

**THE KINDERGARTEN TRANSITION INSTITUTE MODEL FOR
PROVIDING CAPACITY-BUILDING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE IN
THE DISCOVERY INITIATIVE, 2006 and 2007**
Report to the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund Staff

Prepared by

S. A. Stephens
Center for Assessment and Policy Development

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This report was prepared by the Discovery Initiative Evaluation Team for the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund in February 2008. The information used in this report was collected in the fall of 2007. Further details on the data collection are presented in the report.

We appreciate the input and feedback of the Memorial Fund staff, staff of the Connecticut Center for School Change, and the members and staff of the Discovery community collaborative groups that participated in the 2006 and 2007 Kindergarten Transition Institutes. The analyses and conclusions in this report solely reflect the perspective of the Evaluation Team.

Sam Stephens
Center for Assessment and Policy Development
www.capd.org

Donna Studdiford
On Point Consulting
www.onpointconsulting.org

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INTRODUCTION

One of the Discovery Initiative's four objectives is to "build strong connections between early care and elementary education." Over the past decade this concept within the field of early childhood education has evolved into a broad agenda for creating a seamless system of preschool through grade three education.¹ Such a system would include:

- Integrated content and learning outcomes across the preschool through 3rd grade period that are based on early childhood development research;
- Alignment of learning standards, curriculum, student and setting assessment, and instruction across preschool, kindergarten, and the early grades of school;
- Connected assessment systems across preschool through grade 3 to reinforce appropriate learning environments and teaching practices; and
- Practices that smooth transitions between home and school and between education settings and that engage families and communities.

The last component is the one that has been the focus of considerable work known as "kindergarten transition" and has been a topic of capacity-building technical assistance in the Discovery Initiative.

This report documents the use of an "institute" model of delivering technical assistance to Discovery communities and how participating collaborative teams made use of the information and tools provided to strengthen connections between early care and education and elementary school in their communities. It draws on several sources of information, including applications for technical assistance from communities, participants' reports of progress at the end of the technical assistance process, and focus groups with participant teams at a point between 6 and 12 months following completion of the process.²

¹ "Building State Early Learning Systems: Lessons and Results from NASBE's Early Childhood Education Network," M. Haynes, *The State Education Standard* (journal of the National Association of State Boards of Education), June 2008, pages 12 – 19.

² Communities in the first Kindergarten Transition Institute cohort were interviewed approximately one year after completion, and communities in the second cohort about six months after completion.

The goal of the report is to understand how well this model addressed technical assistance needs within the Initiative and how communities used this technical assistance to make changes in policies and practices affecting the transition of young children and their families from their early education settings into the formal school system at kindergarten entry.

Capacity-Building Technical Assistance in the Discovery Initiative

The Discovery Initiative takes a capacity-building approach to pursuing widespread, sustained change in conditions affecting the development and school success of young children in Connecticut. As such, over the course of the Initiative, the Memorial Fund has made available a wide range of types³ of technical assistance, training, and tools and materials to its grantee community collaboratives and state-level organizations.

The primary goal of capacity-building technical assistance provided to the Discovery communities is to support “communities in fostering, leading, and managing a community change process on behalf of young children...[It] supports communities in addressing the four Discovery objectives as well as the core initiative principles of collaboration, parent leadership and community engagement.”⁴

Many of the capacity-building supports have been intended to help the Discovery groups in each community build and strengthen collaborative processes, engage parents in collaborative work, and mobilize broad and diverse community constituencies. Specific topics covered by these capacity-building supports have included collaboration, parent leadership and engagement, community building, communications, and data collection. The most common way in which these strategies and resources on these topics have been introduced to the Discovery communities has been through one-time workshops, usually held Initiative-wide but sometimes regionally or for other subgroups of communities. The materials

³ These include workshops and cross-community training sessions on a variety of topics; resource guides and tools available on the Discovery website; convenings that bring together people from different communities around topical interests, regionally, and state-wide; electronic vehicles for sharing information via a listserv and website; community liaisons who can clarify messages from the Memorial Fund, share information, encourage participation in Initiative activities, and facilitate community reflection and planning processes; on-site technical assistance provided, based on community applications, by expert consultants; and site visits and direct communication with Memorial Fund staff.

⁴ The specific community capacities that the Discovery technical assistance is expected to help develop are to create and sustain a community-wide agenda to improve early school success; collect, share and utilize data; cultivate and engage parents; organize and mobilize diverse constituencies for strategic purposes; leverage resources; and manage and lead a community change process. This statement of the purpose and intended results of Discovery community capacity-building has been included on each year’s capacity-building calendar and on the Discovery website.

and resources from these workshops have been available on the Discovery website and in some cases the community liaisons have been asked to offer on-site assistance in using them.

Kindergarten Transition Institute Model of Capacity-Building Technical Assistance

The Discovery Initiative initially began offering support on kindergarten transition to participating communities with a peer sharing opportunity in May 2003 at which a number of communities reported on local transition activities and practices. This was followed in 2004 with two linked workshops in 2004 (on August 11 and December 9) on “Effective Kindergarten Transition” offered by the Connecticut Center for School Change. Both sessions used Robert Pianta’s work on kindergarten transition as a resource,⁵ the first focusing on effective practices and the second on policy changes.

