of various urban revitalization efforts. The East Side *Making Connections* neighborhood has experienced an increase in diversity over the past decade, particularly in terms of an increase of Hispanic families. The racial diversity in these neighborhoods is most dramatic when looking at the child population, with nearly two thirds of all children being of color. In addition to this diversity, nearly 30 percent of all residents in *Making Connections* neighborhoods are children, which makes education a very important issue.

Prior to the match, the Des Moines site had been involved extensively in school readiness issues—conducting study groups with parents and child care providers; developing a calendar and checklist of the elements of school readiness and distributing it broadly in the community; and coordinating its efforts with those of the Des Moines Public Schools. In working with families and child care providers, school staff and the *Making Connections* school readiness team found that many families and child care providers were unaware of what schools expect from children when they enter kindergarten.

Because of the growing interest in strengthening the transition to kindergarten for young children and their families, the United Way of Central Iowa made a commitment to provide funding for a transition coordinator for the Des Moines Public Schools. The coordinator will focus initially on kindergarten transition planning in eight elementary schools in the *Making Connections* neighborhoods. *Making Connections* also provides stipends for parent ambassadors who work at each of the eight schools.

“We are transitioning kids
from the day they are born.”

Debbie Elliott, School Principal,
Fruit Valley Community
Learning Center

In Washington State, ESD 112 works in partnership with local school districts across the southwestern region of the state to provide effective, comprehensive, and economical educational programs for children. The SELF program, a partnership involving ESD 112 and other organizations in the community, works in three school districts in Clark County to develop community learning centers that promote kindergarten readiness through a collaboration among early learning service providers, public school districts, and the public library system. Other SELF program elements include providing technical assistance and support for networks of child care providers, increasing community investment in early learning, and developing community partnerships to support early learning.

During 2004–2005, ESD 112, along with the state’s Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), participated in the Ready Schools project sponsored by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), with support from the Casey Foundation. Representatives from ESD 112 and two schools in the Vancouver area participated in a series of national meetings to gain an understanding of recent research and best practices in kindergarten transition and the alignment of standards, curricula, and assessments across preschool, Head Start, and kindergarten programs. Because ESD 112 engages families in tough neighborhoods and supports them and their children in the transition to kindergarten, a senior consultant at the Casey Foundation who participated in the CCSSO meetings identified ESD 112 as an exemplary learning partner for the team from Des Moines.

THE CONSULTATION

Prior to the meeting, a core group of participants from Des Moines and Vancouver shaped the agenda for the peer match. A senior consultant with the Casey Foundation and the Center for the Study of Social Policy facilitated the planning process. Participants identified in advance the following learning objectives for the match:

- What are the essential components of an effective kindergarten transition strategy?
- What are the important steps in initiating a kindergarten transition program?
- How can we be successful in involving parents?
- How can we be successful in getting buy-in and support from other key players?
- What are effective ways to measure success?

The *Making Connections* site in Des Moines assembled a diverse team of ten participants for the visit to Vancouver. The team included: the *Making Connections* school readiness coordinator; two parent ambassadors who had recently been appointed to work in their children's elementary schools; the Des Moines Public Schools' director of elementary, early childhood, and middle school programs; the district's Head Start director; a child care center director; and three school principals in the *Making Connections* area.

A Casey Foundation senior consultant, experienced in the peer match process, acted as facilitator for the consultation. Another senior consultant, who had participated in the CCSSO Ready Schools project, documented the match and developed this report.

The match began with an afternoon visit to the Fruit Valley Community Learning Center, located in an isolated, low-income neighborhood in an industrial area of

“This doesn’t look like a school: It looks like a ski lodge!”

Des Moines Visitor to the Fruit Valley Community Center

Vancouver. The school, which enrolls students from kindergarten through grade five, includes an early childhood wing with child care and Head Start classrooms.

