



Interaction Institute
for Social Change

CHERISH EVERY CHILD IN SPRINGFIELD

A Case Study of a Community-Wide
Collaborative Planning Initiative



About the Interaction Institute for Social Change

The Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC) is a nonprofit organization that partners with individuals, organizations, and communities to achieve greater social impact. Our multicultural team of seasoned consultants provides network building, consulting, facilitation, leadership development, and training services to a diverse array of clients that includes networks, collaboratives, and coalitions; nonprofit organizations of all sizes; schools and school systems; intermediary organizations; public sector agencies; international NGOs; and foundations. Our clients work in all disciplines of the social sector and are located throughout the United States, in Ireland, and beyond. We are particularly committed to building the leadership and collaborative capacity of grassroots leaders to engage, speak out, and participate fully in determining the policies and decisions that affect their lives and their communities.

The work of IISC is informed by our theory of social change, mission, and values. At our core, we practice and teach facilitative leadership – a model rooted in shared power and decision making, consensus building, collaborative skill, and servant leadership. We continually strive to deepen our capacity to address issues of power, privilege, and oppression related to various dimensions of diversity and design culturally appropriate processes and services that consciously address power dynamics.

IISC was founded in 1993 by Interaction Associates (IA) as an expression of its commitment to social change and as a way of bringing its collaborative methodologies into the social sector. Since that time, IISC has grown from a staff of two to an organization with nearly twenty staff members and a cadre of affiliates who have worked with thousands of change agents across the globe and social sector. In support of these efforts, IISC has adapted the collaborative and leadership development methodologies inherited from IA and created new and innovative approaches to working with and meeting the needs of social change leaders.

Cherish Every Child in Springfield: A Case Study of a Community-Wide Collaborative Planning Initiative.

Written by Curtis Ogden, Senior Associate, IISC, March 2006.

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Executive Summary

In 1999, the leadership of the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation asked the question, “What else might we do to improve the well-being of children in Springfield, Massachusetts?” For three decades, the Foundation had given hundreds of grants to cultural, educational, and human service organizations, in support of Springfield’s children, youth, and families. On the cusp of the new millennium, however, data from the struggling industrial city showed little promise for many of its most at-risk residents. In view of this situation, Executive Director Mary Walachy and the Davis Foundation’s trustees began to explore options beyond their usual funding approach.

With the help and encouragement of Margaret Blood, a Boston-based child policy expert, the Davis Foundation engaged the Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC) to help it step into a new role, convening the local community to devise strategies and build momentum in support of its youngest children. The Foundation partnered with IISC to co-design and facilitate a community-wide collaborative planning process, called Cherish Every Child, that gathered input from hundreds of stakeholders, including nonprofit and business leaders, elected officials, public school personnel, and local residents. Along the way, IISC worked to build the collaborative spirit and capacity of the initiative’s participants through a series of leadership trainings and modeling its approach to process design and facilitation.

The year-long planning process yielded a shared community vision and “blueprint for action,” comprising a set of eight strategic recommendations and related tactics for implementing those recommendations. In addition, IISC worked with the Design Team, a representative steering committee for the planning initiative, to devise workgroups to implement the strategic plan. Three years into implementation, Cherish Every Child still exists and has been noted for a number of successes, including: raising and maintaining public awareness about the welfare of young children, building organizational alliances and cross-sector partnerships, cultivating skills in young emerging leaders in the community, and making progress on specific issues such as oral health, early childhood education, and family support. In the words of Mary Walachy: “While the final product of the early work was the development of a comprehensive ‘blueprint’ for our children, the process of achieving this plan, under the competent direction of IISC, was as important as the product itself.”



Background

The Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation has long been committed to supporting efforts to improve the lives of the residents of Springfield, MA and its surrounding county. As expressed in its mission, the Foundation has a particular stake in “strengthening the quality of education for children and youth” and “ensuring the well-being of at-risk children, youth and families.” To this end, the Davis Foundation has made hundreds of grants in support and promotion of cultural, educational, human service, and religious organizations throughout Greater Hampden County.

Springfield is the third largest city in Massachusetts. A racially diverse and historically rich community, the city has experienced mounting economic challenges over the past six decades, due largely to a decline in manufacturing. As a result both poverty and unemployment rates have risen considerably, in some cases doubling state averages. In recent years, Springfield has also experienced some of the state’s highest rates of single-parent households, child abuse and neglect, and educational failure when measured by standardized test results.