In 2006, Discovery communities were introduced to another form of technical assistance on this topic – the Kindergarten Transition Institute. The Institute differed from other workshops and training sessions in several key ways:

- Communities had to apply to participate and propose a team of people who would attend.
- Applying communities had to have identified kindergarten transition as one of the objectives of their Discovery collaborative action plans.
- The Institute was held over several sessions with the expectation that the community teams would carry out a plan of action between sessions.

The Institute used a curriculum and materials developed and used previously in other communities – the “Terrific Transitions” project developed by the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, first published in 1997 and last revised in 2005. The focus of “Terrific Transitions” is to assist community transition teams organize, plan for, and implement a successful plan that maximizes the continuity of experience for children and families between early childhood education settings, including home, and their first formal “school” setting, that is kindergarten.

Staff from the Connecticut Center for School Change offered the Kindergarten Transition Institute to two cohorts of communities. The first cohort of four communities⁶ attended three sessions between March 2006 and October 2006;

⁵ The specific resource used was “Successful Kindergarten Transition: Your Guide to Connecting Children, Families, and Schools” by Robert C. Pianta and Marcia Kraft-Sayre, published by P. H. Brooks in 2003.

⁶ The communities that participated in the first Kindergarten Transition Institute were Hamden, Meriden, Waterbury, and West Haven. Focus group interviews were conducted by the evaluation

the second cohort of six communities⁷ attended three sessions between May 2006 and March 2007. Both cohorts used the “Planning for Terrific Transitions: A Guide for Transitions-to-School Teams” materials, which includes both a training manual and a participant’s notebook, with many examples of forms and materials for the planning process. Community teams were also given copies of a book with many examples of kindergarten transition practices compiled by Robert C. Pianta, a national expert in the field, and Martha J. Cox, “Transition to Kindergarten,” published in 1999 by P. H. Brooks.

The focus of the Discovery Kindergarten Transition Institute and the “Planning for Terrific Transitions” guide was to help participating Discovery communities:

- Form a comprehensive transition team
- Conduct a needs assessment process
- Identify transition strategies to meet community needs
- Develop a plan for adopting and implementing these strategies
- Understand how to evaluate progress in strategy implementation and transition goals

These goals were, obviously, in line with the general thrust of Discovery capacity-building technical assistance. The Institute model, however, was intended to differ from previous methods of technical assistance delivery in several ways. These differences responded to observations about the limitations of prior capacity-building workshops, which were generally held as single half- or full-day sessions offered to all Discovery communities at once.

Memorial Fund staff, community liaisons working with individual communities, and the technical assistance broker had made several observations about community participation in these capacity-building workshops that suggested that they were not being used as effectively as intended. These observations have been confirmed through interviews with community coordinators conducted during the summer of 2007.⁸ For example,

in three of these communities; it was not possible to schedule a focus group in Waterbury.

⁷ The communities that participated in the second Kindergarten Transition Institute were Bristol (this community attended the first session of the first Institute, but completed sessions two and three during the second Institute), Danbury, East Haven, New London, Shelton, and Stratford. Focus group interviews were conducted by the evaluation in all of these communities.

⁸ A separate summary of these findings is under preparation.

- Communities generally did not have a standard method for “bringing” back information and ideas from single session events to the broader collaborative group.
- Usually only one person (generally the coordinator) attended single-session events – this person had generally not been charged by the collaborative body specifically with acting on the information given at the session or had a number of other responsibilities and priorities for the collaborative.
- Topics for single session events were based on community interests and needs as identified in various ways – but for many communities the topics may not have been in sync with the collaborative’s agenda and focus at the time they were offered.

The Kindergarten Transition Institute was designed to provide technical assistance under a different model, one that has been adopted for the 2008-09 capacity-building approach. This summary documents how Discovery communities made use of this model, focusing first on the content of the Institute and then on its format and methods.

HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS

Progress by Communities Participating in the Kindergarten Transition Institute

The goals of the Institute were to assist Discovery communities assemble a broad-based team of key stakeholders with the commitment, expertise, and authority to affect kindergarten transition policies and practices; to use data to identify concerns, barriers, and opportunities related to kindergarten transition, and to select and develop a plan to address priority issues. It was not necessarily expected that, during the course of the Institute, the participating community teams would complete all of these tasks. However, it was hoped that the teams, on behalf of and with support from their Discovery collaborative, would make substantial progress in these areas such that the work would continue after the Institute was over.

The findings related to the progress of participating Institute communities toward these goals are outlined below; more detailed information is provided in the “Detailed Findings” section later in this paper.

- The majority of communities participating in the Kindergarten Transition Institute had **existing teams or committees** before applying. However, the Institute provided them with the impetus and specific tasks to expand those involved, assess activities and results to date, and take their work to the next level.