The Family Resource Center opens directly from the main entrance of the airy, wood-and-stone school building, that community residents helped to design. The center is open to all community residents and serves as the “living room” for a school with an inclusive culture. Parents bring their preschool children to the center’s play area beginning at 7:30 in the morning; the public library holds weekly story and craft sessions here for parents and children ages five and under, in partnership with the ESD 112 and the school; mental health workers from community agencies work in the center with children and their families; the county’s Housing Authority and Health Authority also provide services on-site as part of their ongoing support for the Fruit Valley community; and parents reconnect with their kindergartners at dismissal time. The school’s principal guided the Des Moines team in a tour of the building and provided an overview of the school’s philosophy and programs. “We are transitioning kids from the day they are born,” she said.

Following the tour, participants from both cities gathered for a get-acquainted reception and dinner at a hotel in downtown Vancouver. ESD 112’s family support specialist welcomed the group and provided a brief history of ESD’s work in early learning, and Des Moines’s school readiness coordinator provided an overview of *Making Connections* and its efforts in Des Moines.

Match participants began the first full day with a review of the learning objectives, agenda, and established guidelines for their work together. They continued by sharing strategies for success in getting started and examining challenges, including increasing parent and teacher involvement, key roles and responsibilities for all those involved, and ways to measure success.

On the second day of the match, participants from Vancouver reflected on lessons learned from their work and offered strategic recommendations to their peers from Des Moines. After an opportunity to thank and say goodbye to their peer consultants, the Des Moines participants shared their key learnings and commitments to action for the months ahead.

The Fruit Valley Community Learning Center in Vancouver, Washington

DEMOGRAPHIC AND COMMUNITY INFORMATION

According to the city of Vancouver's 2002–2003 Census data, the Fruit Valley neighborhood has approximately 6,698 residents. About 24 percent of these residents are living in poverty. There are approximately 539 children under the age of six and 45 percent live in households under the poverty level. The Fruit Valley Community Learning Center houses a K–5 elementary school as well as a part-day and full-day Head Start classrooms and a Southwest Child Care Consortium child care center serving 59 children. There is a family resource center located inside the school. This center offers computer classes, a food bank, clothing resources, and family activities. Other community resources include a park and community center across the street from the school, a brand new Vancouver Housing Authority complex offering subsidized housing units, and a church.

ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The Fruit Valley Community Learning Center currently uses the HOSTS Readiness Profile and the DIBELS tool to assess current kindergarten students in the fall, with follow-up testing in the spring. In addition, a Read Well Assessment is completed. This is part of a reading program curriculum for kindergartners that is individualized based on the assessment results and follows students through the end of the school year. This year, there was a significant difference in scores between students attending the morning classroom and students attending the afternoon classroom with afternoon students scoring higher. A survey was conducted to see if parents were doing more with their children at home. They found that these parents spent time naming street signs, talking about feelings, and talking at dinnertime about what they did during the day.

—Information Taken from the School Readiness Transition Plan

KEY LEARNINGS FROM THE MATCH

Elements of Effective Kindergarten Transition Strategies

During the first day of the peer match, participants from Des Moines and Vancouver worked together to explore and understand the essential elements of effective kindergarten transitions and ways to involve parents and teachers in the process.

They concluded that effective transition strategies occur when the following elements are in place:

- *Developing a philosophical commitment to do what is best for children.* Kindergarten transition initiatives “connect the dots” across organizations and sectors that may not otherwise have experience working together. The work is more likely to move ahead smoothly when it is based on a shared commitment to achieving healthy development and learning for all children. Each organization can understand its own work in the context of a larger effort.
- *Building on strengths.* Each community has a unique configuration of strengths and resources: in the early childhood community, in the schools, and among the parents and community members, including business and local leaders. Successful communities make an effort to identify and connect these strengths and develop an effort that weaves them together.
- *Distributing leadership at the school building level.* Effective kindergarten transition strategies engage multiple individuals in school leadership roles, including the principal, pre-K and kindergarten teachers, Head Start staff, family outreach and support staff, and representatives of community-based organizations. Creating a kindergarten transition team helps keep everyone on the same page—and moving ahead together.

