

Resources for Child Caring: An Early Childhood Intermediary?

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May 10, 2010

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While Minnesota's early childhood (EC) system has many assets, the existing high degree of fragmentation creates resource accessibility problems for both families and providers. Recently, there has been a growing call for a unified voice to facilitate change in Minnesota's early childhood system. This presents an opportunity for an organization like Resources for Child Caring (RCC), a well-established regional organization, to assume a prominent role in efforts to reform the EC system by becoming an intermediary organization. Becoming an intermediary would provide RCC an opportunity to grow and become a leader in efforts to improve services and outcomes for Minnesota's children.

Before taking this path, RCC will need to carefully consider the benefits and consequences of such a change and whether such a move would fit the mission and vision of the organization. To help RCC assess its capacity for growth and to fulfill an intermediary role, we conducted an in-depth study of the organization's current state, as well as research on the Minnesota early childhood field and existing models of intermediary organizations. This report presents our literature review, organizational audit of current conditions, and organizational gap analysis.

An intermediary is an organization that operates between organizations, facilitating changes in both parties. While re-granting is a common intermediary function, being a re-granting institution does not make one an intermediary. A Minnesota Early Childhood intermediary could play a vital role in coordinating services and information flow, as well as strengthening networks both within and across the field, by performing the following functions:

- **Connecting:** acting as a broker between sources of funding and direct service providers, training organizations in management skills, providing support for infrastructure development, working to increase available resources for the field.
- **Convening:** building relationships between organizations, setting the table for stakeholders to meet and discuss efforts, tangibly showing the benefits of collaboration and coordination.
- **Measuring:** developing evaluation capacity for itself and the organizations it serves, providing information on progress toward concrete goals, creating mechanisms for assessing quality and accountability to funders and wider community.
- **Sustaining:** working with policy makers to develop strategies that will lead to more effective delivery of services, addressing emerging needs as they arise, raising public awareness and willingness to make long-term commitments to the field.

The organizational audit was conducted through interviews with RCC's Board of Directors and staff, document reviews, and secondary data analysis. The audit focused on six functional areas: Programs and Services, Human Resources, Public Relations, Facilities, Information Technology, and Finances. While the organizational audit provided an look at RCC current state, the gap analysis assessed whether RCC has the capacity to become an intermediary, and evaluated where RCC is in regard to each of the four intermediary functions listed above.

Our research indicates that RCC has many strong assets that it can leverage if it wishes to pursue more growth. This growth could include becoming an intermediary. However, there are gaps in RCC's capacity that should be addressed before taking on new growth. The report concludes with our recommendations for RCC should it decide to engage in expansion, and criteria for evaluating the success of such an effort.

INTRODUCTION

Minnesota's early childhood (EC) field needs new leadership to facilitate systemic change in a complex and fragmented system. An open opportunity exists for the right organization to assume this leadership role and facilitate the development of new ideas and collaborations. A heightened awareness among policy leaders and the public about the importance of early childhood care and education has not yet translated into a coordinated system that consistently connects quality early childhood programming with families. The complexity of program offerings, providers and funding streams is further complicated by the diverse needs of families themselves. The fragmentation of the EC field has led to many frustrated attempts to improve the current system. This frustration among early childhood advocates has led to a growing perception that there is a need for a single entity that can act as a conduit between and among diverse stakeholders to facilitate significant change in Minnesota's early childhood system. Such an organization could foster a more cohesive vision for the field, disseminate information and increase communication. It could unite stakeholders behind a shared purpose of measuring quality and improving access to early childhood programming. Furthermore, the organization that takes on this intermediary role has the opportunity to engender positive change both internally and externally. An effective intermediary organization could be seen as the leader in the EC field, should it be able to establish staying power and a reputation that can build trust.

One organization with the potential to take on an expanded role in the Minnesota early childhood field is Resources for Child Caring (RCC). When the Greater St. Paul Area Child Care Council was started in 1971, the childcare industry was small, but poised for tremendous growth due to the increasing number of families with working mothers. In 1983, the Greater St. Paul Council joined with three other local organizations to become Resources for Child Caring. It has since carved out niches in three critical EC service areas:

- Assisting parents in finding child care as part of the Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) Network
- Organizing training and professional development opportunities for child care providers
- Disseminating materials to providers and families on the latest research and best practices through the publishing arm known as Redleaf Press.

Over the past 40 years, RCC has developed a track record of providing quality service while successfully adapting to shifting economic conditions and the changing needs of both the child care industry and families. As an organization contemplating taking on an intermediary role, RCC has many strengths. RCC's strong financial position and solid reputation among providers, families and public leaders has uniquely positioned the organization among nonprofits in the Minnesota EC field. RCC is connected to many local networks that range from the providers and families it serves to policy makers, other EC organizations and school districts. This stable, well-regarded organization may be a good candidate to become an intermediary. The question is: Should RCC take on such a transformation, and would it be able to do so successfully?

In this report, we look specifically at the opportunities for an intermediary in Minnesota's EC field, and evaluate RCC's capacity for growth. We used a literature review, individual interviews, and secondary data analysis to gather information for an organizational audit and gap analysis.

Our research focused on three specific questions:

1. How would an intermediary in the MN EC field enhance the connections between providers, leverage and maximize resources, increase public awareness, and establish a system to evaluate effectiveness?
2. What intermediary model could best fulfill the needs of the Minnesota EC field and be sustainable in the long term?
3. Given RCC's mission and current programming, should RCC become an EC intermediary in Minnesota? If so, how would this affect RCC as an organization?

In the sections that follow, we discuss briefly how an intermediary might contribute to the Minnesota EC field with an examination of intermediary functions and models. An in-depth analysis of RCC's organizational capacity to take on this role follows. Recommendations and criteria for evaluation are also provided. This information will inform RCC as it contemplates a decision that could have significant internal consequences for the organization as well as the potential to improve outcomes for Minnesota's young children.

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION IN MINNESOTA

Minnesota has a history of strong investment in its children. This public awareness and political will has extended down to the care and education of its youngest citizens in more recent years. This emphasis has increased as research revealed the crucial role that high quality early education plays in later success in school and life. A 2008 Study by the Wilder Foundation found that Minnesotans appear to have a general awareness of the importance of preparing young children for school academically, socially and emotionally.¹ Minnesota has a broad set of early childhood programs and offerings that is buoyed by several key assets. Most notable are the strong partnerships between government, non-profit and for profit groups, and leadership from the Early Childhood Legislative Caucus. This combined interest has advanced a number of initiatives and pilot studies, including the recent implementation of quality improvement measures and the use of a beginning kindergarten readiness assessment. While this broad set of offerings has contributed to some of the strengths in Minnesota's EC field, the sheer complexity of the programming, coupled with the challenges facing many families, has contributed to problems of coordination across a very fragmented field.

Fragmentation is nowhere more evident than across the diverse range of organizations that work in the early childhood field, including the wide variety of childcare and preschool providers. In Minnesota, early childhood care and education is offered by Head Start, school districts, childcare centers, religious organizations, licensed in-home providers, informal (family, friend and neighbor) caregivers, or a parent at home. Informal caregivers represent the majority of care providers, particularly for infants and toddlers.² It is a monumental undertaking to provide the training and support that could create systemic change within this disparate group. Providers are surrounded by a range of advocacy and nonprofit organizations, each with their own views on what is best for children. Each of these players can have competing priorities regarding the use of limited resources. These competing priorities along with differing ideologies make it difficult to present a unified voice for measuring and raising the quality of early childhood programming and increasing funding for such initiatives. While most stakeholders agree on the goal -- healthy, well-cared for children who are academically and socially ready for kindergarten -- few agree on how to get there.³

Another source of complexity is the funding streams that drive the childcare and preschool market. The private market makes up the majority of spending for childcare. In 2008, families paid \$1.2 billion of early childhood care and education costs in Minnesota, with many families spending more than a third of their budget on childcare. In contrast, government spending constituted a much smaller share. State government spending on early childhood programming constituted approximately 1 % of its budget.⁴ More than half of the state spending on early care and education is administered through the Minnesota Childcare Assistance Program (CCAP). It offers vouchers for families in Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) and to other low-income families through

¹ Chase, R., Dillon, K, and Valarose, J. (2008) Early care and education in Minnesota: Asset review and status report. St. Paul, Minnesota: Wilder Research.

² Chase, Dillon & Valarose, 2008.

³ Chase, Dillon & Valarose, 2008.

⁴ Ready4K Annual Report, 2008.

the Basic Sliding Fee (BSF) program. Significant funds also go to Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE), Head Start, and other school readiness programs.⁵

The wide range of needs among families has also contributed to the complexity of the EC system. Although the field has expanded to provide a range of settings to meet the diverse needs of children and families, too few children are connected to high quality care and education settings. This problem disproportionately affects low-income families, who may not be able to access even publicly-funded high quality settings because of bureaucratic hurdles, insufficient subsidies for families to participate in some of the programs, and challenges with transportation and scheduling.

The complex nature of the field has led to the fragmentation of information systems, funding sources, quality measurements, and advocacy efforts, which has made it very difficult to create systemic change.⁶ Access to information remains a substantial problem for all families, but particularly low-income families, who may be in crisis or struggling with basic needs.⁷ Many are patching together childcare from multiple sources.⁸ To access the early childhood programs currently available to low-income Minnesota families, parents have to deal with multiple government agencies or social service organizations. Each program has its own set of forms and requirements, which increases the difficulty of accessing childcare. In addition, even a slight increase in earnings for families can disrupt their eligibility for childcare assistance funds, resulting in a loss of consistent programming for the child.⁹ Few openings exist for children with behavioral challenges or special needs. In addition, the field does not have a good mechanism to provide families and providers with a voice to influence program design. As a result, many current programs are underutilized, because they do not meet the unique needs of the families they are designed to serve.

Despite state and federal programs to help families afford care, many eligible families are not participating in existing public programs. Some programs struggle with having enough capacity while others, despite subsidies, remain unaffordable or otherwise inaccessible for many families. In 2008, Head Start had the capacity to serve only one third of the children who were eligible and school readiness programs served less than one third of eligible families. Another example is the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), which has suffered from state and county cuts that have resulted in long waiting lists for CCAP subsidies.¹⁰ In 2008, CCAP served over 17,000 families, but left another 4000 families waiting for openings,¹¹ and many families do not even bother to apply for a spot on the waitlist. Other evidence of the system's failure is reflected in the fact that only one in five MFIP families and one in eight of other eligible low-income families were receiving childcare assistance funds in 2008, because of the two-year wait for assistance and the challenge of finding spots in qualifying programs.¹²

⁵ Ready 4K, 2008.

⁶ Chase, Dillon & Valarose, 2008; Sandfort, J. R. (Forthcoming). Nonprofits within policy fields. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.

⁷ 2007 Itasca Project Task Force on Early Childhood Development (2007). *The economics of early childhood care and education in Minnesota*. Minneapolis, MN: Itasca Project.

⁸ Child Care Use in Minnesota: 2004 Statewide Household Child Care Survey (2005). Minnesota Department of Human Services.

⁹ Itasca Project, 2007.

¹⁰ Chase, Dillon & Valarose, 2008.

¹¹ Chase, Dillon & Valarose, 2008.

¹² Ready 4K, 2008.

Attempts to raise quality standards and match families with high quality care have also been thwarted by fragmentation. Such a broad range of providers cannot benefit from economies of scale, and keeping abreast of current research in best practices or quality standards is often too complex or time-consuming for many providers. Although many have identified highly skilled staff, low teacher to student ratios and an enriched learning environment as components of high quality care,¹³ providers struggle to offer these components. Razor thin profit margins for providers lead to low wages, less qualified staff and high turnover.¹⁴

Making information accessible and meaningful for a diverse group of families and providers also presents a challenge. While the Parent Aware Quality Rating System has begun to inform parents about high quality care providers, many families are still unaware of the ratings. Even when families know what constitutes quality, they often cannot access it. The costs of highly rated care remain prohibitive for most low-income and many middle-income families, and high quality care is simply not available in every community.¹⁵ These challenges are illustrated by the fact that of the 70,000 infants and toddlers enrolled in licensed childcare, only 15% are in facilities with a quality rating. Similarly, only 22% of preschoolers are enrolled in a place with a quality rating.¹⁶ In addition, there are few incentives in place to reward families for using high quality providers or for providers to take on the challenge of quality improvement.

The challenge of determining what constitutes high quality care, how to measure it, and how to deliver it equitably and cost effectively to families with a diverse set of needs is an overarching dilemma, and has stymied the development of greater public support for early childhood. In recent years, efforts have been made by different coalitions of groups to make progress to improve outcomes and increase public support, but a number of these efforts have run their course and some are scheduled to close. Two such initiatives are:

- **Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF)** has focused on researching and analyzing cost-effective strategies for improving school readiness. It has conducted pilots of the Parent Aware Quality Rating System and the Saint Paul Early Childhood Scholarship Program. While it has been a strong contributor to Minnesota's early childhood arena, it is scheduled to close in 2011.
- **Ready 4 K** is a school readiness advocacy and policy development organization working to bring about comprehensive policy change on behalf of Minnesota's children, their parents, and their caregivers. Its mission is to assure that every young child in Minnesota enters kindergarten encouraged, supported, and fully prepared for learning success. Ready 4 K oversees the BUILD Initiative in Minnesota which is a multistate partnership focused on system-wide change to improve outcomes for young children. It is anticipated that funding for this organization may decline significantly in the coming year.

With challenges remaining and the decline of some current initiatives, there is a growing perception of a need for a targeted long-term effort to address the current gaps. The field lacks a unified voice. As a consequence, early childhood advocates struggle to attain adequate public funding and to

¹³ Burr and Grunewald (2006). Lessons learned: A review of early childhood development studies. Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.

¹⁴ Stoney, L, Mitchell, A., and Warner, M. (Summer, 2006). Smarter reform: moving beyond single-program solutions to an early care and education. *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 37, 2.

¹⁵ Stoney, Mitchell & Warner, 2006.

¹⁶ Itasca Project, 2007.

implement systemic change, including the implementation of early learning standards, quality ratings and other measures to improve outcomes (See Appendix 1 – *Strengths and Gaps in Minnesota Early Childhood Initiatives* – for more information).

THE NEED FOR AN EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATION IN MINNESOTA

There is interest from policymakers, foundations and corporations to do something significant to improve outcomes for children. Support for this issue has arisen primarily because of a developing awareness among stakeholders and the general public of the importance of early learning. An organization that can act as a conduit between different arenas and among diverse stakeholders is most likely to be able to facilitate significant change in Minnesota's early childhood system.