- The Discovery communities participating in the Kindergarten Transition Institute **documented needs, identified strategies, and in some cases implemented activities** related to the following areas of transition:
 - Standardizing kindergarten registration and orientation practices across all schools in the community
 - Aligning preschool and kindergarten curricula, learning expectations, and instructional practices
 - Facilitating parent participation in activities to prepare their children for kindergarten

- Many of the participating communities **used tools provided in the Institute's materials to collect new information** from parents, early education providers, kindergarten teachers, and elementary school principals. These data gave credibility to their work, particularly with local superintendents. They helped keep the focus on issues of real concern in the community and in some cases identified practices already in use that could be adapted and expanded community-wide.

- About half of the teams did not produce a **formal detailed plan** for improving kindergarten transition experiences in their communities during the course of the Initiative or in the following months. However, those that did found it to be a powerful tool in guiding and sustaining their work.

- The **transition activities carried out within six to twelve months after completion of the Institute** focused on publicizing kindergarten registration and using a variety of outreach methods to contact families, providing parents and children with information and opportunities to develop school readiness skills, and connecting preschool and kindergarten teachers.

- In only a few communities did the **local board of education provide support** out of operating funds for these transition activities. While the transition teams intended to replicate, expand, or add new transition activities, they had concerns about the availability of resources and institutional support.

One important observation, given the goals of the Institute, was that, by the end of the Institute itself and even a number of months later, about half of the participating teams had not yet developed a comprehensive, widely-adopted plan for transition in their communities and had only begun to conduct specific transition support activities. So, while kindergarten transition continued to be an important concern in these communities, considerable work remained before systemic community-wide improvements could be expected in the experiences of young children and their families as they enter kindergarten.

While the number of communities is small, there are some observable patterns in what community characteristics were associated with what they were able to carry out related to transition planning and implementation:

- While, in general communities in the first cohort had implemented more specific transition activities since the end of the Institute than had the second cohort, they were no more likely to have a formal plan or institutional support.
- Communities with existing transition committees at the time they began the Institute were not more likely than the other participating communities to have created a formal plan, implemented transition activities, or gained institutional support within their community.
- In some cases, staff changes in the local board of education had limited the collaborative's ability to get necessary attention to transition issues and plans. In other cases, district leadership does not appear to have given high priority to this area.

The Institute Model for Providing Capacity-Building Technical Assistance

As noted in the introduction, the “institute model” for providing technical assistance to the Discovery communities was a new approach when the Kindergarten Transition Institute was first offered in 2006 and 2007.

While not every one of the nine communities commented on each aspect of the Kindergarten Transition Institute in detail, there was clear consistency in their recommendations and advice in several areas.

- **Time spent as a team working together during Institute sessions** was particularly valuable, even though hearing from other communities could be helpful as well. Several communities noted that they adopted transition activities from other communities, although not necessarily other Institute communities. This suggests that providing the opportunity for communities to share ideas and experiences is not an opportunity uniquely offered by the Institute. In fact, the Discovery website and the annual Stone Soup conferences have highlighted kindergarten transition with examples from communities. While in theory the Institute teams could meet and work together in their communities, the Institute sessions provided two unique features that were especially valuable to their work – a relatively long period of uninterrupted time together and the availability of advice and consultation from the Institute leaders.
- **Providing a planning framework and sample forms and tools** to use in compiling information, setting goals, and broadening commitment to specific action plans **was highly valued**.

- **Half-day meetings** with the opportunity to continue work during and after lunch should be continued.
- If possible, Institute sessions should be spaced approximately **two to three months apart** and the **complete schedule published in advance**.
- While several communities mentioned the **potential downside of spanning the summer months** between sessions, it was also observed that most teams had not re-engaged in their work by the time of the group interviews in October and November. Therefore, even if all three “substantive” sessions of the Institute are completed within a single school year, there appears to be **value in reconvening for a refresher/review in the fall of the next year**.
- This is reinforced by the almost universal interest in having a **“reunion” follow-up session** about a year after the Institute’s completion. All but one of the communities believed that such a session would provide valuable time for self-reflection, planning, and sharing.
- There was also strong interest in offering a **menu of follow-up workshops on specific substantive issues** identified by the communities as important to their work going forward.
- Communities that participated in cohorts one and two had specific advice for both the planners of the next Institute and those who might want to send teams. It was strongly suggested that interested communities receive **more detailed information on the purpose and expected work of the Institute**; specific advice **on assembling effective teams**; and guidance **on gathering information on transition issues and experiences** in the community prior to coming to the first session.