- *Increasing cultural competency.* Schools and early childhood education providers that work comfortably with diverse populations develop approaches that are welcoming to parents and make parents feel comfortable as partners in their children’s learning. Schools often find that community organizations can be valuable partners in this work.
- *Building a high-quality staff.* Professional development increases staff capacity to support children’s learning and helps to align experiences across the many providers and institutions that are involved. Professional development opportunities often can be designed so that child care and private preschool providers have opportunities to learn and participate alongside school staff.
- *Ensuring seamless communication.* Good communication is essential everywhere: for parents, schools, early care and education providers, community organizations, and more. Businesses and other community stakeholders need more information so they can be involved. To keep them informed, Vancouver sends out flyers to doctors’ offices and clinics to let parents know about the schedule for school registration. Des Moines is planning to use its district’s cable television channel to broadcast similar information. In sum, a comprehensive communications plan is essential. “Make sure to use a variety of communication techniques: Flyers are not sufficient!” commented a Fruit Valley team member.

“People are operating with different constructs. Parents think schools know about the kids and are expecting them; schools say they have no way to know that they are coming.”

Fruit Valley Team Member

In another session, working together in small groups participants shared their challenges and successes in involving parents who live in tough communities. Des Moines’s parent ambassadors who participated in the match were especially knowledgeable and helpful in describing the experiences of parents of incoming kindergarten students.

STRATEGIES FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT: WHAT HAS WORKED?

- Free child care and food
- Visibility: “Meet and Greet!”
- Kindergarten teachers welcoming children and families to the school building
- Calling people by their names
- Interpreters
- Family fun events with no agenda
- Parents have an opportunity to be heard
- Build a relationship—develop a genuine partnership
- A positive phone call from the teacher during the first few weeks of school
- Home visiting—or meeting families at a neutral spot
- Read and Play—a weekly gathering of parents and preschool children with a librarian from the public library
- Activity kits, appropriate for different age groups, that parents can check out
- Providing a physical place for parents, staffed with someone whose job it is to help families, sends a strong message of welcome and inclusion
- Acknowledge parents as their child’s first teacher
- Show respect for families’ experience and wisdom regardless of the level of formal education

STRATEGIES FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT: CHALLENGES THAT NEED TO BE ACKNOWLEDGED

- Teacher contract and staffing requirements
- The systems for providing human services, health care, transportation, etc., are fragmented and stressful for children and families

“Registration can be so cold.

A kindergarten teacher

noticed me and the fact that

I wasn’t happy. She took me

to the room. If that hadn’t

happened, I’m not sure

I would have gotten as

involved at the school.”

Des Moines Team Member

- Cultural differences in expectations for parents and children
- Some cultures assume that responsibility for learning belongs to the school
- Some groups have no experience with voluntary involvement: tell them they must be there!
- Parents who work long hours
- Mobility, homelessness, and abandoned children
- Parents who have had bad experiences in school themselves: how do you help them become involved?
- Incarcerated parents

Strategies for Gaining Teacher Buy-In

Team members shared their insights on engaging classroom teachers, especially kindergarten teachers, who are most involved in the work of designing and carrying out transition strategies. Suggested strategies include:

- Creating a kindergarten transition team that involves the principal, kindergarten teachers, counselors, and parents. Regular meetings build buy-in, although it sometimes does not happen in the first year.
- Validating what teachers are currently doing: “We believe in you and will work with you.”
- Involving teachers in identifying the purpose: “What needs to happen? Why?”
- Providing opportunities for input and sharing ideas—listening and acting on the ideas of teachers.
- Reassuring teachers that they are not alone. Listing the partners, such as the United Way and other community organizations, can be comforting.

- Including teachers and their own children in evening events to model involvement and commitment to the concept of family.
- Getting flexible parent contact hours written into the teachers' contract. Teachers keep track of the hours they spend working with parents.