In view of this situation, in 1999 the Davis Foundation engaged in an informal strategic planning process, looking at its programs and initiatives and asking, “What else might we do to improve the well-being of Springfield’s children?” This question and some initial research led Executive Director Mary Walachy to the issue of early childhood development and to child policy

expert Margaret Blood. Blood is the Founder and President of Strategies for Children, a Boston-based non-profit organization specializing in public policy, advocacy, and constituency building around the well-being of children and families. Mary Walachy expressed to Blood the Davis Foundation’s interest in focusing its attention on children before they entered school and in doing something beyond its usual funding approach. Blood agreed to work with Walachy on looking at the existing data on children and families in Hampden County and developing a set of recommendations for consideration by the Foundation’s trustees.

The Challenge

During their research, Walachy and Blood learned that there was no shared agreement around priorities for young children in Springfield. While this opened the door for Blood to dictate a plan, she was reluctant to do so. Instead, she encouraged the Davis Foundation to take the initiative to engage the community in collectively developing a vision and “strategic blueprint” for their children. She felt this undertaking would ultimately yield a plan that the community owned and was committed to implementing. Walachy and the Foundation’s trustees agreed.

This decision represented a bold and challenging new step for the Davis Foundation which, up until this time, had a history of avoiding being out in the front of its initiatives. As Walachy explains,



“Everyone in this community knows that there is nothing behind the work the Davis family does except caring for people. It’s not about us getting grants, it’s not about us getting power, it’s not about us getting praise or remuneration of any kind. There’s none of that here.”

The idea on the table suggested a very public and unfamiliar leadership role for the Foundation. In addition, the proposed endeavor called on the Davis Foundation to make a significant indirect investment, to lay the groundwork and fund a process that would lead to greater impact down the road. Mary Walachy understood that choosing this path meant having to demonstrate the value of such an endeavor against more direct kinds of funding and interventions. Given the novelty of the undertaking, the stakes, and the fact that Walachy was the Foundation’s only full-time staff person at the time, there was a clear need for outside expertise skilled not only in facilitation but in thinking about and designing large-scale collaborative initiatives. At the recommendation of Margaret Blood, the Davis Foundation decided to enlist the services of the Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC).

IISC’s Framing of the Challenge

IIISC’s experience has shown that well-orchestrated and inclusive planning processes that incorporate a diversity of vested perspectives can yield more

creative and intelligent solutions than those that simply rely solely on so-called experts. This is consistent with research about collaboration and the wisdom of groups when faced with complex problem-solving scenarios. As James Surowiecki writes: “When decisions are made, it makes little sense, given everything we know about the virtues of collective decision making and about the importance of diversity, to concentrate power in the hands of one person. In fact, the more important the decision, the more important it is that it not be left in the hands of a single person.”¹ Indeed, when faced with complex situations with uncertain solutions and multiple stakeholders, it is best to decentralize decision-making not only to yield greater insights, but also support and commitment from those who will ultimately be responsible for implementing strategies on the ground.

From the perspective of IISC, the Springfield community had in the Davis Foundation one of the critical components of a successful large scale collaborative initiative – a well-connected, respected, and resourced organization with the will and capacity to play a public convening and facilitative role. The Foundation did not feel that it had, or had to have, all the answers for young children in the community. Instead, it recognized both its limitations and the value of using its power of bring community members together to decide for themselves how to address the challenges they faced and what they wanted to create in their city and county.

¹James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations*. (New York: Doubleday, 2004) 222.



What remained was the task of deciding how to proceed and whom to involve in constructing a vision and plan for improving the lives of Springfield's young children. Any such collaborative undertaking requires careful design and planning with a core group of committed and knowledgeable individuals, including content experts in fields relevant to the issue at hand. It also requires thoughtfully elicited input from a wide array of strategically chosen stakeholders, along with a clear process and procedures for aggregating and synthesizing input and making decisions. The opportunity implicit to such a community-wide initiative is the ability to create a network and wider culture of collaboration and coordination that continues to generate effective responses to issues as they arise.

“The process has succeeded in bringing people together that never worked together before on behalf of children”

– Margaret Blood

The Process

The central challenge facing the Davis Foundation and IISC was the creation of an inclusive and engaging process to help community members develop relevant and effective strategies for improving the lives of Springfield's young children. The Davis Foundation agreed to serve as the public leader of the initiative, using its connections and resources to identify and convene community members. IISC would operate as the manager of the

design and planning phases of the initiative as well as the lead facilitator. Margaret Blood would serve as the core content expert and advisor on early childhood issues. The next step was to identify other individuals to round out a Design Team to operate as the engine of the process going forward.