Many studies have demonstrated positive effects from having high quality early childhood experiences including better school readiness, fewer grade retentions, and fewer arrests.¹⁷ The seminal longitudinal studies, the HighScope Perry Preschool Project from 1960¹⁸ and the Abecedarian Project begun in 1972,¹⁹ both showed improved outcomes for at risk children. Rolnick and Grunewald have conducted cost benefit analyses of longitudinal studies on the provision of high quality early care for children. Their examinations indicated a significant financial return on investment from high quality early childhood care and education.²⁰ Studies about the infant brain stress the importance of early learning experiences and relationships in encouraging proper development.²¹

Our evolving understanding of the importance of environment in the early years of life has spurred interest in raising the overall quality of early care and education to improve outcomes for children. The 150 member Minnesota Early Childhood Legislative Caucus recently issued a statement calling for system building, accountability, benchmarks and voluntary participation.²² Many studies have included recommendations about improving access, availability and affordability of quality care, training for caregivers and providers, and providing outreach and support to families.²³ Others call for professional development, program support, consumer education, parent support, employer education and assistance, and data collection.²⁴ Still others focus more on assessments and accountability.²⁵ Additional recommendations suggest the development of more comprehensive

¹⁷ Rolnick, A, and Grunewald, R. (December, 2003). Early childhood development: economic development for a high public return. *The Region*.

¹⁸ Woodard, K. (2004). HighScope Press Release: Long term study of adults who received high-quality early childhood care and education shows economic and social gains, less crimes.

¹⁹ Campbell, F., Ramey, C.T., Pungello, E., Sparling, J. and Miller-Johnson, S., (2002) Early childhood education: young adult outcomes from the Abecedarian Project. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6, 1, 42-67.

²⁰ Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003.

²¹ Shonkoff, J. (February, 2003) From neurons to neighborhoods: old and new challenges for developmental and behavioral pediatrics. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, 24, 1, 70-76.

²² Vision of Early Childhood Caucus (2008). Early Childhood Caucus Retreat. St. Paul, MN.

²³ Ready 4K, 2008.

²⁴ Stoney et al., 2006.

²⁵ MDE, 2005.

systems, which would require new policies, standards, financing, connections to resources and a strong coalition of support.²⁶ Alongside these system-wide reform proposals, there is a concurrent

call for a unified voice and leadership:

With many entities working toward a goal of school readiness, though sometimes with different understandings of what that means, participants indicated that early childhood care and education efforts have been very disorganized and uncoordinated for years. Not only are different entities and agencies working to address quality care and education, the individual programs and outcomes often change with each change in leadership. To address this discontinuity, participants would like to see an organization taking the lead in coordinating early childhood care and education efforts and resources across the state. Some see this as being an office at the state, while others suggest a public-private partnership.²⁷

Others go a step further by citing the need for an intermediary or an intermediary-type structure:

A better developed intermediary structure is needed—to network providers to facilitate information exchange and economies of scale, and to provide better consumer information to parents. Tiered reimbursement rates and quality rating systems are gaining momentum, and these approaches recognize the power of market signals to promote quality choices by both providers and parents.²⁸

Finally, the sector lacks intermediaries with enough resources to provide sufficient information for parents on quality and availability of childcare. Warner discusses the unique market intermediary role that Child Care Resource & Referral organizations play by networking providers within the industry and offering information to parents about quality and availability of childcare. This kind of intermediary role can improve the productivity and efficiency of the childcare marketplace.²⁹

²⁶ Chase, Dillon & Valarose, 2008; Ready 4K Early Childhood Care and Education: A Wise Investment for Minnesota (2003). St. Paul, Minnesota: Wilder Research; Itzkowitz, V. (2002) Minnesota early care and education finance commission: outcomes and lessons. St. Paul, MN: The Bush, Jay and Rose Phillips Family, and McKnight Foundations.

²⁷ Chase, Dillon & Valarose, 2008, p. 8.

²⁸ Stoney as referenced by Warner, M. E., (2006). Putting child care in the regional economy: empirical and conceptual challenges and economic development prospects. *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 37, 2, p. 19.

²⁹ Warner, 2006.

WHAT IS AN INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATION?

Over the past few decades, there has been a steady transformation in the administration and delivery of social services. Government has increased its reliance on nonprofits to deliver large-scale programs through networks of regional and local nonprofits as well as local governments and private entities.³⁰ This increased reliance on non-governmental agencies has created “layered challenges on top of the traditional institutions and their processes.”³¹ While the greater flexibility of local implementation has benefited social service delivery in some sectors,³² it has also increased the complexity and challenges in coordinating service delivery among fragmented policy areas. This devolution has led to a need for intermediaries or a system-wide entity to facilitate relationships among providers, government, foundations, employers, families and other stakeholders.³³ With an increased emphasis on providing more efficient and effective delivery of services, there is new interest in organizations that can have a broader impact *within* and *across* program and policy areas. They can organize fragmented service delivery across programs into systems of multi-partner communications and collaboration.

Despite the growth in the number of intermediary organizations, defining them still remains a challenge. In a study conducted to examine how and why foundations engage the services of intermediaries, the Foundation Center found that there was no consensus among the individuals interviewed on the definition of an intermediary organization. Offered definitions ranged from, “An intermediary is anyone that a grantee thinks it has to be responsive to,” to “Unless you fund, you're not an intermediary.”³⁴

Our working concept of an intermediary draws upon the definitions provided by Honig³⁵ and Sandfort.³⁶ Honig's definition³⁷ is based on research by Berger & Neuhaus about mediating structures and organizational ecology and defines intermediaries as:

“[...] organizations that occupy the space in between at least two other parties. Intermediary organizations primarily function to mediate or to manage change in both those parties. Intermediary organizations operate independently of these two parties and provide distinct value beyond what the parties alone would be able to develop or to amass by themselves. At the same time, intermediary organizations depend on those parties to perform their essential

³⁰ Smith, B. C. (2008). The sources and uses of funds for community development financial institutions: The role of the nonprofit intermediary, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 2008, 37, 19; Cohen, R. (Winter, 2009) Nonprofit intermediaries: an untenable solution? *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, 16, 4.

³¹ Kettl, D. F. (2000). The transformation of governance: Globalization, devolution, and the role of government, *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 60, No. 6 (Nov. - Dec., 2000), p. 488.

³² Wolpert (1993) as cited in Steurle, C.E. and Hodgkinson, V.A. (2006). Meeting social needs: Comparing independent sector and government resources in Boris, T. and Steurle, C.E. (Eds.), *Nonprofits and Government*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press.

³³ Walker, C., Foster-Bey, J. (2004) Community development intermediation and its lessons for the workforce field in Giloth, R.P. (Ed.), *Workforce intermediaries for the twenty-first century* (pp. 336-364). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

³⁴ Szanton, P., (2004). Toward more effective use of intermediaries. New York City, NY: The Foundation Center, p. 10.

³⁵ Honig, M. I. (2004). The new middle management: Intermediary organizations in education policy implementation. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 65-87, p. 64.

³⁶ Sandfort, J. R. (2010). Reconstituting the safety-net: new principles and design elements to support low-income workers. Chapter for discussion at the West Coast Poverty Center Conference: *Old Assumptions, New Realities: Economic Security for Working Families*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

³⁷ Honig, 2004, p. 64.

Sandfort describes intermediaries as organizations that:³⁸

"'build capacity' of service agencies by buffering them from environmental turbulence and providing access to new sources of financing, offering program tools and management support, and creatina networks amona similar oraanizations."

According to Sandfort, intermediary organizations "operate as essential hubs in a system, providing a necessary interface between private service providers and public governance."³⁹ Thus, for the purposes of this study, an intermediary organization is considered to be an organization that acts in the space between public, private, or nonprofit organizations.

CHARACTERISTICS AND FUNCTIONS OF INTERMEDIARIES

The functions of an intermediary organization vary as much as the definitions. There are intermediary organizations that focus primarily on re-granting while others may provide funding and programmatic support to other organizations and individuals. Honig found that intermediary organizations vary along at least five dimensions:⁴⁰

1. **Levels of government between which they operate:** Intermediary organizations may operate in the space between state and local governments, between local government and service providers, or any combination of public, private, non-profit and for-profit agencies.
2. **Membership:** The organizational structure and staff composition of intermediary organizations vary. Intermediary organizations may have staff that are solely dedicated to the work of the organization and do not hold positions in other organizations. There are some intermediary organizations that are comprised of staff from other organizations. These intermediary organizations are often known as collaboratives or partnerships.
3. **Geographic location:** Intermediary organizations may be physically housed either within or outside the geographic areas in which they work.
4. **Scope of work:** Intermediary organizations may choose to work within a single jurisdiction or multiple jurisdictions.
5. **Funding sources:** Intermediary organizations may be funded through either public or private sources. Some intermediary organizations are funded exclusively by one of these sources, while others tend to receive funding from both private and public sources.

On the other hand, Blank et. al. found that there are key functions typical of intermediary

³⁸ Sandfort, 2010, p. 12.

³⁹ Sandfort, 2010, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Honig, 2004, p. 68.

organizations.⁴¹ These functions are:

- **Connecting:** In this role, intermediaries work through networks to help programs leverage resources by acting as broker. This includes: increasing access to existing funding opportunities; retooling the way existing funding sources are used; acting as a fiscal agent to streamline services; training local organizations in effective finance strategies; and working to increase available funding and resources. With the intermediary organizations focused on the brokering and leveraging of services and resources, the organizations that they serve can focus more on direct service delivery. This can increase the efficient use of both time and money.
- **Convening:** In this role, intermediary organizations are “setting the table” for stakeholders to meet, to plan, and to strategize new initiatives. Doing so enables organizations to build strong, meaningful and purposeful relationships across organizations as well as program and policy areas. Intermediary organizations also help organizations see the benefits of collaboration and coordination of efforts. Additionally, since intermediary organizations tend to not be direct service providers, they can help providers focus on the bigger picture.
- **Measuring:** In this role, intermediary organizations identify and keep open lines of communication about quality and accountability. They are often focused on measuring not only their own success but also the field’s success. However, this can be complicated because intermediary organizations are often funded by organizations that are different from than those they serve.
- **Sustaining:** In this role, intermediary organizations educate officials and policy makers on policies likely to lead to more effective services and better results. Intermediary organizations are particularly helpful in providing policy advice on how organizations can work together to reduce duplication of efforts, address emerging needs and align programs.

This framework is useful for understanding the nature of the activities performed by intermediary organizations and allows for comparison across program activities and fields. This functional description of intermediary activities allows each local intermediary to develop operations that are responsive to their own constituencies. If an intermediary is to be successful in its efforts, each function should be considered, although some intermediaries do not perform all four functions. In this report, we use the four functions to frame the discussion of an Early Childhood Intermediary and such an organization’s potential role in Minnesota.

EXISTING MODELS OF INTERMEDIARY ORGANIZATIONS

Intermediaries operate in a wide range of fields, including housing, technology, community economic development, international development, education policy, and youth and workforce development. In each field, intermediaries can take on several different forms and perform a variety of functions. This leaves open the question: what does an intermediary look like?

⁴¹ Blank, M. J., Brand, B., Deich, S., Kazis, R., Politz, B. and Trippe, S. (2003). Local intermediary organizations: Connecting the dots for children youth, and families. Sponsored by Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Flint, MI.; Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, Kansas City, MO.; Carnegie Corp. of New York, NY.

Community Development Intermediaries

Since the 1980s, intermediaries have played a significant role in supporting community economic development across the country.⁴² In this field, intermediaries are predominantly large, nationally operating organizations that serve as both re-granting institutions and resources for technical assistance and networking. This type of organization serves as an intermediary between funding sources and community development corporations.⁴³

Example of Community Development Intermediary Organization:

- ❖ The **Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)** operates as a national nonprofit intermediary organization and receives most of its funding through corporations and foundations, including the MacArthur Foundation. LISC works through local community development corporations to build wider coalitions and coordinate neighborhood redevelopment projects. LISC connects projects with sufficient resources, including operating funds and technical assistance, to enable each project to be successful. LISC also provides consulting firms, freelance journalists, and a handbook to facilitate the process, although local citizens do most of the planning and implementation.

Source: McCarron, J. (2004). The power of sticky dots. *American Planning*, July 2004.

Youth and Education Intermediaries

Although intermediaries have become more common in the areas of community economic development and housing, there are fewer intermediaries currently operating in the fields of education and youth development.

Example of Youth and Education Intermediary Organizations Intermediary Organization:

- ❖ The **Alliance for Children and Families (ACF)** is a national membership association of nonprofit child and family service organizations. ACF works with schools, districts and community-based agencies to provide team training and train-the-trainers workshops to facilitate replication of the ACF model.
- ❖ The **Right Question Project (RQP)** is a nonprofit organization that promotes parent involvement by building parents' skills. RQP disseminates this strategy through local education agencies that work directly with parents. Organizations can access training products and curricula, participate in a peer-learning network of users of its strategy, and contract for tailored training and technical assistance.

Source: Wynn, Joan R (2000). Lopez, M. E, Kreider, H., and Coffman, J. (2005). Intermediary organizations as capacity builders in family educational

education and youth development. Because this trend is more recent, little research is available regarding youth- and education-focused intermediaries. However, the information that does exist demonstrates that a range of form and functions are possible.

Lopez, Kreider and Coffman reviewed intermediaries that support schools, parent groups, and community based organizations to encourage family involvement.⁴⁴ These organizations provide models, training, evaluation, technical assistance, and fundraising support to implement and sustain family involvement beyond what the schools would otherwise be able to

⁴² Liou, Y. T. and Stroh, R.C. (1998). Community development intermediary systems in the United States: origins, evolution and functions. *Housing Policy Debate*, 9, 3.

⁴³ McCarron, J. (July, 2004). The power of sticky dots. *American Planning*.

⁴⁴ Lopez, M. E, Kreider, H., and Coffman, J. (2005). Intermediary organizations as capacity builders in family educational involvement. *Urban Education*, 40,1.

Example of Youth and Education Intermediary Organizations (continued):

- ❖ **Youth Development Institute** of the Fund for the City of New York (YDI), which works with youth organizations to improve their program and management practices, and communicates among legislative leaders, funders and others to strengthen support for the field. YDI offers extensive resources for a small group of local youth-serving organizations with access to wider networks. Partner organizations commit to the participation of staff at different levels, and serve on working committees devoted to identifying outcomes and increasing capacities to achieve outcomes. In addition, YDI works a network of school-based community centers, facilitating cross-site meetings and providing technical assistance and consultation on program issues and management challenges.
- ❖ **Community Network for Youth Development (CNYD)** is a private non-profit organization based in California. CNYD offers intensive and outgoing supports to local youth-serving organizations, and acts as a policy advisor to local and state officials seeking to support youth and youth-serving orgs through legislation. CNYD recruits staff from area organizations to participate in extensive learning sessions with groups of peers from similar agencies with a focus on quality youth development practices, followed up by on-site coaching. Although CNYD doesn't provide organizational development or management assistance to local organizations, it but does work with agencies around organizational development issues.
- ❖ **Community Partners (CP)** is a California-based nonprofit, which is unique in that 90% of its core budget is raised through management services fees charged to the agencies in its nonprofit incubator program. CP serves as a fiscal agent and as the project manager, coordinator and technical assistance provider for large-scale foundation led initiatives. CP focuses on organizational management and serves a convening role for organizations within each initiative. It also organizes roundtables of key government and private youth development actors.