Tracking the Results of Strong Kindergarten Transitions

Kindergarten transition strategies create a positive atmosphere and can make parents, students, and teachers feel good. But do they lead to better results? Can those results be measured? At the end of a long day of discussion, participants tackled the thorny issue of results: how to measure the impact of their work. They agreed that, when schools are more responsive to parents and children beginning with strong transitions,

Students will demonstrate:

- *Better academic progress*
 - More parents understand their children's developmental progress and what to do next
 - Less children repeat a grade
 - Graduation rates increase (a lagging indicator measured many years later)
 - Progress on state tests improves (Washington at grades 4, 7, and 10; Iowa at grades 4, 8, and 11)
- *Better behavior*
 - Behavioral referrals decrease
 - Suspensions decrease
 - Special education referrals decrease

Parents will demonstrate:

- *Increased involvement*
 - Changes in parent practices occur (pre- and post- self-assessments; homework journals to track parents involvement in children's school work at home)
 - Participation in parent-teacher conferences improves
 - Use of resources at a family resource center increases
 - Attendance improves; tardiness decreases
 - Attendance at meetings increases (sign-in sheets)

Examples of Existing Transition Activities in the Fruit Valley Neighborhood in Vancouver, Washington

- **Jump Start Kindergarten**—*August*—Any kindergarten-eligible child is welcome to attend this pre-kindergarten two-week session designed to acclimate children to a classroom experience, practice basic classroom skills, and learn about classroom rules.
- **Preschool Packets**—*Each month throughout the school year*—Distributed by the Vancouver School District, each packet contains activities and worksheets for four- and five-year-olds to practice the alphabet, writing their name and letters, along with math, science, and social studies skills.
- **Kindergarten Round-up**—*May*—Families with incoming kindergarten children are invited to attend and learn about the school, the classrooms, and register for the following fall class. Packets are distributed, complete with school handbook, lunch program information, a school district calendar, a summertime activity calendar and booklet for incoming children, a brochure on skills children will need for school, some community resource information, and parent partnership information.

- **Back-to-School BBQ**—*Prior to the first day of school*—All school children and their families can attend the open house to meet their new teachers, see their new classrooms, and receive information about the school. Traditionally, Burgerville, River’s Edge Church, and other partners help sponsor the BBQ by providing food, volunteers, and the Burgerville Train.
- **Read & Play Storytime**—*Weekly, year-round*—A 60-minute session designed for children from birth to age five and their families. A librarian reads a story, uses finger plays, music, and movement to encourage literacy-skills development. Parents and caretakers can talk with each other and receive support from a Parent Educator.
- **Literacy Kits**—*Weekly, year-round*—Available for checkout by parents and child care providers, these kits are filled with activities and toys related to a literacy-based theme.
- **Family Nights**—*One to three times per school year*—Preschool children and their families are welcome to attend family nights at the school with themes such as literacy, health, and parenting. Activities are designed to encourage parent and child interaction. Materials are provided on parenting and child development topics.
- **Family Resource Center**—*Year-round*—Families and community members have access to the resource center located inside the school. With access to the Internet, a food bank, and clothes closet, as well as a school-supply drive in September, families have the opportunity to visit the school while obtaining support.
- **Head Start located in the school**—*School year*—Income-eligible families with four- and five-year-olds have access to this free preschool program.

OTHER LESSONS LEARNED

The experiences of ESD 112 in Vancouver provide valuable lessons for the Des Moines team and others working to improve outcomes for young children and their families. Since the SELF program was initiated in Clark County in 2001, it has grown steadily and built support across all sectors of the community. During the peer match’s closing session, the Vancouver team shared lessons from its five-year journey.

- *It’s about relationships.* The work of building partnerships to support children and families depends on establishing relationships among individuals and across organizations. Personal relationships often come first—relationships that help to identify commonalities in philosophy and commitments to children. These connections are strengthened through shared experiences and initial successes and deepened by the acknowledgements of shared goals.

Relationships build support across stakeholder groups, bringing together parents, school staff, and diverse community partners to accomplish what no one group could do alone. Relationships enable partnerships to find solutions that are acceptable to all. When a member of the Des Moines team asked what happens when school district policies and community priorities don’t match up, an ESD staff member replied, “We stay at the table until we work it out.”

