

## SUPPORTING READY COMMUNITIES

Families' access to information, health care services, and high-quality early care and education options has a direct bearing on children's readiness. Much of the action, responsibility, and decisionmaking for child and family service delivery occurs at the local level, but states can play a supporting role for community leaders. The NGA Task Force on School Readiness recommends that governors ensure Ready Communities by:

- promoting local collaboration and school readiness needs assessment;
- assisting community leaders in tracking school readiness outcomes; and
- seeking community input in statewide planning efforts.

### Promoting Local Collaboration and Needs Assessment

Communities are well positioned to identify the needs of local families. Local infrastructure is just as important as the state's in connecting families to resources and services easily and efficiently. Communities are also well suited to identify local public- and private-sector partners to leverage resources and reach families directly. States can provide guidance and resources to help community leaders and all related stakeholders (e.g., family support, health and mental health, and early childhood education) review the existing policy and service landscape to better match resources with family needs. (See, also, National Community School Readiness Initiatives on page 15.)

Wilmington, **Delaware**, began an early childhood strategic planning process several years ago in collaboration with the Delaware State Early Care and Education Office. The city used the state's strategic plan, "Early Success: Creating a Quality Early Care and Education System for Delaware's Children," to develop goals and priorities based on the state's key systemic elements, including quality programs, professional development, family engagement, and public will. This alignment with state planning enabled the city to leverage state support. For example, the state education department and early care and education office already committed almost \$20,000 to Wilmington's early literacy training program for child care providers and parents.

For more information, visit <http://www.familyandworkplace.org/providers/provider.advocacy.htm>.

### National Community School Readiness Initiatives

The National League of Cities' *Campaign for Early Childhood Success*, launched under the 2003 chairmanship of Mayor John DeStefano Jr. of New Haven, Conn., was a yearlong campaign to encourage municipal involvement in improving outcomes for children from birth to age five. As the focal point of the campaign, Mayor DeStefano challenged cities and towns across America to develop multiyear early childhood plans for their communities. More than 100 cities accepted the challenge and are working to create a long-term, strategic agenda for addressing the key needs of their youngest residents in areas such as health care, early learning, and parent education and support. For more information, visit [http://www.nlc.org/nlc\\_org/site/programs/institute\\_for\\_youth\\_education\\_and\\_families/early.cfm](http://www.nlc.org/nlc_org/site/programs/institute_for_youth_education_and_families/early.cfm).

*Making Connections* is a 10-year investment of the Annie E. Casey Fund in more than 20 communities across the nation to improve outcomes for families and children in tough or isolated neighborhoods. Each Making Connections site works with a team to develop strategies to strengthen families and the neighborhood. Efforts are concentrated on creating opportunities to earn a decent living and build assets; building close ties with family, neighbors, kin, faith communities, and civic groups; and having reliable services close to home. For more information, visit <http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/mci/index.htm>.

Many states have modeled their efforts to seed local planning and implementation activities after **North Carolina** Smart Start, a long-standing comprehensive state initiative to support broad community-driven school readiness efforts. Smart Start is a public-private initiative run through the nonprofit North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC) and offers flexible funding to local partnerships in exchange for positive results for young children. Specific services vary based on local priorities, though all partnerships seek to improve the quality of child care, make child care more affordable and accessible, provide access to health services, and offer family support. Currently, \$192 million in state funds support Smart Start, and the initiative has raised more than \$200 million in

private resources since its inception in 1993. With philanthropic support, NCPC now houses the Smart Start National Technical Assistance Center to help other states implement similar statewide, community-based initiatives. General technical assistance and materials are available publicly, and the center has awarded grants to seven states—**Alabama, Colorado, Iowa, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Vermont**—to support planning and implementation efforts. NCPC also hosts an annual national conference for state and local policymakers and practitioners to share best practices and lessons learned. For more information, visit <http://www.smartstart-nc.org/>.

The **Oregon** Commission on Children and Families provides flexible funding to local commissions to support comprehensive supports and initiatives for children and families. Local plans must indicate how communities will measure and ensure progress toward Oregon benchmarks for children and families. For more information, visit <http://www.ccf.state.or.us/pageoccf/links.html>.

In 1998 **California** voters passed Proposition 10 to dedicate state revenue from a 50-cent tax on cigarettes for early childhood initiatives. Approximately \$600 million flows through the public-private First Five California Commission on Children and Families to local commissions for services to infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. For more information, visit <http://www.cfc.ca.gov/>.

### Helping Community Leaders Track School Readiness Outcomes

States can also provide guidance and technical assistance to communities on setting measurable goals for child outcomes, selecting indicators and measures of progress, evaluating results, and communicating outcomes.

Since 1994 **Rhode Island** KIDS COUNT, a statewide nonprofit organization, has collected community-level data on key child indicators to inform state early childhood and related policies. Through meetings, publications, and other communication tools, the indicators are used to promote best practices in communities and across the state and aim to hold systems accountable. With support from several national foundations, including the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Kauffman

Foundation, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT led a five-year, 17-state initiative to replicate this model and identify common indicators from which other states and communities can start. Communicating community-level and statewide results is a key component of this initiative, and several states, including **Connecticut** and **Virginia**, have attracted significant media attention to their efforts. For more information, see the School Readiness Indicators Initiative on page 10 or visit <http://www.rikidscount.org/>.

**South Carolina** First Steps is a results-oriented, statewide early childhood education initiative largely based on the **North Carolina** Smart Start model that seeks to ensure children arrive at first grade healthy and ready to succeed. It is developing a rigorous evaluation with the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation to assess local progress toward achieving the First Steps goals and determine the impact of the initiative on children and families at the state and local levels. The impact assessment will include school readiness measures; benefits from child development services; immunization status; low birthweight rates; parent literacy; parenting skills; parental involvement; transportation; developmental screening results; and other related measures. County school readiness boards will use the results to inform investment decisions and will be held accountable for results. For more information, visit <http://www.scfirststeps.org>.

### Seeking Community Input in State Planning Efforts

Community voices offer a reality check for state decisions. Local input is necessary to ensure policies make sense on a local level and are feasible to implement. Local involvement also strengthens grassroots support for an initiative and helps ensure the long-term sustainability of the efforts. State leaders can include community representatives at the state school readiness planning table, or form an advisory board of local leaders and stakeholders, to inform state decisions. They can also solicit local input by hosting town hall meetings, local public forums, or focus groups with community stakeholders to seek their input in state planning efforts.

The **Vermont** Governor's Cabinet on Children and Youth sought local input through community forums, focus groups, and stakeholder planning ses-



sions to design and roll out Building Bright Futures, an initiative to improve early childhood services through regional and local planning efforts. For more information, visit <http://www.ahs.state.vt.us/earlychildhood/BBFutures.htm>.

Similarly, **Idaho** Governor and First Lady Kempthorne's Early Care & Learning Cross Systems Task Force has sought wide community input on a statewide plan for school readiness. The state hosted regional meetings for public and private partners to gather input, which helped secure strong approval of the plan's goals. The plan will be completed by June 2005. With support from the federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau's State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems grant, the task force will begin implementing the plan in fall 2005. For more information, visit <http://www.gccfc.idaho.gov/ECLCSTF.html>.

## Conclusion

Communities play an important role in directing resources to meet the needs of families, informing state decisions, and building grassroots awareness and support for investments in early childhood. States can strengthen, build on, and spearhead successful community efforts that improve children's readiness for school. Strong state leadership, guidance, community input, and effective partnerships can make a significant difference in the lives of children and families. ■