Source: Wynn, Joan R (2000). The Role of Local Intermediary Organizations in the Youth Development Field. Prepared for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation by The Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago.

commit.

The authors found that intermediary organizations facilitated parent involvement by offering resources that maximized the efforts of the schools and community organizations. In addition, the intermediary organizations were able to invest more substantially in research and program development and support site sustainability through fundraising assistance. Intermediary organizations also played a key role in convening participants from different sites to learn from each other through peer-learning networks, strategy-sharing newsletters, and annual conferences.

The Youth Development field has also seen a growth in the number of intermediary organizations, many of which operate with a local or regional focus.⁴⁵ Local youth development intermediaries operate between youth-serving organizations and a body of knowledge, skills, contacts and other resources. They work directly with youth-serving organizations to build capacity, define common outcomes, identify best practices, develop training curricula, connect organizations with other organizations, and represent the field to gain the support of policy makers, government agencies, and sources of funding.

Intermediary organizations have also been used to facilitate change within the education system itself. Private foundations are increasingly contracting with intermediary organizations to facilitate education reform initiatives⁴⁶ and research institutions are beginning to partner with

⁴⁵ Wynn, J. R. (2000). The role of local intermediary organizations in the youth development field. Prepared for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation by The Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago.

⁴⁶ Ancess, J., Barnett E. and Allen, D. (2007). Using research to inform the practice of teachers, schools and school reform organizations. *Theory Into Practice*, 46, 4.

intermediaries to implement ongoing research.

Early Childhood Intermediaries

Although early childhood intermediaries exist, very little research or evaluation is available regarding these organizations because of their relative novelty. It is likely that much of the research available on youth development and education-focused intermediaries is highly relevant, and the organizations listed above provide applicable models.

The Harlem Children's Zone is a new York-based community organization that focuses, in part, on early childhood. HCZ has been identified as a model for replication, with the Promise Neighborhood program acting as an intermediary.⁴⁷

Example of Early Childhood Intermediary Organization:

- ❖ **The Ounce of Prevention Fund**, a Chicago based organization that works both locally and nationally to promote and provide high quality early childhood care. The Ounce operates early childhood programs directly through home visiting programs, partners with states to build research-based programs, and trains nearly 700 early childhood providers each year. The Ounce also disseminates research and best practices through regular publications, and advocates for state and federal funding for early childhood services.
- ❖ **The Orange County Partnership** in rural North Carolina focuses on quality improvements in early childhood programs. The Partnership works with the leaders of local child care programs to increase the number of accredited centers and certified teachers. The Partnership also contributes to the improvement of the field by convening task forces and publishing policy studies.

Sources: Blank et al.. 2003.; <http://www.orangesmartstart.org/>, 2010.

Programmatic and Organizational Challenges of Intermediary Organizations

Balancing competing obligations and responsibilities, including managing both the networks and the organization itself, can pose a challenge for intermediary organizations and their leadership.⁴⁸ Questions also remain about the sustainability and accountability of intermediaries.⁴⁹ Intermediaries need to be accountable upstream, primarily to funders and government agencies. However, downstream accountability has proven more challenging, because intermediaries must simultaneously report to and oversee the organizations within their networks.⁵⁰ Other programmatic challenges include:

- **Recognizing and reinforcing local expertise:** Providing for two-way interactions that acknowledge leadership within the field and incorporate knowledge from external sources.
- **Establishing trust:** Earning and holding the trust of constituent organizations and individuals.

⁴⁷ Cohen, R. (Winter, 2009) Nonprofit intermediaries: an untenable solution? *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, 16,4.

⁴⁸ Wynn, 2000.

⁴⁹ Liou, 1998.

⁵⁰ Smith, 2008.

- **Promoting shared purpose:** Reducing the effect of competition for funding, credit for outcomes, and access to resources.
- **Producing measurable outcomes:** Demonstrating the value of the intermediary in terms of improved programs and better outcomes for constituency.

Intermediaries also encounter organizational challenges related to structure, staffing and sustainability. (See Appendix 2: Programmatic and Organizational Challenges of Local Intermediaries). A developing intermediary must make structural decisions that may lead to other benefits and challenges, including greater credibility, increased accountability, and operational constraints.⁵¹ Other organizational challenges include:

- **Staffing:** Attracting and retaining qualified staff.
- **Funding:** Developing the ability to solve funding problems and remain sustainable
- **Leadership:** Attracting and retaining effective leaders, and managing leadership transitions.

THE ROLE OF AN EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERMEDIARY IN MINNESOTA

As evidenced by the examples above, an intermediary can take on a range of forms and functions. Some intermediaries perform all four intermediary functions – connecting, convening, measuring and sustaining – while others focus on performing one or two functions. An intermediary is distinguished from other organizational models because of the unique position it occupies between organizations, helping to facilitate change in both parties.⁵² Although the intermediary model is new to the early childhood field, it is likely that an organization of this nature could provide significant benefits in Minnesota by facilitating positive system-wide change.

Connecting

An intermediary is well suited to play a connecting role because it is simultaneously aware of the unique needs of stakeholder organizations and connected with wider support networks, including government entities and foundations. The intermediary can act as a bridge, helping stakeholder organizations access resources that far exceed those they could secure on their own. These resources could relate to staffing, space, time, technology, management, and organizational development, as well as managing data systems, providing staff to conduct professional development training, or working with business partners.

A Connecting intermediary in the Minnesota early childhood community could introduce economies of scale and shorten learning curves. The fragmentation of the field makes it costly for a single organization to benefit from new funding opportunities, current research, upcoming collaborative efforts, and new policies and practices. Early childhood providers, in particular, may lack the time or expertise to access resources individually and could see a significant benefit from a

⁵¹ Wynn, 2000.

⁵² Honig, 2004, p. 67.

“resource clearinghouse.” An organization that is able to provide those benefits to providers, parents or other early childhood organizations could quickly be valued as a Connecting intermediary.

Convening

In a convening role, intermediary organizations provide opportunities for stakeholders to gather, build relationships, and develop strategies for new initiatives. Convening intermediaries facilitate relationship development across organizations, as well as program and policy areas. They help to provide resources that allow stakeholders to find common purpose.

A Convening Intermediary in Minnesota could act as a driving force for collaboration and a magnet to “bring local constituencies and their leadership together around an intentional agenda, promote broad public participation, accelerate learning and improvement, and focus attention and resources on the achievement of tangible results.”⁵³ In Minnesota, there is a need for early childhood practitioners and K-12 educators to come together in developing standards for school readiness and quality improvements. In addition, organizations that might compete for limited resources could improve outcomes by working collaboratively to use those resources more efficiently and purposefully. Because it occupies a different space than the organizations they serve, a Convening intermediary could help providers focus less on turf issues and more on working towards improved outcomes.⁵⁴

Measuring

In the measuring role, intermediary organizations work to identify and promote quality and accountability in both the field and their own organization. Intermediary organizations work with service providers to help “identify standards for assessing service quality and use data more effectively to promote positive outcomes and continuous program improvements.”⁵⁵ Utilizing their ability to convene different stakeholder groups, a Measuring intermediary is able to push forward discussions about shared goals and missions, responsibilities and roles of the organizations, and how to measure overall success of their efforts.⁵⁶ Additionally, intermediaries are often focused on their own accountability and measurement of their own success.

In the Minnesota early childhood landscape, there is yet to be a system-wide tool or mechanism for outcomes measurement in terms of a child’s readiness for school. An intermediary’s ability to convene stakeholders could facilitate the development of a unified measurement plan. The development of standards and measurements to determine both service quality and outcomes is fundamental to enhancing existing services and increasing the profile of the field in general.

Sustaining

As a convener and connector, intermediary organizations are positioned to become an influential voice in local policy formulation and systems refinement, which helps to sustain and promote

⁵³ Blank et al, 2003.

⁵⁴ Blank et al, 2003.

⁵⁵ Blank et al, 2003.

⁵⁶ Blank et al, 2003.

lasting changes in the field. They are frequently involved in discussions with service providers and recipients and organizations from different parts of the system, which allows them to become “skilled at educating elected officials and policy makers on specific policies that are likely to lead to more effective services and better results.”⁵⁷ Sustaining intermediaries also generate public awareness, connect the organizations within and outside the system, and promote long-term commitment to the goals in the field.

Calls for a unified voice to represent stakeholders and influence early childhood policy in Minnesota are fairly widespread and indicate a gap in the current system. A Sustaining intermediary would be helpful in providing the field with the necessary knowledge to reduce duplication, determine how needs can be met, and better align programs and services. A Sustaining intermediary in Minnesota would have to be comfortable in different arenas and have sufficient longevity to effect lasting change.

SUMMARY

The existing fragmentation within the early childhood field has, thus far, posed an insurmountable barrier for any attempt at systemic change. To adequately address the shortfalls in the field, it is necessary to create a larger, field-wide effort with intensive coordination and collaboration. Such an effort is likely to be most successful if it is orchestrated by a single organization with significant influence.

An intermediary organization is uniquely suited to fill this need within the early childhood field, through maximizing the assets currently existing in the field and leveraging external resources as needed. Although good ideas currently abound within the field, an intermediary is needed to build relationships between organizations and develop collaborations that can put those ideas into action in a system-wide, sustainable fashion. If the early childhood field is going to expand to meet the needs of every child, an intermediary must help organizations rise above turf battles and work together to present a unified voice to legislators, funders, and taxpayers.

The development of the intermediary model and the existing need within the EC field presents a crucial opportunity for an organization that is ready to take on the role of an intermediary. An organization that is able to develop the needed capacity, position itself properly, and provide leadership towards a powerful vision of the field will be well placed to develop into an effective intermediary that is able to generate substantial results in the long term.

With an eye towards the current need for an intermediary, and the open opportunity for an organization prepared to fill that role, the following research addresses the question: Should RCC become an EC intermediary, and if so, do they currently have the needed capacity?

⁵⁷ Blank et al, 2003.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The first two research questions have been addressed through the literature review of the early childhood care and education field, characteristics and functions of intermediary organizations, and existing models of intermediary organizations. We turn now to the third question:

- Given RCC's mission and current programming, should RCC become an EC intermediary in Minnesota? If so, how would this affect RCC as an organization?

In order to answer this question, we first conducted an in-depth study and organizational audit of RCC. This provided us with a deeper understanding of RCC's current capabilities. For the purposes of our analysis, we have divided RCC into six functional areas: Programs and Services, Public Relations and Communications, Human Resources, Facilities, Information Technology, and Finance. Competency in all of these areas is essential to the functioning of any organization, regardless of its size or purpose.

Next, the findings from the organizational audit were used to inform a gap analysis of RCC. The gap analysis is a research tool that can be used to help compare current performance with potential performance. At the core of any gap analysis are two questions: "Where are we?" and "Where do we want to be?" As such, we compared RCC's current capacity with the functions an EC intermediary organization could perform: connecting, convening, measuring, and sustaining. The gap analysis aids the identification those capabilities that RCC is currently missing and those that will need to be developed if it were to take on an intermediary role. Both the organizational audit and gap analysis will help to determine how well RCC's current status aligns with the role of an intermediary organization and analyze the benefits and risks of RCC becoming an intermediary.

RESEARCH METHODS

The primary data collection methods were semi-structured interviews and document reviews. Each research method has inherent strengths and weaknesses. We have chosen complementary methods in the hope that the weaknesses of one method will be balanced by the strengths of another.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview method has a fairly open framework for collecting information from the respondents. While the majority of the questions are designed and phrased ahead of time, the semi-structured interview allows for questions to be formulated during the interview process. This allows the interviewer the flexibility to probe for details or further explanations. Three interview protocols were developed to provide a framework for the interviews; one for the senior staff, one for the front-line staff, and one for the Board members (See Appendices 3 – 5). With the exception of one interview, two team members participated in each interview in order to maintain consistency. The questions centered on the following themes: departmental functions, strengths and weaknesses of the department and organization, growth, functions of an intermediary, barriers

to being an intermediary, risks and opportunities to being an intermediary, and current or future partnerships.

Sampling

We interviewed eight members of the RCC Board of Directors. Targeted interviews included the Board Chair, who we thought would most likely understand the long-term vision of the organization, and the chair of the subcommittee examining intermediaries. Additionally, we interviewed six randomly selected Board members based on tenure: long tenured (5+ years), medium tenured (2-5 years), and short tenured (0-2 years). We stratified based on tenure in order to get a range of perspectives. We expected that a long-tenured Board member could provide a richer historical perspective on the organization and help us “take the pulse” of RCC as it currently stands, whereas newer Board members might have different perspectives and ideas about RCC’s future.

Initially, we selected 18 staff to be interviewed, but one of the staff members selected was on an extended leave. Thus, a total of 17 RCC staff members were interviewed. The staff sample was stratified based on their department and sub-department in an effort to get a holistic view of RCC and the diversity of perspectives, experiences, and vision present within the organization’s staff. We considered the publishing arm of RCC, Redleaf Press, as one department within RCC. From each department and sub-department, we interviewed the senior manager, the mid-level manager and randomly selected front-line workers. Interviewing a cross section of the staff allowed us to collect a comprehensive yet purposeful view of the organization. Additionally, this method provided for triangulation of the data collected, which allowed for the validation and cross-verification of data from multiple sources. The breakdown of staff selected for interview is as follows:

Department	Division	Number of Staff in Division	Number of Staff Interviewed in Division
Programs & Public Policy	Scholarship, Grants, & Referral Manager	14	3
	Community Outreach	11	2
	Child Care Assistance	11	2
	Professional Development	14	3
	Special Needs	5	1
Publishing		17	3
Organization-wide		11	3
Total		72	17

In addition to the staff within each of the departments, we also interviewed three staff that perform functions supporting the entire organization: Executive Assistant/Building Coordinator, Chief Financial Officer, and Administrative Assistant for Program and Public Policy.

Document Review

We reviewed organizational documents in order to gain a better understanding of RCC’s current capabilities, identify gaps, and evaluate the organization’s potential for growth. From these

documents, we hoped to learn how well RCC is performing its current functions and how easily it could fill the expanded functions of an intermediary. A comprehensive list of documents reviewed can be found in Appendix 6.

Secondary Data Analysis

To evaluate RCC's current successes in the EC field and the organization's relationship with childcare providers, we evaluated secondary data analysis of the professional development training customer satisfaction survey and staff satisfaction survey. The customer satisfaction survey enabled us to understand how RCC's current audience rates the organization's current and past offerings. It also served as a proxy for understanding the organization's reputation among providers, and its status as a resource for the field. This allowed us to hypothesize about how childcare providers would respond to RCC's assumption of an intermediary role. Along these same lines, results of the staff satisfaction survey provided us a gauge for assessing organization-wide staff satisfaction, needs, and concerns.