Positive relationships permeate the Fruit Valley Community Learning Center, with reminders to staff and community volunteers that they are a positive force in building assets for children and their families. School-based mental health workers, funded through a county grant, work with children and their families, and there has been a significant reduction in disciplinary referrals at the school. “The bottom line is that kids are cared for here. We all know there is a reason for acting out. It’s our job to figure out why these behaviors are occurring,” said the principal.

“Working together to build a community that nurtures the full potential of our youngest children.”

Support for Early Learning and Families (SELF) Mission Statement

In another example of how the Community Learning Center fosters positive relationships, students are encouraged to provide services to others at their school. A sign-up sheet in the Family Resource Center lists service opportunities. “Even kindergartners can make ice packs,” the principal noted.

- *Include individuals with a variety of experiences and perspectives.* SELF is a countywide partnership, initiated in 2001 by the Clark County Community Network, ESD 112, Clark College, Educational Opportunities for Children and Families (EOCF), Washington State University Vancouver, and the Clark County Health Department. The organizational partners formalized their relationship and developed documents to guide the role of partners and their decision-making process.

Now, the partnership has expanded to include over 40 community groups, including public and private service providers, neighborhood associations, businesses, and higher education institutions. Bringing in parents as partners has brought new insights and perspectives. An example that was mentioned was how staff were surprised to find out that many families thought that the schools already knew who the incoming kindergartners were and where they lived.

Planning retreats are held periodically to convene individuals and share perspectives. A 2005 public forum on cultural perspectives on early learning involved 65 individuals from six different cultural communities in the county. Conferences on issues of broad interest, such as early brain development, draw hundreds of participants from across the community and expand the circle of those who are involved in improving conditions for young children.

Clark County’s inclusive, deliberate approach to building partnerships has brought additional support for early learning from the United Way, the state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Department of Health and Social Services, and the U.S. Department of Education.

To sustain momentum and serve an increasing number of children and families, SELF launched the Clark County Early Learning Fund in partnership with Washington's Foundation for Early Learning. The Early Learning Fund is supported by individual donations, corporate support, institutions, and organizations. At the community level, the Fruit Valley Community Learning Center has initiated its own foundation to gather support from the community and sustain the center's work.

- *Engage a neutral convener to lead the planning process.* Staff from ESD 112 credit an outside consultant who led the SELF planning process with keeping people at the table and maintaining the focus on goals for children and families. A facilitator—or neutral convener—can help translate the acronyms and jargon of different partner organizations and equalize influence among those who participate in the planning.

Schools sometimes seem to take center stage in planning discussions, leading to concerns about measuring progress only in terms of children's academic achievement. Because schools are the only institutions universally available to children in most communities, they are held to a higher level of public accountability than other institutions. An outside facilitator can help partners to develop a commitment to results that reflect the concerns—and contributions—of all partners.

A consultant from outside the community, especially one with access to key organizations and learning resources nationwide, can also bring additional knowledge and support from experiences in other communities. The intent is never to imitate—or replicate—the work of other communities, but to inform local work and reduce the likelihood of repeating mistakes that could be avoided with additional knowledge.

- *Learn about the systems that serve children and families.* In many communities, multiple organizations and programs work with the same children and families. It helps to learn about each organization's mission and services to

understand what supports are available, how they overlap, and why gaps exist in their availability. Understanding each system—and how money is allocated within it—often allows communities to make better use of existing resources. Instead of trying to fund specific programs, partners can look at what each organization can accomplish within its own budget and how they can work together to create an array of services that responds to community needs.

An example of this strategy is found in the role of the Clark County Public Library at the Fruit Valley Community Learning Center. The Fort Vancouver Regional Library District offers a Read and Play storytime in conjunction with ESD 112 and the school. At several other schools that offer these storytimes, a project librarian facilitates the storytime portion of the morning utilizing funds from OSPI. The library identified early learning as an area it wanted to focus on and made a commitment to find other means of reaching families with young children as part of its strategic planning process in the community. Utilizing a community branch children’s librarian (rather than the project librarian) is one way that has been accomplished with existing resources. Now the library sponsors a weekly Read and Play activity at the Learning Center with a story hour and structured art activities. Families participate regularly with their preschoolers, and children from the child care center at the school join in for the activity.