DETAILED FINDINGS: COMMUNITY WORK ON KINDERGARTEN TRANSITION

The “Terrific Transitions” guide and other materials provided during the Kindergarten Transition Institute provided communities with a number of case studies as examples of possible transition plans and strategies, and the Institute itself offered opportunities for communities to share their own experiences and successes. The major elements of successful transitions presented in the examples and the Institute materials included:

- Policies for kindergarten registration and orientation, child assessment, information sharing, etc. that create a common set of experiences for children and families, regardless of the early childhood or school setting
- Joint work – including site visits, joint training, and networking opportunities -- among early childhood staff, kindergarten teachers, special needs coordinators, and others to develop common understanding of learning goals, a shared appreciation of what each brings to the support of young children’s development, and complementary curriculum and teaching practices
- Planned and coordinated activities to provide families with information about the kindergarten experience and ways to be involved in helping their children move successfully into kindergarten
- Joint activities between early care and education providers and schools to give children the opportunity to “try out” kindergarten – for example, through classroom visits and role playing – and outreach by kindergarten teachers to welcome and orient entering students and families
- Community activities to promote kindergarten registration, encourage families to make use of local resources in developing their children’s school-readiness skills, and celebrate children’s entry into the next phase of their development

As will be seen in the sections below, the Discovery communities participating in the Kindergarten Transition Institute documented needs, identified strategies, and in some cases implemented activities in all of these areas.

In the sections below, detailed information is provided on:

- The issues and concerns that led communities to apply to participate in the Institute;
- Prior work in the communities on kindergarten transition;

- Successful planning strategies used by the participating teams;
- Transition strategies implemented as of the fall of 2007;
- Evidence of outcomes and benefits; and
- Plans and issues concerning next steps.

Impetus for Participation in the Institute

In their applications⁹ to participate in the Institute and during the focus group interviews,¹⁰ communities were asked to identify the problems in their community that hindered smooth transitions between early education and elementary education.

The most common transition problems identified in the applications were:

- Different kindergarten registration and/or orientation practices across the elementary schools in the community (mentioned by 5 communities)
- Lack of alignment between preschool and kindergarten curricula, learning expectations, and/or instructional practices (mentioned by 4)
- Inability to coordinate parent and teacher schedules to facilitate attendance at kindergarten orientation (mentioned by 2)
- Inadequate parent knowledge or means of communicating to parents about how to prepare their children for school (mentioned by 2)

A range of other issues was mentioned by single communities in their applications:

- Language and cultural differences
- Difficulty in engaging children not attending preschool
- Incomplete participation among preschool providers in transition activities
- Lack of general community awareness of importance of ECE

⁹ Applications were available for review for the following communities: Bristol, Danbury, East Haven, Hamden, Meriden, New London, Shelton, Stratford, and Waterbury. West Haven's application was not available.

¹⁰ Focus group interviews were conducted during the fall of 2007 in the following communities: Bristol, Danbury, East Haven, Hamden, Meriden, New London, Shelton, Stratford, and West Haven. It was not possible to schedule a focus group in Waterbury.

- Insufficient full-day kindergarten openings to meet need
- Issues related to assessment of entering kindergarten students
- Late registrations

During the Institute, participating communities tended to narrow their focus and in the group interviews conducted during the fall of 2007 identified the three primary areas of concern:

- Kindergarten registration, including students registering late, burdensome registration processes, registration issues affecting specific groups such as non-English-speakers and children with special needs, and variability in registration and/or orientation across schools within the community
- Alignment of preschool and kindergarten learning practices and experiences
- Student adjustment to or readiness for kindergarten

Goals for Participation in Institute

Communities described what they hoped they would be able to accomplish as a result of participating in the Institute as part of their applications. These goals tended to be broad and ambitious.

- The most often mentioned goal was to develop a district- or community-wide plan or set of policies and practices for transition (mentioned by six communities).
- Improved communication among various groups (parents, early education providers, kindergarten teachers, school district leadership, and community members in general) was mentioned as a goal by four communities.
- Three communities stated goals related to more effective engagement and support for families during the transition to kindergarten.
- Three communities hoped to create better understanding among preschool providers and parents about expectations for and ways to prepare children for kindergarten

Other goals mentioned by single communities were that all children would receive consistent preparation for kindergarten, schools would be prepared for developmental diversity among entering students, and there would be greater continuity in curriculum and learning expectations between preschool and kindergarten.

Prior Work on Transition Issues

Almost all of the participating communities had done some work on transition issues prior to the Institute. This is not surprising, given that one requirement for being accepted into the Institute was that the Discovery collaborative's action plan had to include work on the third objective – to improve connections between early care and education and elementary education.

- Six communities already had existing transition teams or committees on their Discovery collaborative and/or School Readiness Council.
- In five communities, preschool and kindergarten teachers had participated in joint meetings, classroom visits, and/or shared professional development activities.
- Two communities had completed work on their kindergarten registration packets.
- One community had held organized events related to kindergarten transition.

In many cases, participating communities saw the Institute as a way to take their prior work to the next level or to engage others in that work.