ANALYSIS

Data gathered from the interviews and documents were compiled and analyzed using an inductive analysis technique. Inductive analysis allows for responding to themes that emerge from the data rather than testing existing research-based theories. Using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software package, the interviews were analyzed separately for themes. Following this initial step, the themes from each interview were compared to find similarities across all interviews. The general themes derived from this second step were:

- Organizational Structure
- Organizational Identity
- Organizational Strengths and Weaknesses
- Program Priorities
- Barriers to Becoming an Intermediary
- Opportunities/Risks to Becoming an Intermediary
- Alignment of Intermediary Functions with Organizational Mission
- Intermediary Functions RCC is Already Performing
- Reasons for RCC to Become an Intermediary.

The third step in this analysis was to delve deeper into each of these broad themes and identify more nuanced sub-themes. Lastly, this information was triangulated with the analysis of internal organization documents, such as financial reports, programming materials, and the employee handbook.

For the gap analysis, we compared the present state of RCC to its target state. Present state refers to RCC's current capacity and capabilities, while target state refers to how RCC could look if it expanded, possibly to perform the functions of an intermediary organization. After developing an understanding of the gap between where RCC is and where RCC should be, we formulated steps that RCC should take in order to close those gaps.

ORGANIZATIONAL AUDIT OF RESOURCES FOR CHILD CARING

In order to evaluate how well RCC is currently performing, we performed an organizational audit that assessed RCC in reference to six functional areas: Programs and Services, Public Relations and Communications, Human Resources, Information Technology, Facilities, and Finances. This

“We really are one-stop shop. If a provider comes in the door, we have a lot of resources to help them.”

framework covers the most important aspects of RCC’s operations and elicits information on specific strengths and weaknesses. This information will provide the basis for the gap analysis that follows and will enable RCC to allocate resources in strategic ways that can build on its existing assets and address areas that may need improvement. Each functional area will be evaluated in terms of how well it advances RCC’s current mission. The first area, Programs and Services, relates to the mission

most directly, and the remaining five areas are evaluated in terms of how well they support the first.

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Of all of the functional areas, programs and services are arguably the most critical to the success of any organization, particularly a non-profit such as RCC. They are the most visible way in which the organization’s mission is translated into concrete action and are the vehicle through which it interacts with the wider community. Most of RCC’s programs and services can be grouped under three broad categories: those that are targeted toward parents of young children, those that are targeted toward childcare providers, and those that serve both.

Parents

Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R): As part of the Resource and Referral Network in Minnesota, RCC assists parents in finding a childcare provider that best fits their requirements in terms of quality, location, and cost. To support this, RCC helps to maintain and keep current a database of more than 5200 licensed providers, a daunting task given the amount of turnover in the childcare industry, especially among licensed home providers. Demand for this service is robust, with about 18,000 requests handled annually.⁵⁸ Due to periodic spikes in requests, referral workers often receive more calls than they are able to handle immediately: *“Generally understaffed for volume of calls, but peak times managed through triage system.”*⁵⁹ One staff person commented that RCC’s resource and referral is ranked high in Minnesota for customer satisfaction. *“For Resource and Referral, the execution is top notch. It’s efficient, people get what they need out of it, the ratings of the service that they get seem pretty high.”* Currently, the program employs seven referral

⁵⁸ Wilder Research Presentation to RCC Board (December, 2007).

⁵⁹ Programs and Services Map, RCC internal document, p. 3.

specialists (one part-time) and two full-time database coordinators, with an annual budget of around \$750,000.⁶⁰

Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP): Also known as the Basic Sliding Fee program, this is a statewide effort (though managed at the county level) that helps low-income families in Minnesota afford childcare by subsidizing a portion of the cost. Through a grant with Ramsey County, RCC administers more than \$12 million in assistance annually to more than 1700 families. *“We perform well in understanding basic sliding fee and child care assistance policy and giving families options. Our staff have to know a lot about child care assistance.”* The CCAP program has a budget of \$580,000 and is currently handled by 11 full-time staff.⁶¹ A recent evaluation of this program found that parents consider it essential. Without it, many of them would be unable to afford child care.⁶² Parents also gave high ratings to the RCC case workers who manage their participation in the program, but complained most often about the length of time case workers took to return their calls.⁶³ Since case workers currently manage around 250 cases each, this may be an indication that the program is not sufficiently staffed.⁶⁴ Some staff reported that this is the case: *“Caseloads are very high, so we’re understaffed. We’ve eliminated full-time positions so it’s left everyone having to provide the services, but with more work, and that’s been very stressful. We could improve services more efficiently and more timely if we had more staff.”*

Providers

Professional Development: RCC organizes training programs that help childcare providers keep their credentials current as well as give them opportunities to pursue more in-depth studies of EC-related subjects. Recent data indicate that over 80% of providers who attend training classes believe that RCC does a good or excellent job in this capacity.⁶⁵ The quality and variety of the

“If you are an early childcare provider and you don’t know about Resources for Child Caring, you’re

programs were often cited as one of RCC’s strengths: *“We offer high quality services. We really listen to providers and listen to the trends that are going on in the field and we are right there. Our training is really quality.”* In FY 2009, RCC organized more than 1,000 training classes at dozens of sites around the Twin Cities metro area. These classes had a total enrollment of 9600.⁶⁶ In addition to training classes, RCC also offers individual career counseling to child care professionals. Overall, Professional

Development is one of RCC’s largest programs in terms of staff (11 full-time and 2 part-time) and annual budget (\$780,000).⁶⁷

Family Child Care Business Support: RCC provides support to licensed home providers to manage their finances and other aspects of their businesses successfully. This program assisted

⁶⁰ Sandy Myers, Personal Communication, May 3, 2010

⁶¹ Sandy Myers, Personal Communication, May 3, 2010

⁶² Hippler, V. M. (2009). “Evaluation of the Basic Sliding Fee Child Care Assistance Program”.

⁶³ Hippler, 2009.

⁶⁴ Hippler, 2009.

⁶⁵ RCC Internal Document “CCR&R Professional Development Survey – East Metro District 2008-2009: Anoka, Ramsey, Washington Counties”, p. 6.

⁶⁶ Report to the Community, (2009). RCC Internal Document.

⁶⁷ Sandy Myers, Personal Communication, May 3, 2010.

about 100 providers in FY 2009. Given the very slim profit margins under which many of these providers operate, this service can mean the difference between staying open and going out of business. This program includes training classes, online resources, and individual consultation. RCC's internal documents report that: *"Scale is disproportionate to need – leading to the current priority of a train the trainer mode."* There is currently only one part-time staff person devoted to this program, indicating there is likely potential for expansion, however the funding available for it is limited, with a budget this year of only \$40,000.⁶⁸

Quality Improvement Grants: There has been increased emphasis in recent years on developing quality EC programs, and the new Parent Aware Quality Rating System is now being implemented. However, in many cases providers lack the funds needed to improve their facilities or programs to meet Parent Aware standards. The Quality Improvement grants are one method for them to obtain such funds and act as an incentive to providers to make the necessary upgrades. In FY 2009, RCC administered 400 such grants totaling \$3.5 million.⁶⁹ There are five full-time staff associated with this program.

Parents and Providers

Special Needs Consultation: RCC's special needs consultants work to minimize the difficulties parents have in finding care for children with special needs and the difficulties providers sometimes have making accommodations, and assist both parties in creating workable solutions or finding care settings that are a better fit. *"[The] Special needs [program] is very good – this could be expanded."* Consultants are knowledgeable about a wide range of disabilities and train providers on how to best adapt both facilities and curriculum to better serve special needs children in their care. They also act as advocates for parents in navigating a complicated and fragmented system of special needs services. The department's one full-time coordinator and four part-time consultants worked with over 200 families and providers in FY 2009, and demand for their services is always much greater than they are able to meet. The program's budget is \$180,000, though continued funding for is currently on uncertain ground.⁷⁰ Multiple interviewees cited this program as a tremendous asset and one that has enabled RCC to create and sustain strong relationships in many communities. For instance, the Special Needs area has established more ongoing working relationships in the west metro than other parts of RCC through its collaborations with Washburn Child Guidance, Fraser and St. David's Center. This department also works very collaboratively with other departments within RCC on a regular basis.

"We need to have more special needs. It's really limited because we don't have enough facilities, and we have providers with special needs children and they don't want to recognize that the child needs extra assistance. We need the special needs team working with the outreach team and going with us to the provider."

⁶⁸ Sandy Myers, Personal Communication, May 3, 2010.

⁶⁹ Report to the Community, (2009). RCC Internal Document.

⁷⁰ Sandy Myers, Personal Communication, May 3, 2010.

Library: Several staff and Board members praised RCC's library. *"We have a great library."* The Debra S. Fish collection is a treasure trove of EC materials, with over 3000 titles currently available. However, the lack of easy accessibility at its current location means that this resource is not as heavily utilized as it potentially could be. There are currently about 1500 library card holders, but only about 700 are considered "active users," meaning they have checked something out within the past six months.⁷¹ Plans are underway to integrate the library into the St. Paul or Ramsey County Library system to make the materials more accessible to a wider community. The library is staffed by a single full-time librarian.

Outreach: RCC extends outreach to parents and providers in the Latino, Somali, Hmong, and other communities and has built strong ties in these communities. Outreach staff try to position RCC not as an outsider imposing its own way of doing things, but as a collaborator that can help children succeed. Interviewees commented that RCC is performing well in this area: *"We're particularly strong in the quality of the professional development opportunities that we do and the degree to which we are able to reach underserved communities."* RCC's outreach activities cover a wide variety of areas, including: parent education, first-language training for non-English speaking providers, start-up grants and other business support for providers, and adapting quality ratings to fit cultural contexts.. The Outreach area currently has 11 full-time staff, many of whom are bilingual or have other culturally specific experience, and they served over 750 families and providers in FY 2009. This area provides support to RCC's other programs and also staffs the Language Access Line, which is often the first point of contact with RCC for non-English speakers. The budget for this program is \$950,000, with \$170,000 of that going to the Language Access Line.⁷²

"Redleaf is maintaining its own in the publishing world in very difficult economic times. That's exceptional."

Publishing: Redleaf Press is a for-profit division within RCC and provides RCC with approximately 40% of its current revenue.⁷³ Redleaf has a national and international reputation for quality EC publications and training materials. *"When our books come out, they are quality resources... Usually*

books we publish are very professional. They're well made." Also notable is the fact that even in this uncertain economy it is still generating respectable sales, which adds strength to RCC's overall bottom line.⁷⁴ In FY 2009 Redleaf generated more than \$3.5 million in revenue for RCC, with over 212,000 individual products sold. Currently it employs 16 full-time and two part-time staff.

Other Initiatives and Collaborations

In addition to the programs and services detailed above, RCC also engages in a number of initiatives and collaborations with outside partners. Most of these are dependent upon the particular source of funding that supports them, but the fact that RCC is seen as having both the willingness and the expertise to carry out pilot projects and neighborhood level activities speaks to its reputation for excellence within the EC community. Some of these initiatives include:

⁷¹ Wendy Nielsen, Personal communication, April 30, 2010.

⁷² Sandy Myers, Personal Communication, May 3, 2010.

⁷³ Barbara Yates, Personal communication, April 5, 2010.

⁷⁴ RCC Board Meeting Minutes (March 9, 2010). RCC internal document.

- **Project Early Kindergarten (PEK):** This collaboration with the St. Paul Public Schools, MELF, and the McKnight Foundation helps child care providers in the city serving at-risk children to align their programs with the school district's kindergarten readiness standards. 30 providers were served in FY 2009, with a budget of \$220,000.
- **Healthy Homes:** This partnership with the Payne-Phalen neighborhood in St. Paul and the health insurance company BlueCross BlueShield focuses on training about environmental risk factors to children's health and how to remedy them. This is a small grant of \$3,000.
- **St. Paul Early Childhood Scholarships:** This collaboration with MELF provides scholarships to 3-year olds in two low-income St. Paul neighborhoods to help them access high-quality early childhood education. In FY 2009, this program gave scholarships totaling \$2 million to 510 children, with an internal budget of \$153,000.

Taken together, RCC's programs and services constitute its most valuable asset. They are well run, well regarded by those they serve, and each in its own way advances the organization's mission: "raising the standard of care for children."

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS

When asked about areas where RCC most needs to improve, Public Relations and Communications was the function cited most often by Board members, managers, and staff. Currently there is no one person in charge of communications and it is not apparent that the organization has the current technological capacity and professional expertise to fulfill this function.

Internally, the challenge of communication is experienced on several levels: communication between staff, communication between the east and west metro locations, and communication with the Board. A broader challenge is promoting the organization to providers, families, potential funders, and the general public, as well as positioning RCC in such a way as to have a greater voice with policymakers.

"The communications piece is a huge element and has never been a top priority here. It has always been part time or non-existent. It's impressive that they've grown as much as they have without a communications plan."

Internal Communication

In general, managers and supervisors seemed to speak more positively than other staff members about communication between departments and levels of the organization. Larger staff meetings occur only about every six months. Despite the presence of cross-departmental teams, many staff still felt they did not have enough communication with those outside their department. One staff person commented: "Managers have meetings together. Across departments, it [communication] can be tricky. All staff meetings are very rare. I'm not always up on everything. Maybe a newsletter or highlights would help." A few people called for a regular newsletter, more frequent updates to RCC's intranet, or other techniques for keeping employees informed without having to attend too many large meetings. Several respondents felt that internal communication in the organization was good:

"I think our communication has been really good... It's very open in the way of communication. People are accessible. If you call, you get an answer back."

Communication between the east and west metro offices often came up as a challenge. Some east metro staff spoke of not feeling connected with the west metro office, partly because staff at the two locations do not necessarily know each other. They also spoke of not knowing what is happening at the different locations and the presence of an information lag between them. A few spoke more optimistically about communication between the two locations: *"We try to do a lot of team meetings. Communication with e-mail really helps. Some people might feel there is some type of separation but we try to communicate with them the same as all the other staff."*

A few respondents, both staff and Board members, raised concerns about communications with the Board. One person felt that there should be a website for the Board members. Another staff person bemoaned the distance from the Board to middle management and the rest of staff members. The Executive Director gives quarterly updates to staff about the Board, but one person felt that was not enough to understand their process and their connection to the mission of the organization. There was also a sense that many Board members came from organizations with more sophisticated communications and IT systems and brought with them higher expectations for RCC. Our research did not indicate whether or not the Board's public affairs committee communicated with the staff public policy committee on a regular basis.

External Communication

The theme of external communications and branding was one of the most frequently voiced concerns of all people interviewed. Almost all Board members and many staff touched on the issue in various contexts: funding and development, mission and vision, potential expansion and service delivery. Many felt that the public profile of the organization needed to be much more evident and its message needed to be more clearly delivered. *"It's going to be important to have someone in the role who can help us manage how we put our name out to everyone."* They felt that filling this role is a "next step" for the organization. One Board member said that *"a lot of people on the Board"* feel that having a public relations position is necessary before the organization contemplates taking on any more growth. Another spoke of how *"fragmented"* the current state of communications is. An example of this fragmentation is that decisions about what goes on the website are largely left to the development department, while the Director of Programs and Public Policy decides on public policy content. No one person or department is deciding on broader issues.