The Design Team is a critical element in IISC's collaborative approach to working with organizational and large scale strategic initiatives. In general, these teams fulfill the following roles:

- partner with IISC to design an inclusive and efficient process;
- synthesize and document data throughout the process;
- provide ongoing information and feedback about the initiative, people involved, and process;
- serve as a group of ambassadors and advocates for the process; and
- connect stakeholders to the process and reflect their thinking/points of view.

Given its responsibilities, it is important that the Design Team consist of representatives of key and diverse interests and perspectives and that its members have the ability to work collaboratively. The following individuals were members of the Design Team for the Springfield initiative: Mary Walachy; Margaret Blood; Marianne Hughes and Courtney Bourns of IISC; Frank Robinson, Executive Director of Partners for a Healthier Community; Peter Levanos, Assistant to the Superintendent of Springfield Public Schools; James Bell, Executive Director of the Springfield Day Nursery; Maria Morales-Loebl, Executive Director of the Spanish American Union; and Woody Greene, who was hired by the Davis Foundation to be Project Manager for the initiative. Greene, who was working with Partners for a Healthy Community and had



helped to convene Springfield community members around the issue of school attendance and truancy, would play a central role in the initiative, handling all the communications and logistics and serving as a facilitator for community meetings. He would also serve as the “weaver” of the evolving network of stakeholders.

Design Phase

In January of 2001, the Design Team met for the first time to discuss IISC’s collaborative planning framework. IISC’s research and experience suggest that a number of key elements and principles are critical to the success of broad-based community planning, including the following:

- commitment of leaders from the private, nonprofit, and public sectors;
- inclusion of all relevant stakeholders from the start;
- ownership of the process by participants in the process;
- agreement on the problem(s) as a precondition to agreement on solutions;
- strategic thinking, a collaborative attitude, and skills for working together; and
- recognition that the process of planning is as important as the plan itself.

IISC’s framework is captured in the “Pathway to Action” (see diagram on next page), a planning and assessment tool that lets participants know where their collective attention is currently focused and what steps will follow. The Pathway is both structured and flexible in order to move participants through a clear set of conversations and agreements

that build upon one another, and to address the specific needs and context of a given initiative. Along the way, the tool ideally creates confidence that the goal is attainable and increases the likelihood of successful implementation.

IISC’s approach to collaborative planning is typically divided into five phases, or “spaces,” that are sequentially focused on:

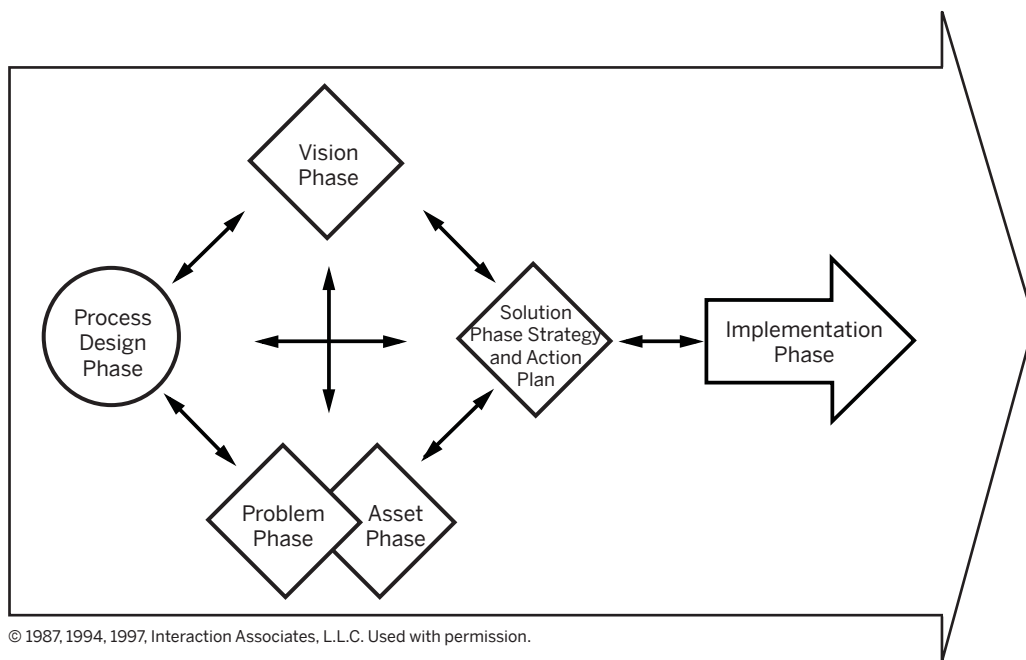
- design of the overall process for the entire collaborative initiative (Design Space);
- an image of an ideal future state (Vision Space);
- the core problem(s), root causes of the core problem(s), and strengths and strategies that are already in place in the community (Problem/Asset Space);
- new strategies and a plan of action that everyone is willing to support (Solution Space); and
- implementation of the plan (Implementation Space).