- *We saw the Institute as an opportunity to pull people together and keep it going...Before the Institute our School Readiness coordinator had tried to start work on kindergarten transition, but each time it had fizzled... We felt that signing on to the Institute would create buy-in...and it did.*
- *The dialogue on transition issues was already going on, and we saw the Institute as a new way to inspire ideas.*
- *Kindergarten transition has been a piece of our work going back many years – we wanted to use the Institute to refresh ourselves, reflect on our strategies, and see what has worked.*
- *We knew there were a lot of issues related to kindergarten transition that weren't getting addressed through regular meetings.*
- *There was a lot of energy around using this as an opportunity to get the whole community involved in the issue.*

Successful Planning Strategies during the Institute

Building a broad-based and effective transition planning team and collecting and using data to identify community needs and reflect on community experiences were major themes of the “Terrific Transitions” training. Communities noted that the Institute helped them implement effective strategies in those areas:

- During the focus groups, four communities noted that they were able to build a strong transition team and added other key stakeholders. Examples of approaches to building teams included the following:
 - *We built our Institute team around a single school, rather than piecemeal across the district...We got a wide range of staff from that school involved (the secretary, kindergarten teachers, the principal, the social worker) as well as community people from the library, United Way, the fire department, Head Start, and preschool providers.*
 - *The Kindergarten Transition team has resource members who are needed on specific issues, but not expected to attend all meetings.*
 - *Having a principal on the team gave the work credibility with the Board of Education...he understood the regulations, had access to central administration, and encouraged us to bring what we thought was right to the superintendent and let him decide.*
- Five communities collected information on current transition practices and the concerns of preschool and/or kindergarten teachers to use in identifying critical issues and possible practices to build on.
 - *We had a principal on our team collect information on kindergarten registration practices from the other principals and used this to create a master grid.*
 - *We did a survey of preschool and kindergarten teachers and elementary school principals and shared the results with the superintendent.*
 - *A major factor in getting our work started was the survey of preschool and kindergarten teachers...Having these data really turned us around.*
- Two communities conducted surveys or focus groups with parents to learn about their experiences and build broader based support for work on transition issues.
 - *We held focus groups with parents who had just gone through the registration process...We presented information on their experiences and what they wanted to the superintendent.*

Three communities reported in the focus groups that they had developed a specific written plan for their transition work. When they had, it served as a guide and tool for ongoing planning and implementation.

- *We developed a year-long action plan... This was important as it was specific and detailed and we were able to use it to show progress.*
- *During the Institute we developed a formal plan to which we continually refer.*
- *The Institute was the impetus for us coming up with a formalized plan.*

Two other communities noted that work on kindergarten transition falls under broader collaborative or community plans for improving children's outcomes.

- *There is an action plan related to joint professional development as part of our broader collaborative plan for 2008-09.*
- *The community is in the middle of a community planning process... Kindergarten transition is part of one component that will encompass broader issues of alignment in curriculum and practices.*

Transition Strategies Implemented as of Fall 2007

Compared to other capacity-building topics, kindergarten transition was more "product" oriented and one that parents, teachers, early education providers, and community residents might see as more concrete in producing benefits for children and families. Because of this, it was often easier for kindergarten transition teams to come up with "early wins" in this area, as seen below often building on what already was underway in the community. The focus group interviews conducted after the communities had completed the Institute gathered information on the work that had been carried out as of fall 2007.

Many of the participating communities implemented outreach and/or publicity efforts to increase parent awareness about registering their child for kindergarten:

- Four communities used outreach activities through early education providers or other groups
 - *We involved early education centers in identifying children who would be attending kindergarten at our pilot school... They sent contact information on these children to the school so that the school could reach out to them if they weren't registered by May.*

- *Last year for the first time we sent letters about kindergarten registration to centers that were not School Readiness providers.*
- *We send a school bus to our public housing projects with information on kindergarten and registration forms. We are also going to grocery store parking lots.*
- *We are connecting with diverse parents through other community groups – like the Catholic church that many Spanish-speaking families attend and an ethnic group organization.*
- Four communities used various media to publicize registration
 - *We had a billboard campaign.*
 - *We got publicity through CPTV...It started with a single segment with a teacher explaining the importance of kindergarten...It spun off into a six-segment series with presentations by a school nurse, a literacy specialist, and others that highlight community resources for kindergarten readiness.*
 - *We put information on kindergarten registration on each individual elementary school's website.*
- Two adopted a ride to the first day of school on a fire truck as an incentive for early registration

Three communities put in place multi-session parent-child programs to help families prepare their children for kindergarten entry.

- *In January we begin contacting families of entering kindergarteners and send out an activity card each month covering one component of readiness skills.*
- *We got a grant to give a book to each child registered for kindergarten...the preschools used the book, families were sent activities to do related to the book, and then kindergarten teachers used the book at the beginning of the year.*
- *We adapted a program begun at one of our elementary schools...We hold five sessions from fall through spring.*

Single events to orient children and parents to kindergarten were held in two communities.

- *We recruit parents early through a family event in November [of the year prior to kindergarten entry].*
- *We have a booth at the annual town fair... Give out readiness kits on developmental milestones, Born Learning materials, a children's book.*

Activities to bring preschool and kindergarten teachers together were undertaken in three communities.

- *In May we hosted a community preschool and kindergarten teacher joint event focused on kindergarten transition... The superintendent attended and BOE preschool and kindergarten teachers were expected to attend and were issued CEUs.*
- *Community preschool teachers will visit BOE preschool and kindergarten classrooms... We hope to expand and have kindergarten teachers visits preschools.*
- *We hold a mini-conference in March for community early childhood providers at which kindergarten teachers explain the curriculum and speech specialists outline the elements of pre-literacy.*
- *Based on the results of our survey with preschool and kindergarten teachers, we worked with the assistant superintendent to give kindergarten teachers release time to meet with preschool teachers... We had one full-day and two half-day workshops.*

Two communities had not yet implemented any specific transition activities, although both had prepared detailed recommendations.