Many comments related to the notion that RCC is not well known for all the great work it does: *"We are the 'sleeping giant.' Biggest one around and nobody knows who we are, and that's a bad situation*

"I would love to see some sort of marketing or advertising campaign out into the community to let them know who we are and what we do. Sometimes we seem like St. Paul's best-kept secret."

when we're doing the work we're doing and not getting the attention we need..." Low visibility problems extended not only to reaching their constituents but also potential individual, corporate and foundation donors. The challenge of building recognition in the west metro area has proven somewhat daunting to date. Staff reported low name recognition and development efforts still struggle in that domain. Some specified a need for better branding or a marketing campaign that could succinctly explain what RCC does. Along

with the concept of branding, there were even some calls to explore a name change for the organization or pursue other means to better communicate the scope and depth of RCC's offerings.

On the whole, Public Relations and Communications is an area in which RCC has a lot of room to improve. The lack of any coherent PR infrastructure hinders RCC's ability to reach both potential clients and supporters, which may result in both the underutilization and underfunding of the agency's programs and services.

HUMAN RESOURCES

"We enjoy working with our counterparts and I think we have good skills that we are able to tackle the things that come up."

The staff at RCC are one of its strongest assets. In our interviews, Board and staff members alike generally praised the high quality, expertise and commitment of RCC employees and saw them as contributing to the stability of the organization in weathering different challenges. Flexibility, adaptability, a good work ethic and eagerness to

learn were cited as strengths of both front-line staff and management. This work ethic was particularly apparent in respondents' descriptions of how willingly and purposefully staff took on the extra work that resulted from RCC's rapid expansion into the west metro area in 2006. The organization's core values of excellence, innovation, respect and collaboration toward common goals⁷⁵ seem to be reflected by the attitudes of many in the organization: *"The passion is driving all of us here ... We have more of a commitment. I think this is a key for us. Because we're doing this from the heart. RCC really has a committed team."*

Currently, RCC has fewer than 100 full and part-time employees. With the recent economic downturn, RCC laid off approximately 8 people in November of 2008. Positions in IT/Web development, Communications, CCAP, and Language Line were eliminated. Redleaf lost staff in sales, warehouse, and purchasing and inventory. A half-time human resource assistant was laid off and the Human Resources department currently consists of one part-time Human Resource Director. Overall, RCC has about a 14.6% annual rate of staff turnover, with the average staff member's tenure being 4.68 years.⁷⁶ These numbers indicate that RCC is able to retain talent and maintain stability within the organization.

Perhaps as a result of the layoffs, some organizational functions, such as IT, facilities and communications, are apportioned out to different staff members. The new CFO has some responsibilities in overseeing technology and facilities. The Executive Director's assistant also serves as the building coordinator and has some

"As far as resources or training...my supervisor has asked me to think about areas of growth and if I want to go to a workshop or take a class and think about where this might lead, so they've been pretty good about that. It's always hard now with budget stuff though."

⁷⁵ Employee Handbook (2008). RCC Internal Document.

⁷⁶ Diana Rockstad, Personal communication, May 3, 2010.

IT duties. She is responsible for the phone system, conference calls, and some troubleshooting. The Associate Director for Redleaf performs mixed functions as well, including some facilities and IT training work. Public Relations and communications are shared by the Executive Director, the Director of Development and the Director of Programs and Public Policy.

While there was praise for the high quality of the staff and past training opportunities, there was also acknowledgement of training cutbacks in recent years and calls for more opportunities for training and professional development. External training opportunities were reduced as were internal ones, such as IT training from the Webmaster. Overall, staff cited the need for improving skills in IT and management techniques. Some spoke of the need for ongoing early childhood development training and one Board member would like to see a more systematic way of getting current research and information from academia to those in the training unit.

Management

As an organization, RCC has a history of promptly and effectively responding to the changing needs of families, providers and funders. The result of this has been that RCC has not often had the luxury of planning changes well in advance. For example, the sudden collapse of the Greater Minneapolis Day Care Association (GMDCA) in 2006 necessitated a rapid response from RCC. RCC took on the role of providing childcare resource and referral services for Minneapolis and Hennepin County almost overnight. Also, the fact that much of RCC's work is contract driven has sometimes led the organization to adopt a more reactive than proactive way of thinking. Departments and organizational structures have risen up in response to needs, but the siloed nature of the organization, with a heavy emphasis on managers, may not be the most effective way for the organization to conduct business today and in the future. Although RCC has handled many transitions well, there is evidence that cracks are appearing in the management infrastructure.

RCC's structure is largely hierarchical, with an Executive Director leading the organization and a lead team directing operations in the following areas: Programs, Redleaf Press, Development, Finance, and Human Resources. Cross-departmental teams include a staff activities committee, the diversity advisory council, a public policy committee, and a safety committee.⁷⁷ (See Appendix 7 – Organizational Chart)

Several respondents spoke well of the leadership from the Executive Director, but felt that there were some problems within the management layer. Numerous people stressed that supervisors have too heavy a load and are not doing as good a job as they might because of this burden. Several spoke of managers or supervisors having too many people or programs assigned to them. More than one person spoke of a need for a "middle layer" or a coordinator in the middle to assist

"A lot of our supervisors are totally overworked. Way too much to do. I don't know how she manages it all."

managers or supervisors with their workload. Some mentioned the need for better development of management's skill sets. Respondents spoke of a lack of positive reinforcement and respect from managers. Others discussed the lack of availability of their managers, one example being a manager who splits time between the east and west metro locations. Several mentioned that supervision

⁷⁷ Employee Handbook (2008). RCC Internal Document.

seems to take place through e-mail and there are very few performance reviews. The statement *“In the last month I received praise or other recognition from my supervisor for doing good work”* received the lowest rating in the Employee Satisfaction Survey for 2010, continuing the trend from the previous three years.⁷⁸

Some of the staff interviewed felt they could take on more, but many spoke of people who were overworked or had too heavy a load. Direct support staff spoke of increased caseloads and of the frustration of serving people primarily over the phone rather than in person. One person felt the caseload burden and the mechanism of counting how many people they have served is negatively affecting how they can deliver services and does not allow for the kind of face-to-face service she believes would really help families.

While cross-departmental teams exist, they meet infrequently and are generally not exploring programs and service enhancement, focusing instead on issues like building safety and staff activities. Collaboration is not seen as a strength of the organization, although some program areas, particularly Special Needs and Outreach, work a great deal with other departments. The siloed departmental structure and the disunity it causes was a prevalent theme among the front-line staff. One person mentioned that her previous employer had a less hierarchical structure and it was *“more like a family.”* Communication between departments and locations was rarely seen by staff as a strength. In general, they felt that managers knew what was happening in the organization overall because they regularly attended meetings with each other. However, there was no reliable mechanism for making sure that information made its way down to everyone else. They felt that knowing more about what was going on in different departments would enhance their own work and that of the organization.

The siloed nature of the organization is most vividly illustrated in the division between RCC’s programs and services area and Redleaf Press. The two departments function virtually independently with very little crossover or input. The relationship between the mission of RCC and Redleaf’s role in fulfilling that mission was not readily apparent. In fact, one respondent noted: *“I don’t think of Redleaf as a department. I think of it as a company.”*

“The publishing group is almost like a separate island.”

RCC’s Human Resources function has both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, the high quality of the staff, their flexibility, and their dedication to RCC are crucial to the organization’s ability to fulfill its mission. On the other, a siloed departmental structure, overstretched management, and missed collaborative opportunities contribute to a lack of organizational cohesion and reduced potential to foster innovation and creativity among employees.

⁷⁸ Summary of Results of 2010 Employee Satisfaction Survey (2010). RCC Internal Document.

FACILITIES

RCC currently maintains two locations that house staff and material resources. The organization's headquarters in the St. Paul suburb of Little Canada was acquired in 2004 and is now owned almost outright. Although the exterior is nondescript, the interior space is open and welcoming. This facility supports 61 full and part-time staff, and has sufficient space to add more staff if necessary. The headquarters is also well-suited to meet RCC's current programmatic and training needs, particularly the needs of Redleaf Press, such as shipping, receiving, and warehousing operations. Unfortunately, the location of this building has posed challenges for RCC's clients, particularly those from the inner city or those without cars: *"It makes them feel like they wasted their time driving out here because some people say we're not the easiest place to find, we're not directly on the busline"* Also, the building's visibility is low. It is not located close to any major residential or commercial areas and it is difficult to distinguish it from the surrounding buildings.

"The strength that we have is the facility. That we own this building here. I think there's a small mortgage, on this building. Additional resources, I think, would be the weakness for maintaining the building. Because once you have it, you have the maintenance costs.... You need to do your painting, your ceiling, all those kinds of things."

The second office, a leased space along Hennepin Avenue in northeast Minneapolis, has excellent training facilities and meets the needs of the current staff. There are 23 staff working in this location. The Outreach (10) and Resource and Referral (11) programs are entirely housed there, along with two general support staff, with some management splitting time between the two offices. RCC subleases part of this to other EC organizations (MELF and Parent Aware), which provides some revenue and increases RCC's connections with these agencies. In addition, this space could accommodate additional staff in the future. This space is considered more accessible to clients since it is on a busline, and is also close to two major highways. Both characteristics were required by the contract with Hennepin County. RCC sought community input when seeking out the space, but one manager reported that some in the community still feel it is not in a good location: *"We're in Minneapolis, but we're not in the right part of Minneapolis."* If RCC decides to move to a more permanent location in the West Metro, it is likely that accessibility and visibility will be important considerations.

This facilities configuration also has had consequences for RCC internally. Staff in both locations reported feeling isolated and disconnected from what was going on within RCC as a whole. *"We were all in one building before, now we've got two sites, so ... it put a gap between our two organizations. That exacerbates the situation because now we've got two different sites and how do you get both of those sites to feel the goal and feel connected to one another and reach that potential?"* There is some confusion on the part of clients as to what services are available at each location, causing some frustration when clients travel to the wrong location to receive needed services. As a result of these factors, the overall picture with facilities is decidedly mixed. While both locations are adequate for carrying on RCC's day-to-day activities, they also contribute to its low public profile and could be hindering the delivery of services to the agency's client base

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

RCC's evolution and history of responding to different needs in the community is also reflected in its information technology. In order to fulfill the requirements of government contracts and other funders, RCC runs multiple software programs for data collection and financial tracking. This profusion of incompatible systems hinders stronger interaction between departments for service delivery, program evaluation, accounting, and other internal data tracking.

Poor software systems were cited by some in the employee satisfaction survey as a reason they did not give a higher rating to the statement, *"I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day at work."*⁷⁹ Some respondents saw weaknesses in IT as a key reason for deficient data collection and self-evaluation. One respondent commented that the staff try to connect families to providers and other needed services. However, if the family is transferred from one department within RCC to another there is not a way for the referring staff person to later determine if the family found child care or the services they need. Within RCC itself, there is no computer system or database to track and follow-up with families. As one respondent said, *"There's gotta be something out there that can capture more of what we're doing."*

There was fairly broad consensus that RCC's current IT infrastructure, while functional, is inadequate. The move to the current east metro facility in 2004 instigated a large IT investment, but the system has not had any major upgrades since that time. RCC has a contract with *Foundation Atomic* for functions like monitoring the server, creating distribution lists, and controlling viruses and spam. Although RCC is experimenting with a help desk component there, the organization continues to struggle with balancing its IT needs against the costs of relying too heavily on an external provider.⁸⁰

Some people expressed concern that RCC was not staying current with technology, and was missing opportunities to use new tools like social networking sites for advertising and webinars for training. The Webmaster was let go during the layoffs of November 2008, and several staff members mentioned that as a result the internal web was not being updated: *"Our intranet is a disgrace. It hasn't been updated since '08."* They felt this hindered communication and sometimes made RCC *"look bad."* Redleaf staff spoke of the need to stay current in technology to remain competitive in the industry, but said that they are doing a better job of being current than they have in the past.

"Capacity and funding often stops a lot of good ideas."

There were a number of comments about the types of IT equipment upgrades that staff thought were needed. The phone system was mentioned several times. One person called the software and phone systems *"obsolete."* The phone system at the headquarters is twelve years old and the company that made the system is now out of business.⁸¹ Others mentioned challenges with integrating the older phone system with the newer phones in Minneapolis when conducting conference calls. A number of staff indicated that a lack of access to needed equipment, including

⁷⁹ Summary of Results of 2010 Employee Satisfaction Survey (2010). RCC Internal Document.

⁸⁰ Lisa Lind, Personal communication, April 20, 2010.

⁸¹ Lisa Lind, Personal communication, April 20, 2010.

new phone systems or portable technology, had a direct impact on their ability to complete their work effectively.

An additional barrier to improved IT operations in the organization was the skill level of staff. An

“We're mostly self-taught on computer programs, and you learn enough as you go and that's holding us back a little bit right now. Everyone has all that stuff and people still aren't using them like they should be.”

interviewee commented: *“We're mostly self-taught on computer programs, and you learn enough as you go and that's holding us back a little bit right now. Everyone has all that stuff and people still aren't using them like they should be.”* Several mentioned that there should be more attention to IT training for staff. This function was performed in the past by the Webmaster, but has not been available to staff recently. One person called for training in basic programs like Excel, Word, Powerpoint, Access and Outlook. Some felt that the IT skill level of new candidates should be examined before hiring. There were several comments that suggested that staff IT capabilities were generally stronger in the Redleaf division than in Programs and Services.

Overall, the IT area within RCC presents many challenges. Issues of software incompatibility, aging equipment, and insufficient IT training create obstacles for RCC's day-to-day operations and there are missed opportunities to increase RCC's public profile online and elsewhere. However, any comprehensive approach to upgrade these systems will require a significant outlay of resources, and it is unclear whether the funding will be available to do so.

FINANCES

Regardless of its sources of funding, a non-profit such as RCC does not remain in business for nearly 40 years unless it has been well managed financially. One theme that emerges from any examination of RCC's history is that, as an organization, it has always been committed to living within its means, even when it necessitates the laying off of staff or the cutting of programs: *“We might not clearly have a contingency plan on paper, but if we lose major funding we could gather our team together and come up with action steps and triage and figure out how are we still going to keep our trajectory going in spite of this major setback.”* During this recent recession, RCC's leadership made some critical decisions early on, such as cutting eight staff positions and freezing salaries. These moves, coupled with a relatively strong showing from Redleaf Press, have enabled the organization to maintain a financial position that is stronger than many other non-profits at this time.