In addition to sharing this framework, IISC engaged Design Team members in the critical task of “stakeholder analysis.” This exercise includes the establishment of criteria for and then brainstorming and prioritizing a list of possible participants. IISC defined stakeholders as those who would be affected by and/or help implement the plan, had resources or expertise to share, or might disagree with and/or block an initiative. Given the size and significance of the Springfield project, three meetings were required to agree upon criteria for and finalize a list of key stakeholders to become participants at appropriate points in the planning process.

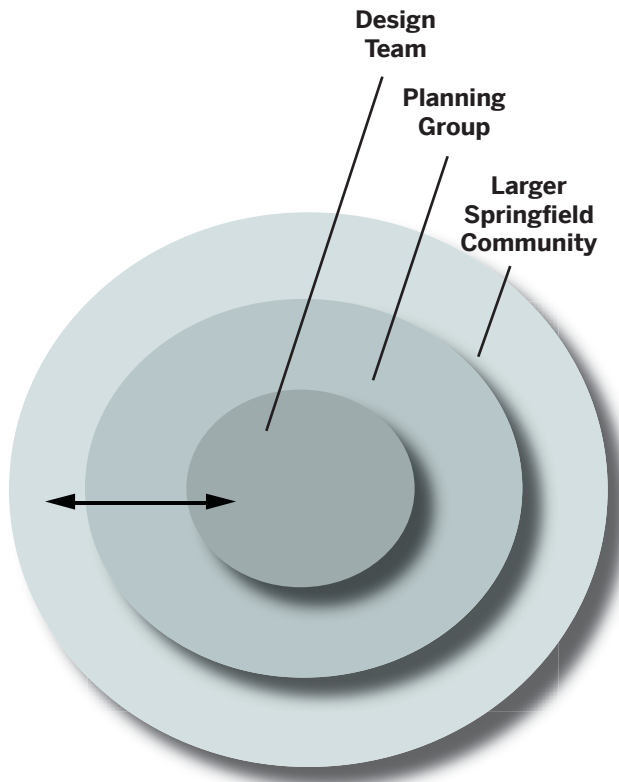
Some 50 of these stakeholders would ultimately constitute the Planning Group, a body that expanded the reach of the Design Team. In essence, members of the Planning Group were meant to serve as representatives of the larger community and the diverse voices that needed to be heard. Its members primarily came into play during each phase of the planning process when multiple community stakeholder groups convened in order to both share and gather information and input (see diagram on next page). Those involved in the Planning Group agreed to meet a half dozen times throughout the year-long planning phase to share their own perspectives as well as those of their fellow Springfield and Hampden County residents.

With the Planning Group identified, the next task was to define strategies for involving the various stakeholder groups and establishing a timeline and overall design for the subsequent phases of the planning process. All of this was captured in a process map (see appendices), a tool IISC uses to guide and provide clarity for collaborative initiatives. Each map is meant to be flexible and will often change with slight upgrades as the process evolves. The early spring of 2001 was committed to defining goals, roles, and responsibilities for the vision phase. In addition, a name was officially selected for the initiative, Cherish Every Child Springfield (or CHECHS), which captured the community-wide emphasis of the undertaking.

IISC's Pathway to Action



CHECHS Planning Process Players



Vision Phase

On June 7, 2001, the Cherish Every Child initiative held its official kick-off event, during which the vision phase was launched. This phase of planning grows out of IISC’s belief and experience that it is vital for organizations and communities to not only agree on what is not working, but on where they want to go. The vision for CHECHS began to grow out of an IISC-facilitated exercise at the kick-off event that guided participants to imagine a Time Magazine cover story in the future featuring Springfield for the actions it had taken to improve the lives of young children, including a core set of key accomplishments.

Over 40 people participated in this initial visioning exercise, including local government officials, nonprofit and school leaders, representatives of the business community, social and health service providers, and parents. The exercise was then replicated around the community by Woody Greene and members of the Planning Group. Subsequently, individuals from across Springfield with a wide array of involvement with children began collaborating around the design of a shared vision for their children.