Evidence of Results to Date

Improvements in Transition Outcomes. Four communities were able to cite specific measurable outcomes as a result of their work on kindergarten transition:

- *Kindergarten registration by May has gone up to 50 percent from 35 percent..*
- *By working with our School Readiness providers we were able to increase our pre-registration by 10 percent.*
- *Last year we had 125 preschool parents involved in roundtables on kindergarten expectations and other early childhood topics like literacy.*

- *One year only 50 percent of kindergarten students had registered before school start... The next year, after tremendous effort, we raised it to 80 percent.*

Side Benefits. Three communities noted that work on kindergarten transition brought new stakeholders to the Discovery collaborative. In two communities, participating in the Kindergarten Transition Institute offered a way to connect more deeply with the local board of education. One community also reported having increased collaboration with other early childhood initiatives.

Next Steps

Planned Follow-up. In four of the nine focus group communities, explicit plans for next steps were mentioned, including repeating successful events or activities, adding new activities, and working on transition issues for special needs children.

Two communities mentioned wanting to get other collaborative committees involved in the work, especially communication and parent engagement committees.

Two planned to use information gathered thus far to garner support for initiating or replicating transition activities.

Institutionalization of Transition Strategies. In three communities the local public school district had contributed operating funds to implement transition strategies. In another the local superintendent indicated commitment to bringing a pilot effort to scale, if results warranted.

Other communities were relying on grant funding and collaborative staffing to move their transition plans forward.

DETAILED FINDINGS: COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT OF INSTITUTE APPROACH

As noted earlier, the Kindergarten Transition Institute took a different approach to offering capacity-building technical assistance to Discovery communities than had been used earlier in the Initiative. As noted earlier, the Institute differed from other approaches to providing capacity-building information and support in several key ways, including:

- Requiring communities applying to participate to have identified transition as an important area of work for their community;
- Requiring that an initial team of stakeholders be assembled with the charge from the collaborative group to participate in the Institute;
- Offering sessions of sufficient length to allow community teams together, receive specific information and tools from the Institute team, and have opportunities to network with other communities; and
- Requiring that the community teams develop, commit to, and report back on specific activities to advance their own work between the sessions, which were offered several months apart.

These elements of the Institute model responded to circumstances and barriers that had appeared to limit the effectiveness of other capacity-building approaches offered to the Discovery communities. The community teams reported that these and other elements of the model were valuable in setting up the conditions and providing the resources for making substantial progress on transition planning during the Institute.

This section describes the benefits and drawbacks participating communities reported regarding specific elements of that approach, specifically:

- The Institute format (multi-session with a combination of large group presentation and discussion, team meetings, and cross-community small group work and the expectation of team work between sessions);
- The Institute schedule (both the time for each session and between sessions);
- The materials used in the Institute;
- Ideas for possible follow-up activities and support; and

- Suggestions for communities participating in future Kindergarten Transition Institutes.

Assessment of the Institute Format

Each of the three sessions of the Institute included presentations by staff from the Center for School Change, opportunities for community teams to work together on exercises or their local plans, and time for teams to meet with other communities to share ideas and experiences. At the end of each session, community teams were asked to decide on and commit to accomplishing a specific set of tasks before the next session. The sessions were half-day in length in the morning and lunch was provided at the end of the session, as well as opportunities for teams to stay and work together, with Center staff or with other communities after lunch.

Opportunity to meet with other community teams

Five of the nine communities noted specifically that they found the opportunity to meet with other community teams valuable:

- *It was helpful to see what other communities are doing – we got a lot of ideas about how to publicize kindergarten registration*
- *The chance to learn from other communities was valuable*
- *It was valuable to talk with other communities – to find out what other school systems are doing – we got a lot of great ideas*

Two communities made note that having communities of similar size and demographic composition in the Institute made the sharing more useful.

Only one community reported that this part of the sessions was not helpful to their team:

- *We don't feel the time spent with other communities was productive. The communities were different so we didn't necessarily help each other. We would rather have spent the time as a community team.*

Balance of time with own team versus with other communities

All the participating communities reported that having a substantial period of time set aside to meet as a team, away from everyday distractions, was one of the most valuable aspects of the Institute. This time was perceived as a hard-to-come-by commodity:

- *This was an opportunity to spend significant time together that is often hard to find*
- *It provided us with a forum for a “meeting of the minds” on this issue*
- *It gave us time for reflection and discussion away from our offices*
- *It gave us the opportunity to really discuss our ideas in a smaller group*
- *It made us stop and think – reflect on what was working and what was not – an opportunity to slow down and think*
- *It was good to have “think tank” time – time to focus on a topic for an extended period*

About half of the nine participating communities appeared to be reasonably satisfied with the balance of time spent working together with their own team and time meeting with the other community teams was appropriate. However, three communities would have liked to have more time as a team:

- *At some points we wanted more time to talk together*
- *It would have been more valuable to have more time for us to meet as a team and less time meeting with other communities*

In fact, two communities made the same suggestion – set aside most if not all of the third session solely for the purpose of community team work.