One sign of RCC's well-managed finances is the longevity of its contract relationships. RCC has longstanding contracts with both Ramsey County for the CCAP program and the Minnesota Department of Human Services for Resources and Referral and Professional Development. Another source of RCC's financial strength comes from its diversified revenue streams. Currently, about 40% of RCC's revenue comes from Redleaf sales, another 40% from government contracts, and 20% from foundation grants and individual contributions.⁸² This diversified revenue stream

⁸² Barbara Yates, Personal Communication, April 5, 2010.

contributes greatly to RCC's financial strength and sustainability. Like many non-profits, RCC sustained substantial declines in net assets during the past two fiscal years. However, RCC is poised to end FY 2010 at the break-even point, and possibly with a slight surplus,⁸³ despite a precipitous drop in foundation grants. Also, RCC is developing a sizable endowment fund that, in time, may contribute to the financial stability of the organization. Finally, some recent changes, such as upgrading all of RCC's financial reports to adhere to Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAPs), will allow it to enhance transparency and accountability to funders and other stakeholders. Characteristics like this are indicative of prudent leadership, and send the signal to any potential new funders that RCC will use any dollars it receives wisely.

One area where RCC could improve is in its accounting infrastructure. *"We have many different ways that funds come into the organization, through publication sales, providers, parents, contributors, contracts, and each set of funds are handled separately, and go through a separate process. We have each one down and we get it all accounted for, but it's not all that efficient."*

"The money comes in 15 different ways, and we've got 15 different processes."

Currently, the various program areas within RCC all have their own accounting systems, usually based on the software and reporting requirements of the foundation grant or government contract that supports the program. While this facilitates RCC's accountability to outside funders, it makes the collection, analysis, and sharing of data internally a cumbersome and frustrating process. Fortunately, efforts are underway to address this issue. The newly-hired CFO has plans to update the financial system, do a process review, and standardize the accounting systems. These actions should ameliorate a major obstacle in strengthening organizational cohesion.

As a non-profit, RCC's primary responsibility is to its mission, but in order to do that effectively it must practice sound financial management. In this context, RCC's reputation for fiscal caution and the effective use of limited resources is just as much of an asset as its knowledgeable staff or top notch customer service.

SUMMARY

While the organizational audit revealed many areas where RCC is currently doing well, it also uncovered areas that make it less effective than it otherwise could be. All of RCC's programs directly advance the mission in some form or another and its reputation for high-quality customer service is well deserved. Financially, the organization is also in a strong position and has a long track record of reliability. Facilities and Human Resources are more of a mixed bag, with each area contributing to the mission in some aspects while hindering it in others. Public Relations and IT, however, are clearly in need of serious improvement. When considered as a whole, the overarching implication for RCC in relation to any potential growth is that it must first fix the areas where there are deficiencies before embarking upon any significant expansion. This process will be greatly aided by the creation and subsequent implementation of a strategic plan. By outlining a specific series of steps to address issues related to RCC's internal infrastructure, the organization will be able to better position itself to take advantage of the opportunities that becoming an intermediary would present.

⁸³ Board Meeting Minutes (March 8, 2010), RCC Internal Document.

GAP ANALYSIS OF RESOURCES FOR CHILD CARING

Beyond the investigation of RCC's current organizational strengths and weaknesses, our research examined RCC's ability to take on more growth and potentially expand into the role of intermediary. To determine RCC's capacity for future growth, we conducted an organizational gap analysis. The gap analysis is used to compare current performance with potential performance, establishing a vision and then asking, "What do we need to get there?" This gap analysis will identify the capabilities that RCC will need to develop if it is to enter an expansion phase.

Becoming an intermediary is only one of the potential options available to RCC, should it choose to play an expanded role in the Minnesota EC field. Accordingly, we first evaluate RCC's capacity for growth in general, and then discuss RCC's capacity to take on each of the specific intermediary roles: connecting, convening, sustaining and measuring. Each section will present the vision for RCC, the current capacity of the organization, recommendations for bridging the gap, and criteria for evaluating effectiveness.

RCC'S CAPACITY FOR GROWTH AND EXPANSION

The interview protocols for staff and Board members asked several specific questions about whether or not the organization was ready for more growth. For the most part, staff and Board members felt that RCC should begin considering an expansion of the organization. Staff indicated that the organization was able to accommodate more work, more staff, or both, and felt that expansion was important to enable the organization to meet existing needs better. *"Growth is a big thing for RCC. There are a lot of children out there who need assistance who are not getting it."* Board members focused on the benefit to RCC of such an expansion as well as the benefit to the field. *"I think the time is right. Given where we're at economically, I think we can't afford not to try to expand early childhood. This is not the time to scale down."* However, both groups were unclear about the nature and direction of potential expansion, and expressed concerns about how the organization would be affected.

"Staff and Board members really want to know what this means."

Vision for RCC

RCC will engage in intentional growth that furthers its mission, strengthens its role in the EC field, and builds on current capacity. RCC's expansion should be governed by the vision of its Board of Directors and Executive Director, and be managed through the development of a strategic plan that can allow for purposeful growth and can capitalize on RCC's current strengths while resolving its deficiencies.

RCC's mission and the vision of the Board of Directors provides ample inspiration for the development of a plan for RCC's intentional growth and expansion. In interviews, Board members expressed their vision for the organization in terms of cementing RCC's role as a "go-to organization", or a thought leader for the field. *"RCC should be viewed as the 'go-to' entity. There are other early education and childcare organizations, but we're the only one that does the full spectrum*

of services. We could be viewed as the ‘thought leader’ because of our high level of sophistication and expertise.” Most Board members expressed interest in seeing RCC move into a broader role in the field and become increasingly recognized for the work they do.

Current State of the Organization

When asked about RCC’s expansion into the west metro area in 2006, staff and Board members generally concurred that the expansion was successful, but involved heavy workloads and increased stress and anxiety for staff, Board members, and constituents. “My impression was that it really stressed the staff. There was a lot of growth and not enough administrative resources in place to absorb a lot of the tasks and responsibilities that happened.” However, some concerns were raised about whether RCC was again ready for more growth. A number of staff and Board members indicated that RCC was not yet well established in the west metro, and that more effort was needed to build partnerships and establish a strong presence in Minneapolis and the western counties.

“I would hope that any further expansion would be undertaken more deliberately with ample time for examining all relevant aspects.”

“There are still so many providers who have no clue who we are, specifically in Hennepin County.” Moreover, both staff and Board members expressed that a new growth period would be more successful if it directly furthered the mission and was preceded by an intentional planning process. This planning process would need to include implementing lessons learned from the prior expansion, ensuring that staff are prepared for and supportive of growth, as well as communicating with community partners.

RCC’s current mission is to “advance quality care and education of children in their crucial early years.” Staff and Board members uniformly supported this mission and, in most cases, specifically stated that they were at RCC *because* they supported the mission. However, it was also clear from our interviews that such a broad mission was open to several different interpretations. We did not find a consistent understanding of mission and vision throughout the organization, and there was clear confusion as to whether parents or providers are RCC’s primary client. Moreover, there was a lack of consensus about which programs were most important in furthering the mission of the organization.

Issues relating to mission and vision are most apparent in the division between Redleaf Press and RCC. Although Redleaf is an important asset for RCC, it is not integrated into the rest of the organization, and both staff and Board members are unclear about how Redleaf Press should support the mission of the organization. Some individuals felt that Redleaf should support the mission by publishing books that further developments in the field, while others felt the press should publish books that maximize revenues and thus increase the ability of RCC to fulfill its mission through the other program areas. Managing these competing purposes has posed a clear challenge for Redleaf, which has struggled to meet both goals simultaneously.

RCC does not currently have a strategic plan in place, nor was there evidence that the organization is in the process of developing one. Without a strategic plan, it will be difficult for the RCC to engage in intentional growth that directly furthers the mission of the organization. A strategic plan can guide growth and development of new functions, reducing the risk of mission drift or becoming too funder-driven. A strategic plan is especially important if the Board is to consider re-evaluating the mission, vision or name of the organization. During interviews, we encountered a small amount of interest in reconsidering the mission or the name of the organization. Two Board members

suggested that it might be appropriate to reconsider RCC's mission and/or name. One senior staff member mentioned that RCC should consider changing its name. Changing the organization's mission, vision, name, primary focus and role in the field without a strategic plan opens RCC up to serious risk. Without a plan to guide the process in a specific direction, RCC could lose its organizational purpose, become too focused on funding sources for decision-making, or simply end up as an entirely different organization. One Board member remarked, *"We need to do this carefully."*

RCC also struggles to establish a strong presence in the Early Childhood field. A common goal of both staff and Board members is to increase RCC's role in the field, and become the "go-to" organization for early childhood. While constituents who seek services from RCC are generally very pleased with the organization, many staff and Board members felt that RCC wasn't as well known as it should be. *"RCC isn't recognized as the dominant force that it is because other groups get more attention, because they have more aggressive PR or whatever."* A frequent comment made in the interviews was that it was hard to communicate in a "90 second elevator pitch" what RCC does. RCC will need to address issues regarding name recognition, branding and presence if it is going to increase its stature in the Minnesota EC field.

RCC may also need to consider the composition and capacity of its current Board. RCC has a strong, engaged and knowledgeable Board that is eager to see the organization grow. However, engaging in a strategic planning and expansion process will require a lot of oversight. RCC's Board members possess diverse sets of skills and some members may require training in order to maximize their ability to guide the organization through a period of intense change and growth. RCC's Board is composed of dedicated individuals from a variety of fields, but has little high-profile representation from businesses, foundations, and research organizations. This may hinder the organization's ability to attract fundraising, media attention, and partners for collaborative opportunities necessary for long-term sustainability.

Recommendations for Bridging the Gap

➤ Develop a long-term strategic plan.

RCC needs a strategic plan to direct the path of growth and expansion. A strategic plan should establish realistic goals and concrete steps for achieving them. As part of the strategic planning process, RCC will need to decide if it's ready for more growth, whether that growth should take the form of becoming an intermediary, and determine the specific steps in that process. The Board should evaluate whether existing programs fit with their vision for RCC and consider how growth could capitalize on RCC's current strengths. In order for the strategic plan to be effective, RCC will need to address questions related to its mission, vision, and focus, including the specific purpose of Redleaf Press.

➤ Address issues of name recognition, branding and presence.

Although a strategic plan will help address issues of organizational identity, branding, and public presence, the Board should also develop concrete steps towards increasing name recognition, branding and presence. In order to become a "go-to" organization, RCC will need to increase public knowledge about the organization and its services. An increased internet presence, a marketing plan, and the development of key partnerships could help increase RCC's public profile and strengthen its leadership position in the field.

➤ **Build greater capacity on the Board.**

RCC must assess the current capacity of the Board to lead an organization with an expanded role in the community, and provide training and resources where necessary. The Board should purposefully recruit additional Board members with specific skills sets, including high-profile Board members, to help RCC secure funding and develop its reputation as a key player.

Criteria for Evaluating Effectiveness

➤ **The organization is implementing an evaluation plan with measurable goals that align with the organization's mission.**

As part of the strategic planning process, RCC will need to develop and implement a plan with specific measurable goals aligned with the mission and vision of the organization. The efforts should test the benefits of the expansion to RCC along with how well it has improved outcomes for young children.

RCC'S CAPACITY TO BECOME AN INTERMEDIARY

During interviews, staff and Board members were asked, "Do you think RCC should become an intermediary?" Frankly, most interviewees responded "Yes." *"Yes, I think we should take it on. Knowing Barb and her expertise, I think we have the right person at helm to do it. It feels like there's an opportunity, but I haven't seen any other groups saying they're going to play this role."* However, it was also clear that most respondents are unsure of what becoming an intermediary would entail, and what functions RCC would perform as an intermediary. There was wide variation in respondents' ideas about how an intermediary role would affect the organization. Both staff and Board members hoped it would increase RCC's visibility, while others envisioned more money for their programs or more advancement opportunities. Still others saw an increased role for the organization in public policy activities. Many respondents felt that RCC is correctly poised for such an expansion. However, many staff and Board members stressed that any expansion, in order to be done well, would have to proceed strategically, and would require the development of additional capacity.

"Yes, with a question mark at the end. We should not rush into things. [RCC] would be positioned at some point to do this and to do this very well. Not next week, next year, next three years As part of a 5 year plan certainly to get a timeline into place for how we could tackle this."

At least 60% of respondents had the opinion that RCC was currently acting as an intermediary. *"I thought that's what they were doing already!"* Most commonly, respondents felt that RCC currently acts as a fiscal intermediary and an information clearinghouse. Yet, although an intermediary can perform re-granting and information-distribution functions, the performance of these roles does not make RCC an intermediary. These roles would more appropriately be called a contractor, technical assistance provider, or school coach, but not an intermediary.

"I thought that's what they were doing already!"

If RCC decides, as part of a strategic planning process, to become an intermediary, the question will still remain: Does RCC have the capacity to become an intermediary? To answer this question, this section presents an evaluation of RCC's capacity to fill each specific intermediary role: connecting, convening, measuring and sustaining.

Connecting

Vision for RCC as a Connecting Intermediary

As a Connecting intermediary organization, RCC will be working to help broker and leverage resources in a way that facilitates change in organizations in the field. RCC can provide expert knowledge of the complexities of the system and do the "dirty work" of distributing and monitoring funds. In addition to this, RCC will be able to offer its "back room" services to parents, providers, or other non-profit organizations in the early childhood field. These services could include website management, maintaining data systems or financial reporting, and providing technical training or other staff development opportunities. RCC could enhance business development assistance and speed the dissemination of information and current research to providers.

Current State of RCC

Most interview respondents felt that RCC is currently filling a Connecting role because it links providers and families to resources such as funding, training, and technical assistance. *"We are well known in doing a good job with providers. Any direction we go in helping providers connect with each other, get trained, access resources, anything we can do to make their jobs better is good. We're well positioned to do those things."* Stepping into a role as a Connecting intermediary may be the most natural course for RCC because of these existing functions, but many of these operations are currently conducted as part of government contracts, which can sometimes limit flexibility and innovation. Connecting is not just about providing resources, but also creating opportunities for parents and providers to have an effect on the types of resources that are available to them.

"We are well known in doing a good job with providers. Any direction we go in helping providers connect with each other, get trained, access resources, anything we can do to make their jobs better is good. We're well positioned to do those things."

RCC currently performs re-granting functions and, by all accounts, that portion of the organization seems to be doing its work well. *"We administer grants for providers on behalf of the state, and we do Parent Aware, and collect data on childcare for the 7-county metro area. We are fiscal agents on a number of collaboratives."* However, while re-granting may be a significant responsibility of a connecting intermediary, it is not sufficient to make RCC an intermediary, especially if there is no mechanism for RCC to facilitate change in the grantor's or grantee's organization. Moreover, RCC may not have enough capacity to accommodate the administration of additional grants. In order to develop its ability to collect and distribute resources, RCC will need additional development and fiscal management capacity. This includes the development of data systems to facilitate the processing of pass-through funds.