- *Think of what you can accomplish each year.* Don’t try to do too much. Participants from ESD 112 envision the work of SELF as a river, continuously flowing through changing conditions—a familiar metaphor for a community on the banks of the Columbia River. The populations and needs in schools and communities change over time. New families come to the community and others move away; each family brings unique assets and needs. Funding from state, county, and local governments and from private sources changes each year. Although the partners work hard to sustain their

“Think of the work as a
river — constantly flowing
through changing conditions.”

Vancouver Peer Consultant

efforts, changing conditions require constant adjustments and changes in the partnership.

To manage change and avoid being overwhelmed by it, SELF has developed an organizational framework with subcommittees to manage ongoing issues and guidelines to organize the work of the partnership. Specific planning days are set aside to bring partners together to lay out the work for the year.

Focusing on the present—while always being aware of where the river has been and where it may be flowing—helps partners to manage change.

There is an intentional effort to begin work in specific communities, institutionalize it, and then move on to other parts of the county.

PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

Peer match participants from Des Moines came to Vancouver at a crucial point in the development of their work. New staff has been hired and the site is preparing to bring the initiative to life, in schools and across the community, in the months ahead.

The participants' closing thoughts focused on the work they are about to undertake, informed now by their learning from the experiences of their peers in Vancouver:

- “We have a continuing and valuable resource in the Vancouver team.”

Lora Kracht

- “We can involve additional resources and groups from the Des Moines community.” *Melissa Nelson*

- “There are new and valuable approaches to try out at my school.”

Thomas Simmons

- “So much effort goes into preparing children to be successful in school.”
Alycia Ford
- “We can plan to involve the community in a new school building.”
Jill Burnett
- “We need to set priorities and time lines.” *Raul DeAnda*
- “Building and strengthening relationships is essential to our success.”
Gillian Wilder
- “Parent ambassadors are giving us a new set of eyes to look at the possibilities. We need to give them all they need to be successful. Principals need their help to work with parents.” *Judi Cunningham*
- “I have all kinds of hope for this!” *Nancy Duey*

NEXT STEPS

At the end of the peer match, the participants from Des Moines identified the following next steps:

- *Summarize information and inform the remainder of the school readiness team.*
 - Get the partnership list and the action plan out to everyone by the end of the month. Individuals will review and brainstorm additional responses. All members of the team (including all members of this group) will meet soon.
- *Develop an organizational structure with clear roles and responsibilities for individuals and subgroups.*
 - Share the purpose and the mission of strengthening kindergarten transition. Make it universal, with implementation that may look different at each school.

- Define what the responsibilities of this group are.
 - Set first-year goals for the transition effort.
 - Develop an evaluation structure with indicators of progress.
 - Plan for sustainability from the outset.
 - Involve stakeholders to organize the effort at the school building level.
Determine whether to form a separate Kindergarten Transition Team or make it a subset of the School Improvement Team.
 - Develop a time line and goals for activities, including planning for the opening of year-round schools in July.
 - Use available funding sources (e.g., Head Start transition, Empowerment, Reading First) to strengthen and expand kindergarten transition activities for all children in the pilot schools.
 - Consider bringing additional partners to the table, including higher education and the area education agency.
 - Begin to build community around the new Longfellow/Wallace Elementary School, set to open in fall 2007.
- *Develop and communicate the parent ambassador role in preparation for parent conferences/kindergarten registration.*
 - Meet with principals of the seven target schools. E-mail principals to request input before the meeting.
 - Figure out how parent ambassadors connect with child care providers.
Meet with child care directors from the areas to work out transitions for individual children.
 - Meet with home child care providers to prepare for kindergarten registration.
 - Meet with parent ambassadors to work on improving transitions for individual children.