One community would have liked to have more time sharing with other communities.

Commitment forms and reporting out

Half of the community teams made special note of the value of the end-of-session commitment forms and requests to report out at the next session in ensuring that work was done between sessions:

- *The process kept us on task – gave us a framework and specific things to do between sessions*
- *Institute staff held us to our action plan goals*
- *They gave us specific assignments, which kept us on task*
- *Having commitment forms and required reporting at the next meeting pushed us along*

Assessment of the Institute Schedule

As mentioned earlier, the Institute sessions for the first cohort were held in March, May and October 2006. The second cohort met in May and September 2006 and March 2007.

Length and schedule of the sessions

Three communities made special note that the half-day meetings allowed more people to participate who might otherwise find it difficult to get away from their jobs or other responsibilities for an entire day.

Positive comments on the lunches provided were made in all groups. The quality of the food and the consideration in having it provided for people who needed to get back to their communities was greatly appreciated.

Three communities made special mention of the opportunity provided for teams to continue to work together over and after lunch:

- *We liked having the option to stay and work as a team or meet with other communities*
- *A positive was that they let us stay after the session and work, with Institute staff available to consult if needed*

Spacing between sessions

Community teams generally found the spacing between the first and second Institute sessions was appropriate, given the expectation that teams would carry out specific tasks in their communities during that period:

- *Spacing gave us time to work between sessions, to have meetings in the community*
- *Spacing gave us time to build sessions into our schedule, allowed us time to take information back and try it out in our community*

However, spacing longer than two to three months, especially over the summer, were seen as problematic:

- *The gap over the summer was hard in keeping up the momentum*
- *Having sessions split over the summer made it too long*

Advance notice of schedule

Three community teams made note of problems with changing schedules for some of the sessions. They advised setting the schedule for all three sessions upfront and making that information available at the time communities apply:

- *Commit to specific dates at the beginning – if we know ahead of time, team members can plan*
- *There was a problem getting the same people to attend all three sessions, since we didn't get a schedule at the beginning*

Assessment of Institute Materials

The Institute provided communities with a guide produced by SERVE, Inc. in notebook form, "Planning for Terrific Transitions: A Guide for Transition-to-School Teams" (2004). Community teams were also given copies of a book with many examples of kindergarten transition practices compiled by Robert C. Pianta, a national expert in the field, and Martha J. Cox, "Transition to Kindergarten," published in 1999 by P. H. Brooks.

The SERVE notebook as a guide to the process

The SERVE notebook got mixed reviews. One community did not use it to guide its process, while two found it difficult to navigate:

- *We hardly used the notebook – didn't always do the exercises. After the first session, we were ready to roll and didn't find the exercises useful*
- *Materials in the notebook seemed to skip around*
- *Pages were not numbered and sections not labeled – this made it hard to find things*

On the other hand, three other communities found the notebook helpful in guiding their process:

- *The notebook was well organized, concise, and easy to follow*
- *Materials helped us think through ideas whirling around in our heads, provided us a structure and helped us focus*

The sample forms and tools in the notebook

At the same time, almost all community teams reported using some of the sample forms and tools provided in the SERVE notebook, especially the survey questionnaires:

- *The notebook has lots of blank forms that are helpful in organizing meetings and planning tasks*
- *We have used the exercises and forms for other Discovery work as well*
- *We used the survey forms provided in the notebook to conduct surveys of preK and kindergarten teachers, elementary principals, and parents*
- *The materials helped us organize what information to share with different groups – to come up with an “elevator speech”*
- *Having each team member complete the surveys enlightened us – it showed us that we had different perspectives and visions*
- *It helped us brainstorm about how to reach diverse groups*
- *We used the guidelines from the notebook to refine our community sessions*

Compilation of transition practices

One community found the volume by Pianta and Cox more helpful than the SERVE notebook:

- *That book was especially good in providing concrete examples of welcoming schools, of successes. It had the consistent theme of linking family, school and community*

Interest in Follow-up Sessions

All but one of the nine community teams participating in the evaluation focus groups were definitely interested in some kind of follow-up from the Kindergarten Transition Institute, generally a one-session “reunion” or “refresher” rather than a multi-session format:

- *Don’t think a full institute with multiple sessions would be useful – the communities are at too many different places now*
- *We would like one or two follow-up sessions*
- *Would like to have a follow-up once a year for a couple of years*

Most (six) wanted an opportunity to learn what other communities that had participated in the Institute had been able to accomplish:

- *It would be interesting to hear what other communities are doing*
- *Like to see what other towns have done – like to exchange best practices*
- *We'd like to share experiences with others – for example, share our surveys and the results*

Four specifically wanted to have the opportunity for concentrated time together as a team to plan:

- *It would provide us with forced planning time*
- *We could use the time to identify roadblocks and spend time problem solving*
- *Might have two sessions – the first to share information, and the second to digest what we heard and plan for our own community*