As Woody Greene and the Planning Group got underway replicating the visioning process, the Design Team proposed that CHECHS tap into “emerging leaders” in the community – younger individuals who were up and coming in organizations connected with the initiative. The idea was to encourage these emerging young leaders to become active participants in CHECHS and give them leadership training that they might apply in their own organizations. These individuals were identified by members of the Design Team and Planning Group, invited to join in the community planning process, and given opportunities to receive training in facilitative techniques, facilitate small focus group meetings, and network with their peers in local community and social service agencies. The emerging leader role was envisioned as a flexible one, allowing each individual to determine how involved he or she wanted to be in the process and various leadership development opportunities.



In late June, IISC offered a custom-designed Facilitative Leadership® training to these young leaders. Facilitative Leadership® is a core training program of IISC. At the heart of the workshop are seven leadership practices geared to helping participants “create a work environment distinguished by outstanding performance and personal satisfaction.” For the emerging leaders of Springfield, IISC focused its training on the core practices and characteristics of facilitative leadership, how to run effective meetings and facilitate agreements, and how to create a framework for group planning and problem-solving. A few months later, IISC offered a follow-up training to participants in more advanced facilitation skills.

In the meantime, the Design Team continued to meet monthly, receiving updates on Woody Greene’s networking and organizing work in the field. Furthermore, the Design Team began synthesizing data from the various visioning sessions into a shared community vision. This synthesis resulted in an

overarching vision statement for Cherish Every Child (see below).

Problem and Asset Phase

By October, the initiative was ready to move into the problem and asset space, which serves as a means of identifying potential obstacles and contributors to a shared vision. This is an important check on reality that builds shared understanding of the nature of both obstacles and assets so that a group is able to identify appropriate solutions. For CHECHS, this meant engaging the Planning Group and other members of the community in brainstorming the challenges to the vision they had developed. Through the fall, Design and Planning Group members replicated the problem identification process around the community. This included meetings with business and legislative leaders who contributed their own perspectives on the obstacles to the vision and committed their support to the emerging plan and ongoing learning.

CHECHS Shared Community Vision

Cherish Every Child envisions a Springfield where:

- Every child is embraced and every child is cherished.
- Where the family is recognized as the most powerful environmental influence on children’s development and success in school and life.
- Where all children are members of a diverse community that is committed to helping every child reach his or her full potential and to helping every family support their children within strong neighborhoods.
- Where every child has the love of a caring adult and access to the support s/he needs.
- Where every child is guaranteed freedom from harm and hope for a promising future.
- Where everyone who touches the life of a child has the financial resources, education, skills, and commitment to meet that child’s needs.



IISC also led members of the Planning Group through an asset-mapping exercise in which participants were asked to identify Springfield’s existing strengths and resources that benefited young children and families – programs, facilities, open spaces, funding sources, organizations, and specific individuals. Planning Group members plotted these assets on a map of the community to ascertain where resources tended to cluster and where they were lacking. In addition, the exercise guided participants in thinking about how CHECHS might be able to partner with and build upon existing efforts and progress.

In December, the Planning Group was reconvened to come to consensus on the most critical problems and obstacles identified throughout the community. These high priority barriers included:

- Lack of coordination, collaboration, and cooperation among providers/services
- Lack of coordination and collaboration between parents, schools, and the community
- Lack of quality affordable early care and education
- Lack of cultural competence among providers, educators, and policy makers
- Lack of resources – income, basic needs, housing
- Lack of political and public will for prioritizing the needs of young children and families
- Inadequate family support, including parent education, skills, and involvement
- Lack of voting/citizen involvement
- Lack of knowledge about/access to/eligibility for services

IISC then facilitated a root cause analysis of these

identified challenges. The goal of the process was to go beyond symptoms and delve into less obvious factors that may have contributed to identified problems. For example, with respect to the issue of lack of coordination, collaboration, and cooperation among providers and services, the Planning Group identified four causal factors: “lack of understanding of coordination, collaboration, and cooperation;” “lack of funding, which has created competition between providers and services;” “power struggles;” and “inclusion that is not always inclusive.” The group then looked at each of these factors and dug into possible explanations for them, looking for the high leverage root causes or those that contributed to many if not all of the barriers.