- Revitalize and strengthen the Parents As Teachers program—or expand it to include another school.
- Meet with kindergarten teachers in individual schools to engage them in this effort and clarify their role.

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WHAT IS *MAKING CONNECTIONS*?

Making Connections is the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s initiative to improve outcomes for some of the nation’s most vulnerable children and families. The initiative is conducted through deep and durable partnerships with selected cities and neighborhoods across the United States (for more information, visit www.aecf.org/mc). Several core ideas underlie *Making Connections*:

- *Making Connections* is based on the recognition that the greatest number of American children who suffer from “rotten outcomes” live in city neighborhoods that are in many ways cut off—disconnected—from the mainstream opportunities of American life. Thus, *Making Connections* is “place-based”—it focuses on specific neighborhoods in specific cities.
- *Making Connections* has a simple theory: that children do better when they grow up in strong families, and families do better when they live in supportive neighborhoods. Thus, *Making Connections* strategies are aimed at helping families obtain what they need to be strong, and helping neighborhoods gain the resources they need in order to support families well.
- *Making Connections* focuses on three major types of “connections” that help families grow stronger and achieve what they want for their children. The first of these is helping families connect to **economic opportunities** and to jobs that provide income, assets, and an economic future. Research and experience suggest that this type of connection is unlikely without two others: strong connections to the **social networks** of kin, neighborhood groups, and other informal ties that sustain families when times get tough, and to high-quality, **effective services and supports** that help families reach their goals.

Making Connections focuses on improving results for children and families in tough neighborhoods. Core results that *Making Connections* communities are mobilizing around include:

- Families have increased earnings and income;
- Families have increased levels of assets;
- Families, youth, and neighborhoods increase their participation in civic life;
- Families and neighborhoods have strong informal supports and networks;
- Families have access to quality services and supports; and
- Children are healthy and ready to succeed in school.

A key task in ensuring the success of *Making Connections* is making available the learning and technical assistance that the participating sites need to move forward with their work. One of the ways that the Foundation provides this kind of support is by making peer matches available.

WHAT ARE PEER MATCHES?

Since 1995, as part of a broader effort to rely more intentionally on the experience of people working in the field, the Center for the Study of Social Policy began working with several partners and funders to develop and offer a rather intensive form of peer technical assistance known as peer matches. Peer matches are structured opportunities for teams of people from two or more jurisdictions who are working on a similar issue to exchange experiences and practical knowledge toward resolving a particular challenge that has been identified in advance.

The rationale behind peer matches is straightforward. Often, the people best able to provide hands-on help are the “doers” themselves—people from states and communities who have successfully addressed a problem or created an effective new policy or strategy. These are the people who have an acute sense of what has and hasn’t worked, and why and why not. They have developed good tools and strategies they can share. And they are usually eager to help others because of a strong sense of shared mission. But while good peer matches are informal, they are never

casual, using a carefully designed process and structure to focus the common interests, roles, and goodwill that exist between peers on producing meaningful change for a community.

Peer matches are a resource and time intensive strategy. Careful consideration of when, where, and how to use this approach is therefore always warranted. Experience has shown that careful preparation and execution of the matches are critical factors for their success. This approach tends to work best when the following conditions are in place:

- A specific problem or issue has been identified, and the people looking for help are at a key decision point with respect to the design or implementation of a state or community strategy;
- Stakeholders are invested in and have a high degree of ownership in solving a problem;
- The timing is right—e.g., a decision or action that will affect the community’s family strengthening agenda is going to be taken and/or someone needs to be convinced to take action; and
- A reasonably small number of people have the authority and ability to act on what they learn in the match.

To date, the Center has brokered over 60 peer matches on topics ranging from creating resident-led community development corporations and governance structures, to establishing multilingual homeownership assistance centers, to building integrated services models. As illustrated in the case summaries that are part of this series, peer matches help spread good policies and practice, build relationships among different stakeholders who may not always have a chance to work together, and enable people to put changes in place that improve results for children, families, and neighborhoods.



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