Two were looking for an opportunity to assess progress and revisit their goals:

- *We would use it as an opportunity to evaluate our plan – what was done, what's still important for us to accomplish – reassess our priorities*
- *It would give us an opportunity to self-reflect – like the annual assessment and planning tool*

Two communities believed that holding a follow-up session would be a good way to bring renewed energy to their teams, while another two would like to have the opportunity to hear about new research or resources:

- *Getting together again might rejuvenate us – force us to sit down and plan again*
- *Reviewing the sessions would help us get back up to speed*
- *We'd like to get new information from research and new resources that are available*
- *Would like to learn about possible funding sources and grant opportunities*
- *Would like to see lots of ideas – session packed with strategies, lessons learned, best practices – not process*

Three communities offered a similar suggestion: poll the teams to identify common topics of interest and offer a menu of follow-up sessions from which communities could choose:

- *Circulate a questionnaire first to identify specific issues or topics related to implementing transition plans so the follow-up sessions can target these issues – identify the topics and publicize a menu for communities to select among as needed*
- *Topics that would interest us are kindergarten registration process, how to set up joint professional development with preschool and kindergarten teachers, how to get parent involvement in kindergarten information or orientation sessions*
- *Would like to have a presentation, discussion or sharing on a specific topic – such as how communities have drawn in the business community and parents on a consistent basis*

Two communities believed that communities have moved in quite different directions, so that on-site TA would be more effective than group workshops.

Advice for Communities in Future Cohorts

Advance information

Five community teams had specific recommendations about the type of information others interested in participating in future Kindergarten Transition Institutes should be provided. These recommendations were focused primarily on providing a better understanding of the work expected to be carried out during the Institute, although other topics were mentioned as well:

- *Give the next cohort a set of brief summaries of what each community in previous cohorts has done – share action plans, give examples of successes*
- *Would have liked to have some sample plans before beginning to get a better sense of the range of possibilities*
- *Provide clearer communication about what will be done in the sessions and the goals of the Institute to give communities a better idea of who to send*
- *Give a synopsis of session topics*

One community even suggested having someone from the Memorial Fund or the Center for School Change meet with the superintendent to describe the expectations for the Institute.

Team composition

Communities in the first two cohorts of the Institute had been advised to assemble a diverse team, and this advice was strongly iterated by five communities:

- *Have the initial team be a good mix of community people, parents, school staff*
- *Have a good cross-section on the people – people who work well together but bring different perspectives – helpful to bring people from different parts of town who have different experiences*
- *Have a diverse team that reaches different sectors of the community*
- *Composition of the team is crucial – it's good to have a school administrator, kindergarten teacher, preschool teacher*
- *Parent on the team didn't feel she had that much to contribute – we would rather do a survey of parents since one parent can't represent the needs of diverse groups*
- *We decided not to expand our core team but identified resource people who we could call on for specific things but wouldn't be expected to attend all the meetings*

In addition, three community teams suggested that careful consideration be given to the connections team members bring into broader groups in the community:

- *Use team members to bring back messages and information from the Institute to their peers and get input, ideas, and data from them*
- *Team members should be well connected with their peers (principals, kindergarten teachers, preschool providers)*

Prior relationships/structure

Five of the community teams made special note of the value of the teams participating in the Institute having had prior working relationships, especially as a committee on transition issues:

- *Should already have a transition committee in place*
- *The team should have a role within the larger collaborative group*
- *Should have experience working on something locally ahead of time*
- *Create a team of people who know each other and are in good positions to move work forward*
- *Have a strong transition committee already or a good idea about who should be involved*

Support/commitment

It would be important for community teams participating in the Institute to have strong staff support to get the most out of their experience, according to two communities:

- *The team needs staff time to keep the process going – manage logistics, handle communications, etc.*
- *Have staff with the responsibility to work on transition issues and carry out action steps*
- *Identify a team leader from the start –someone who will do some of the leg work*

Two other communities made special mention of the need to have advance buy-in from the local superintendent:

- *It's very important to have someone on team who has the ear of the superintendent*
- *The board of education must be supportive, there must be buy-in at the highest level*

Several communities were explicit in the fact that community teams must include both people with authority and those with the commitment and energy to do the work:

- *People coming to the work must have some clout, some decision-making authority*
- *Team members need to know that a lot of work is going to be required between sessions*

Advance preparation

Two communities had very specific suggestions for what communities should do in advance of the first Institute session:

- *Make sure everyone is on the same page before attending by sharing information on what is already going on in the community and what's been tried before*
- *Have communities gather information ahead of time on what's already going on in the community – provide a set of guiding questions for research around specific topics like kindergarten registration, transition practices, cross-school consistency, preschool-kindergarten curriculum alignment, communication between early education providers and kindergarten teachers*
- *Have an assignment for teams to meet with parents and PTOs ahead of time to get their input on issues and concerns*

Two other communities had more general suggestions:

- *Team members should know where the town wants to go – identify what the community wants out of the Institute*
- *Identify the team and meet before the first session*