To broker and leverage resources effectively, RCC must be able to build sustainable relationships with the organizations that offer those resources. However, RCC appears to have limited informal and formal relationships with other organizations beyond contractual working partnerships. When staff were asked about organizations or individuals that they generally work with on a regular basis, the majority of those named were people or organizations the staff were required to work with as part of a contracted program. *"We have a lot of partnerships already developed. The biggest is the State R&R [a contractual relationship]."* To build and maintain these external relationships, RCC will need staff with the appropriate expertise and broader perspective about the EC field. It is unclear if this expertise is available within RCC's current staff.

As discussed earlier, RCC is currently struggling to meet its own internal needs regarding website management, IT, and staff professional development. It is unlikely that the organization has capacity to provide these services more broadly to the outside organizations in the near term.

Recommendations for Bridging the Gap

➤ Improve organizational infrastructure.

RCC should take purposeful steps toward improving internal and external communication, by investing in more streamlined fiscal and data management systems that work across the departments, upgrading current technology and providing more professional development opportunities for staff. RCC should consider hiring staff to fill needed communications and technology positions.

Keeping the intranet current will improve communication and help break down barriers between different units of the organization. As well, having a position dedicated to public relations functions can help to raise the organization's public profile. Updated IT and phone systems, as well as staff training to accompany those upgrades, will facilitate communication between departments, allowing RCC to become more effective and possibly more innovative in its work. Streamlined fiscal and data management systems are crucial for improving service to clients, facilitating collaborations between departments, and facilitating internal evaluation capacity.

➤ Develop mechanisms for connecting parents and providers to critical resources.

By building purposeful relationships, RCC can become a critical broker of resources, including funding, technical assistance, and training. RCC should develop opportunities for re-granting that engages grantees in improving the process. It should expand its offerings to include other key resources, such as business development, data management, and staff training. Engaging in a partnership with First Children's Finance could enhance the childcare business development work that both organizations currently perform. A closer relationship with the Center for Early Education and Development (CEED) could expand training opportunities or allow stronger participation in the dissemination of new research.

Criteria for Evaluating Effectiveness of a Connecting Intermediary

- ***The intermediary is connecting programs to quality resources, beyond what they would be able to secure independently.***

Access to resources that raise quality and spur innovation serves as a strong incentive to participants. In addition, the intermediary offers enough flexibility and incentives for creative solutions so that new, better practices can continue to evolve.

Convening

Vision for RCC as a Convening Intermediary

As a convening intermediary, RCC will play a fundamental role in facilitating meaningful change within the EC field. The challenge for RCC will be not just to generate another task force but to create meaningful change that will truly enhance the field and improve outcomes. To provide compelling opportunities for stakeholders to meet, RCC must keep up-to-date on current initiatives and identify rising leaders. Most importantly, RCC will need to be the main driver in establishing and promoting a clearly articulated common vision that motivates the field to action. To do this, RCC will need to build a reputation for encouraging unique collaborations, promoting creative opportunities, invigorating the discussion and bringing new stakeholders to the table to solve old problems in a new way.

RCC must also facilitate relationship development across organizations, as well as program and policy areas, by providing mechanisms that allow relationships to grow and find common purpose. Organizations that might see their role as competing for limited resources could improve outcomes by working more collaboratively to use those resources more efficiently and purposefully. Since it occupies a different space than the organizations they serve, RCC will be able help providers to focus less on territorial issues and more on working towards improved outcomes.

Current State of RCC

Our research indicated that RCC is not currently acting as a Convening intermediary, and a strong convening function seems to be outside the current scope of the organization. In general, playing a role as a Convening intermediary seems to be below everyone's radar. Board and staff members alike did not discuss convening roles.

RCC's potential as a Convening intermediary is restricted by its limited visibility to the public. Many interviewees felt that RCC is not well known, even in the early childhood community. In addition, those community members who do know RCC may know only a narrow slice of the organization, and may be unaware of all the services that RCC has to offer. RCC's breadth and depth may also be a liability for a growing Convening intermediary. Currently, RCC operates as a "jack of all trades," trying to provide

"We need to be more outwardly focused. As we think about partnerships, collaborations, working with public affairs agendas and funders, there really need to have the interfaces at RCC that are equipped to do this. Barbara is certainly externally focused but when it comes to the organization, it is more internally focused."

services to providers, parents and other organizations in the EC field, which makes it challenging for the organization to establish a reputation as an expert in any specific sub-field or to carve out a niche as the go-to Convening organization for a particular branch of the EC community.

In interviews, several Board members acknowledged their primary goal for RCC is developing an increasingly external focus within the organization. A few mentioned that the current executive director was hired because she was very well connected in the wider EC field. *“With the new executive director, there’s a new persona. She brings to the table a lot of depth in the EC field and respect.”* The general consensus is that she has increased the status of the organization, but it was clear from our research that many in the organization remain inwardly-focused, aware of only their particular job function. They were generally unconnected to other parts of the organization, much less outside organizations that could become potential collaborators. The majority of RCC’s current external relationships appear to be contract-driven or stem from the Executive Director. RCC does not currently have staff whose specific job functions include observing change in the wider EC field, identifying opportunities for key initiatives, developing new partnerships, or facilitating the development of leaders. It is unclear whether any current staff members have the capacity to undertake these functions.

Recommendations for Bridging the Gap

➤ ***Implement systems for improved public relations and communications.***

RCC should create positions that are directly responsible for public relations and communications, and develop expertise where needed. Raising the profile of the organization in the community through better communications, an enhanced online profile, and a clearer organizational direction will facilitate later efforts to engage stakeholders in a system-wide change effort.

➤ ***Develop purposeful relationships with other organizations in the field.***

RCC needs to establish both formal and informal relationships with key organizations that are not confined to contractual work obligations. RCC can use these relationships to build its convening function and ultimately to promote strong partnerships with organizations that could play important roles in system-wide redesign.

➤ ***Convene individuals and organizations in the early childhood education field in order to enhance RCC’s prominence and role in the field.***

RCC should host more conferences or meetings with key individuals and organizations in order to begin establishing common goals. Offering opportunities such as the recent candidate forum will help RCC to secure a role in discussions about the development and implementation of the quality and outcomes measurement for the field, as well as position RCC to be a leader in future policy formulation. RCC’s relationship with school districts could be a signal to participants that this effort will be different from past initiatives. Most leaders in the EC field are calling for better coordination between early care, early education, and the school system, but little headway has been made in this area. RCC already has a track record of working with the St Paul School District and could be seen as a leader in such an initiative.

Criteria for Evaluating Effectiveness of Convening Intermediary

- ***The intermediary is successful at convening stakeholders around creative initiatives and new solutions.***

Purposeful efforts are made to foster relationships that unify stakeholders around a common vision and purpose. Stakeholders are eager to create networks and participate in an innovative effort that is making headway in previously intractable areas and helping to achieve positive outcomes.

Measuring

Vision for RCC as a Measuring Intermediary

In this role, RCC will be working to ensure the development of quality assessment mechanisms for the field to enhance service delivery and promote effective practices and positive outcomes. RCC will be able to draw on its role as convener to establish shared goals among stakeholders for systems of accountability and measurements of success. RCC will need to unify efforts for external outcomes measurement, but contingent on that success will be a strong internal focus on evaluations of RCC's programming and services. For RCC to effectively promote the development of quality and outcome measurement in the field, RCC will first need processes for measuring its own outcomes and success.

Current State of RCC

In interviews with both the RCC Board of Directors and RCC staff, there was an expressed interest

"The biggest piece for me is strength re-evaluation. We don't do a very good job of saying what we do...We do have data, but how is that data collected? How is it used?"

in the development of quality and outcomes measurement tools and systems for the early childhood education field. The majority of those interviewed felt that this would contribute significantly to improving their efforts in evaluating which of their own programs are most effective at preparing children to be successful in school. An interview respondent stated: *"The biggest piece for me is strength re-evaluation. We don't do a very good job of saying what we do...We do have data, but how is that data collected? How is it used?"* Many respondents also felt that RCC should take on this Measuring role as an intermediary.

Currently, RCC is involved with quality assurance in its work with the Parent Aware Quality Rating System. RCC works with providers in order to prepare them to be rated. However, RCC will need to do more than just provide coaching and training to providers to be seen as a leader in this area. RCC needs to be involved with the bigger discussions around the development of the measurement tools and standards. Nevertheless, many agreed that RCC currently does not currently have the requisite skills or technology to do so.

Throughout interviews with both the Board and staff, RCC's portfolio of skills and tools around program evaluation was consistently identified as an area that is currently missing. As one

respondent noted, “*A priority should be to use data better.*” Few among the staff in the organization currently have the requisite skills. RCC also does not possess the necessary technological infrastructure. As highlighted in the organizational audit, the various program areas and departments in RCC are using different methods and software for collecting and maintaining their data. This makes it difficult for staff to extrapolate data needed to assess RCC’s rate of success and measure its overall program outcomes. RCC needs to develop the appropriate staff expertise and technology to support this work.

Recommendations for Bridging the Gap

➤ ***Increase the organization’s capacity around program evaluation.***

RCC should hire new staff proficient in program evaluation, offer training for current staff and invest in a streamlined data management system. The ability to evaluate the successes of programs and mechanisms for communicating them to stakeholders will provide opportunities for partnerships, greater funding, and an increased stature in the early childhood community. Hiring new staff with these strengths may be an important step for RCC, but it is also critical to develop the skills of current staff. Before RCC is able to provide these services to the early childhood field, it must develop its internal capacity to do so. As part of this, RCC needs to invest in the development of a streamlined data management system. Relevant, complete data is necessary to accurately determine areas in need of improvement and refinement. This will also allow RCC to determine effective and promising practices that can be used to help strengthen the field.

➤ ***Facilitate the development of effective tools to measure quality and effectiveness.***

Leveraging the Convening role, RCC could make forward progress among stakeholders to adopt a more standard set of measurement tools. RCC could also take the lead in developing a way to track and release data to keep providers informed of best practices and parents informed of high quality providers.

Criteria for Evaluating Effectiveness of Measuring Intermediary

➤ ***The intermediary helps to make concrete steps towards measurement tools.***

Standardized tools are adopted that can measure results across different environments and inform processes for improving the quality and availability of childcare. These tools are used broadly in the field and helps develop a coherent understanding of best practices.

Sustaining

Vision for RCC as a Sustaining Intermediary

Through an increased and long-term prominence in the field, RCC will to be an influential voice in the formulation of policies and systems refinement allowing RCC to create lasting changes in the field. RCC will be actively involved in the education of public officials, practitioners, families, and the general public about pertinent issues and effective practices related to early childhood. This will help facilitate the flow of information to reduce duplication of services and initiatives, ensure efficient use of limited resources, maintain quality enhancement mechanisms, and determine how best to meet the needs of different stakeholders.

Current State of RCC

Staff and Board members commented in their interviews that they would like to see RCC take on more of the functions that have been identified in the sustaining role. Among both the Board and staff, there was a strong interest for RCC to be more active in the formulation of public policies, as well as the education of policy makers about effective early childhood practices. Some RCC staff also felt that the organization should do more to help families and providers be more active in advocating for policies that will help them. One staff person commented that RCC should work with parents in order to get *“parents to know that they can approach legislators.”*

While there is an agreement that RCC needs to take on a more prominent public policy role, there is some disagreement as to the extent to which RCC is currently performing in this role. One staff member commented that she felt that staff is already actively engaged in policy *“by the nature of their work.”* She also stated that staff are encouraged to be active in policy and be part of the public affairs committee where individuals bring in information about policies that may affect their work to discuss with the wider group. However, beyond the work of the Executive Director and the Director of Programming and Policy, most of those interviewed felt that RCC is not very active in the public policy arena.

Although RCC is often tapped by the legislature as an expert in the field, staff felt that they do not have extensive knowledge about early childhood education policies or the field in general. As well, one Board member commented that RCC’s Executive Director has done an impressive job in

“[RCC has a] reactionary role and informing role but not a formulating role.”

working with policymakers and being influential in the policy field, but they are unsure if it is sustainable in the long run or if she has enough staff to support her. It was also commented that RCC currently has a *“reactionary role and informing role but not a formulating role.”* RCC is in a unique position to raise public awareness and capitalize on its connections with providers and families to inform policymakers and make sure that the voices of different stakeholders are heard.

Recommendations for Bridging the Gap

➤ ***Develop staff skills and knowledge around early childhood policy.***

RCC should offer staff internal and external opportunities for training on early childhood policies, policy tools and analysis, as well as child development. In order to be a more influential agent in promoting and sustaining effective early childhood policies, RCC will need to provide its staff with the tools necessary to be educators to families, providers, policymakers, and the general public. Providing staff with these training opportunities will allow staff to be more knowledgeable about early childhood and stay up-to-date on recent developments in the field. This will enable staff to be better agents of change in the policy arena. It is often front-line staff who are in the best position to recognize system inefficiencies and propose unique solutions.

➤ ***Deliver solid results about quality and outcomes to key stakeholders.***

RCC should provide regular updates to policymakers and providers about effective programs and practices. RCC should also capitalize on convening and connecting

capabilities to select and enhance a quality measurement tool that can demonstrate incremental results. Funders, providers, families, policymakers and other stakeholders will continue to “buy in” to an effort that is visibly improving outcomes. This support will enable the effort to be sustained over the long run and effect greater change.

Criteria for Evaluating Effectiveness of Sustaining Intermediary

- ***The intermediary increases support for early childhood at the legislature, in public opinion, and among key stakeholders.***

Early childhood will remain a key issue and funding will increase as a percentage of the overall state budget. High profile leaders, such as a new governor, will champion the cause.

- ***The intermediary creates effective partnerships.***

The organization connects with partners with important strength areas, such as reaching out to diverse populations, conducting research, or providing other resources to meet the needs of the field.

- ***The intermediary is relevant and continues to improve outcomes for children.***

The intermediary continues to enhance the field and encourages innovation. More children, particularly those most at risk, are in high quality childcare programs, are physically and mentally healthy, are prepared for kindergarten, and perform well in school.

CONCLUSION

Minnesota's ability to deliver high quality services and improved outcomes for Minnesota's children is hindered by a highly fragmented early childhood field. This fragmentation has contributed to the lack of information sharing between policy makers, service providers, families, and the general public. It has hindered establishment of quality standards, and a unified voice to advocate for resources and reform. These shortcomings present a vital need for an intermediary organization to serve as a catalyst for targeted long-term efforts at addressing these issues. An organization that can act as a conduit between and among layers of the system will help to facilitate significant change in Minnesota's early childhood system in a way that will improve efficiency and outcomes.

Resources for Child Caring is uniquely poised to take on this role because of its longevity, breadth and depth of services, financial stability, and talented staff and leadership. RCC is a very well established early childhood organization with many important strengths. The organization has a long history of quality services and a clear track record of flexibility and resiliency. Its programs are well regarded, fill important community needs, are unique to the organization, and further its mission. RCC is financially secure with good fiscal management, diverse revenue streams, and a revenue-producing arm, Redleaf Press, which has shown strong sales even in a challenging economic environment. Additionally, the staff is passionate, knowledgeable, and dedicated to the work of the organization, and the leadership team is thoughtful and experienced. The executive director and Board members have vision, established connections outside the organization, and the general support of the staff. The combination of these factors means that RCC has most of the tools it needs to continue to be successful, whether it chooses to take on an intermediary role or not.

However, RCC is not without its weaknesses. The organization lacks a consensus on mission, vision, and purpose, and does not have a strategic plan to direct future growth. RCC's structure impedes communication and innovation, and staff do not receive enough support from management. Internal infrastructures need to be updated, especially financial management and IT systems. RCC is not as well-known as it would like to be in the community. A greater presence is also needed in the west metro, but this effort is hindered by a lack of expertise regarding public relations and branding.

Of the four functions intermediary functions, RCC may currently be best suited to perform a Connecting role, as this is most similar to RCC's current activities. Convening is a function that RCC is currently not performing, and its capability to develop it is impeded by the organization's low public profile and communications limitations. It must also ensure it does not repeat prior convening attempts by other EC organizations that achieved few tangible results. The Measuring function will require investment in RCC's capabilities for program evaluation and data management, as few staff currently possess the required skills. Finally, within the Sustaining role, RCC will need to develop capabilities such as greater engagement in the public policy process and educating parents, providers, foundations, and business leaders about pertinent issues and promising practices in the field.

Although becoming an intermediary would present a great opportunity for RCC, it is equally clear that it poses significant risk for the organization. The threat is that RCC will not be able to fill this role well, and will invest significant resources that do not lead to improved outcomes for children. Moreover undergoing the process of becoming an intermediary may significantly alter the identity

of the organization and transform RCC into a completely “new” organization. While becoming an intermediary may feel like a natural growth step, RCC will need to decide whether or not taking this step will allow it to continue moving toward its mission and vision. Additionally, growth does not automatically necessitate RCC becoming an intermediary organization, but could lead the organization in several different directions.

RCC will need to weigh these risks with the opportunities of becoming an intermediary before moving forward. If RCC decides to move in this direction, we recommend that RCC follow these action steps in order to reduce the risks of this venture and ensure RCC’s success:

- **Develop a long-term strategic plan.** Whatever plan RCC chooses, it must do so in a purposeful and deliberate manner. This may require further refinement to RCC’s mission and vision, as well as other aspects of organizational identity.
- **Address internal infrastructure and staff needs.** This includes IT systems, adding staff to fill missing functions and providing more training to current staff, improving cross-departmental communication and cohesion, and purposeful Board recruitment.
- **Develop more purposeful relationships with other organizations in the field.** To improve its public presence, RCC must forge ties with other entities that go beyond service contracts. Doing this will enhance RCC’s ability to perform all four intermediary functions.
- **Begin taking on intermediary roles as internal capacity develops.** RCC should approach this as an incremental process. Using already developed assets to better perform the Connecting function will enable it to eventually take on the Convening function, which will in turn enable the rest. Once RCC’s own house is in order, it will be more prepared to face the challenges this process will create.
- **Evaluate the intermediary’s effectiveness.** This means setting concrete, measurable goals against which the organization can judge its performance.

If RCC is able to follow these action steps, and embark on a purposeful growth process, RCC could be very successful in becoming an Early Childhood intermediary. An effective intermediary could provide tremendous benefits to RCC, the early childhood field, and Minnesota’s youngest citizens.

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APPENDIX 1: STRENGTHS AND GAPS IN THE MINNESOTA EARLY CHILD STRATEGIES

Early care and education strategies to achieve school readiness used in Minnesota in the last five years, their strengths and gaps

Strategy	Strengths	Gaps
Early care and education initiatives, programs, and services	State mandate to provide opportunities Research supports early childhood care and education Increased consensus and cooperation Community driven efforts and collaborations	Agreement on what children need Consistent standards and license requirements Not following research-based programming Financial support Broader focus on children prenatally to kindergarten Infant care, and culturally-appropriate options Overall strategy Universal access Adequate physical facilities appropriate for young children Parents face barriers to access, e.g., financial means, transportation, knowledge and importance of ECE
Parent education	Positively impacts school readiness Increasing efforts	Funding, e.g., ECFE funds reduced Reaching non-English speaking, low-income, and young parents Stigma attached to ECFE
Home visits	Eases burden on parents (services come to them) Some support from K-12 partners	Expensive Been focused on parents of newborns
Professional development for early care providers	Statewide curriculum available Providers' potential to positively impact children's development Some support from businesses Providers' investment in children	Connecting with FFN and veteran providers Transportation to trainings Trainings focused on early childhood development rather than crafts Funding for trainings and curricula
Preschool screenings	Enables providers to know where children are at	Funding Parents don't bring children in, lack self-confidence
Quality rating system	Efforts to develop	Cultural competence
Transition to kindergarten	Increasing connection between early care providers and kindergarten teachers Interest in database to track preschool children	Level of involvement of K-12 System for communicating between early care and K-12 Resources and support for database to track children

Source: Chase, R., Dillon, K, and Valarose, J. (2008) Early care and education in Minnesota: Asset review and status report. St. Paul, Minnesota: Wilder Research.

APPENDIX 2: PROGRAMMATIC AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES OF LOCAL INTERMEDIARIES

Programmatic Challenges
Orientation Toward Assistance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The relative weight given to the knowledge and priorities of the intermediary itself or of the organizations with which it works. • A more grounded respect for field expertise and a capacity-building approach vs. a more externally driven, didactic approach.
Accountability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The extent to which an intermediary is answerable to the interests and agenda of organizations in the field, to its own funders, or to other stakeholders.
Role Tensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whether an intermediary can be involved both in grantmaking and capacity building and in standard setting and monitoring. • Skirting competition with providers for funding and credit for achievements. • Avoiding gatekeeping: inhibiting providers' direct communication and contact with key actors, e.g., funders, policy makers.
Defining and Demonstrating Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying intermediary outcomes—the net value they add to youth organizations—and developing ways to demonstrate these effects.
Organizational Challenges
Structure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessing the benefits and constraints of alternative structures, e.g., operating as a government agency or as a membership organization.
Funding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtaining a dependable source of ongoing funding. • Securing core operating support. • Covering overhead costs.
Staffing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding and keeping staff who need to have a complex mix of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes.
Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiting and supporting effective leadership and steering intermediaries through leadership transitions.

Source: Wynn, Joan R (2000). The Role of Local Intermediary Organizations in the Youth Development Field. Prepared for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation by The Chapin Hall Center for Children, University of Chicago.

APPENDIX 3: RCC BOARD OF DIRECTORS INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol for RCC Board Members

Introduction:

Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. RCC has asked us to study what an early childhood intermediary in the greater metropolitan area might look like and how that role might be filled. Today, we would like to talk to you about your experience as a Board member, your vision for RCC, and your thoughts about RCC's role in the broader EC community.

Before proceeding, please take a look at this consent form, and sign it if you are willing to participate and have this interview recorded.

[Wait for an agreement. Then proceed.]

Thank you.

Questions:

- 1. First of all, how long have you been a Board member of RCC?**
[Possible probe:] How did you become involve in the RCC Board?
[Possible probe:] How active are you in the early childhood filed?
- 2. In your opinion, what role do you see RCC playing in the early childhood field in the short-term (1-2 years)?**
- 3. How about in the long-term (3-5 years)?**
- 4. Based on your knowledge of RCC's current operations and capabilities, in what areas does RCC perform especially well?**
- 5. In the same vein, in what areas could it most improve?**
[Possible probe:] What How should RCC address these areas?
- 6. How has RCC handled the rapid growth from 2005?**
[Possible probe:] What worked or did not work?
[Possible probe:] Do you think RCC is ready for more growth? Why or why not?

Now, I'd like to discuss RCC's role as an intermediary. For our purposes, we are considering an intermediary as an organization that acts in the space between organizations. These can be public, private, or nonprofit organizations. In this case, RCC could act as a central hub for providers, helping them access funding, research, and other resources. For example, an intermediary could create opportunities for providers to work together, provide access to grants for providers, work to increase public awareness through media and lobbying, and administer a system to evaluate child care providers.

- 7. Based on this description of an intermediary, if RCC were to become an early childhood intermediary, do you think this would align with RCC's mission? Why or why not?**
- 8. Please describe any potential barriers, internal or external, to RCC becoming an intermediary.**
[Possible Probe:] What are some internal barriers?
[Possible Probe:] What are some external barriers?
- 9. Do you think RCC should take on the role of an intermediary? Why or why not?**
[Possible Probe:] What do you think are the main opportunities and risks to taking on this role?
[Possible probe:] Do you see any potential partnerships with other organizations?

[Possible Probe:] How do you think the organization or staff will have to change as a result?

Lastly, is there anything more you would like to add?

Closing:

Thank you for your time. Your perspective will be very useful in our analysis.

APPENDIX 4: RCC SENIOR STAFF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol for RCC Senior Staff

Introduction:

Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. RCC has asked us to study what an early childhood intermediary might look like and how that role might be filled. Today, we'd like to talk to you about your experience working for RCC, your views on its capabilities as an organization, and your interactions with RCC's clients and partners.

Before proceeding, please take a look at this consent form, and sign it if you are willing to participate and have this interview recorded.

[Wait for an agreement. Then proceed.]

Thank you.

Questions:

- 1. First of all, please tell me about your work at RCC. What is your current role within the organization?**

[Possible Probe:] About how long have you worked in the early childhood field?

- 2. What functions does your department perform?**

- 3. Based on your knowledge of your department's current operations and capabilities, what are the areas where it performs especially well?**

- 4. In the same vein, in what areas could it most improve?**

Probe: What specifically would need to be addressed (personnel, logistics, external relations, etc.) in order to do better in these areas?

- 5. From your experience, do you see any gaps in RCC's programming? Where do you think RCC is missing opportunities?**

[Possible Probe:] From your position, do you see things that RCC should be doing?

[Possible Probe:] If the organization were to expand, what would you say its new functions should be?

- 6. Which of RCC's current working relationships do you feel contributes the most to helping RCC fulfill its mission? Are any particularly challenging?**

[Possible Probe:] What about these relationships is important or difficult?

[Possible Probe:] How has that changed over time?

- 7. How has RCC handled the rapid growth it has undertaken since 2005?**

[Probe:] Are there any issues your department is still dealing with as a result?

[Probe:] In your opinion, how ready would RCC be to handle further expansion?

Now, I'd like to discuss RCC's role as an intermediary. For our purposes, we are considering an intermediary as an organization that acts in the space between organizations. These can be public, private, or nonprofit organizations. In this case, RCC could act as a central hub for providers, helping them access funding, research, and other resources. For example, an intermediary could create opportunities for providers to work together, provide access to grants for providers, work to increase public awareness through media and lobbying, and administer a system to evaluate child care providers.

- 8. What would you see as the greatest obstacles RCC would encounter if it were to expand to take on an intermediary role?**
- 9. What capacities would your department or RCC as a whole need to develop to support such an expansion?**
- 10. In your opinion, would RCC be a good candidate to take on such a role?**
- 11. What individuals or organizations would be potential partners for RCC as an intermediary?**
[Possible Probe:] Does RCC currently have relationships with these potential partners?
[Possible Probe:] If so, are any of them particularly challenging?

Lastly, do you have anything else you would like to add?

Closing:

Thank you for meeting with us. Your perspective will be very useful in our analysis.

APPENDIX 5: RCC FRONT-LINE STAFF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**Interview Protocol for RCC FL Staff****Introduction:**

Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. RCC has asked us to study what an early childhood intermediary in the greater metropolitan area might look like and how that role might be filled. Today, we'd like to talk to you about your experience working for RCC and your views about the organization's strengths and weaknesses.

Before proceeding, please take a look at this consent form, and sign it if you are willing to participate and have this interview recorded.

[Wait for an agreement. Then proceed.]

Thank you.

Questions:**1. How long have you worked for RCC?**

[Possible Probe:] What if any, other positions have you had in the EC field, either in this organization or others?

2. Please describe your current role in the organization.

[Possible Probe:] What are your typical job activities?

3. Outside of RCC, what organizations or individuals do you generally work with on a regular basis?

[Possible Probe:] Who do you feel are your key partners?

4. Which of these working relationships do you feel contributes the most to helping RCC fulfill its mission? Are any particularly challenging?

[Possible Probe:] What about these relationships is important or difficult?

[Possible Probe:] How has that changed over time?

5. How well does RCC provide support for your work? For example, supervision, training, technology, other resources?

[Possible Probe:] Are there any additional resources that you would need to be more effective?

[Possible Probe:] What do you feel are the barriers to being effective in your job?

6. In your experience, in what areas does your department perform especially well? In what areas could it improve?

[Possible Probe:] What are your department's strengths and weaknesses?

[Possible Probe:] What would your department need in order to be better at performing its function?

7. In your opinion, how has RCC handled the rapid growth from 2005?

[Possible Probe:] What have been the impacts on staff and programs?

[Possible Probe:] Do you think it could handle more growth?

8. From your experience, do you see any gaps in RCC's programming? Where do think RCC is missing opportunities?

[Possible Probe:] From your position, do you see things that RCC should be doing?

[Possible Probe:] If the organization were to expand, what would you say its new functions should be?

Now, I'd like to discuss RCC's role as an intermediary. For our purposes, we are considering an intermediary as an organization that acts in the space between organizations. These can be public, private, or nonprofit organizations. In this case, RCC could act as a central hub for providers, helping them access funding, research, and other resources. For example, an intermediary could create opportunities for providers to work together, provide access to grants for providers, work to increase public awareness through media and lobbying, and administer a system to evaluate child care providers.

9. Based on this definition, is there anything that you or your department currently does that fulfills this definition?

[Possible Probe:] In your opinion, does your department currently serve as a central hub for resources or information?

10. If RCC were to become an intermediary, what do you see as the most important functions to perform?

[Possible Probe:] From your experience, what are the most important things that RCC does? Why?

11. Do you think RCC should take on the role of an intermediary? Why or why not?

[Possible Probe:] What do you think are the main opportunities and risks to taking on this role?

[Possible Probe:] How do you think the organization or staff will have to change as a result?

Lastly, is there anything more you would like to add?

Closing:

Thank you very much for your time.

APPENDIX 6: LIST OF DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

- Employee Handbook
- Organization chart
- Financial reports
- 25th Anniversary History of RCC
- Board of Directors meeting minutes
- Program Services Map Evaluation of the Basic Sliding Fee Program
- Winter 2010 Training Catalog
- Fall 2009 Community Outreach newsletter
- Cultural newsletters (Latino, Hmong, Somali, Oromo)
- 2009 Report to the Community (annual report)



APPENDIX 7: RCC ORGANIZATION CHART