Solution Phase

In January of 2002, the Planning Group met to generate and come to agreement on a set of “bold solutions” in response to the root causes of eight of the nine identified challenges. At this point, the process moved relatively quickly, the way paved by the agreements and understanding that had been achieved on the scope and nature of the problem. A contributing element to this work was an opportunity for the group to learn about brain development and the impact of early childhood experiences from national expert Dr. Jack Shonkoff, professor and dean of the Heller School of Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University.² IISC then facilitated a process with community members and content experts working together, which yielded a series of solutions and prioritized recommendations for Springfield to support its youngest children.

² Jack Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips are co-editors of *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000).

The Design Team then took the work of the Planning Group and through the early spring proceeded to refine a set of final recommendations (see next page). In addition, the team came to agreement on a set of strategies for implementing each recommendation.

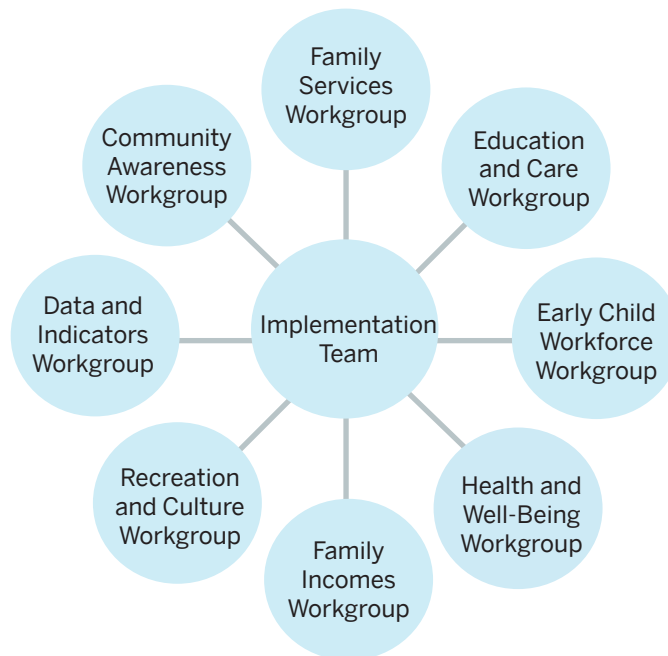
All that remained in the planning process was the work of formatting and formalizing the results of the year-long effort, which was done with the assistance of a contracted writer. In addition, the initiative continued to reach out to ever-widening circles of stakeholders. By the summer of 2002, the strategic blueprint was complete and ready for release.

Implementation Phase

With the strategic blueprint in its final form, representing input from hundreds of people and representatives of nearly every organization that had a hand in working with young children

in Springfield, CHECHS moved into its implementation phase. This required a significant transition, as strategy shifted from planning to action and some Design Team members who had contracted to work through the planning phases stepped down. Over the summer of 2002, IISC worked with the Design Team to nominate individuals for an Implementation Team that would map out the process moving forward, market and advocate for the strategic blueprint, monitor progress, and identify candidates and team leaders for Working Groups tasked with acting on the strategic recommendations (see diagram).

One Working Group was assigned to each of the eight recommendations from the CHECHS strategic plan. In some cases, members of the original Design Team and Planning Group were members of these teams. Once fully constituted, these groups began



³ For a copy of the CHECHS strategic blueprint go to www.cherishspringfield.org.



CHECHS Recommendations

- Develop a sustained community awareness campaign of informative and motivational messages designed to assist and support families in raising happy, healthy children, and to inform and engage the community at large in its role in supporting families of young children.
- Strengthen, coordinate, and facilitate access to comprehensive support services for families of young children that are designed to meet individual families' needs in order to optimize their healthy functioning.
- Ensure the availability of and access to high-quality early childhood education and care for all children five years and under to maximize their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development and to ensure effective transitions for children from early childhood program and home to kindergarten and first grade.
- Expand and retain a supply of well-trained, credentialed, and well-compensated early childhood professionals to maximize the health development, care, and education of young children.
- Promote and sustain programs to optimize the health and well-being of young children and their families.
- Assist families of young children to increase their earning power so that they meet or exceed the Massachusetts Self-Sufficiency Standard.
- Ensure the availability of and access to worthwhile recreational and cultural programs for young children and their families to improve their quality of life and to instill in children a lifelong appreciation for physical fitness, culture, and the arts.
- Create a Cherish Every Child data committee whose charge will be to establish quality of life indicators for Springfield's young children and collect and disseminate reliable data on children's status on an annual basis.

developing long-term goals and objectives for each strategy, as well as an 18-month action plan for their most immediate work. In addition, they conducted an analysis of and developed a communication strategy for their respective stakeholders and developed linkages to appropriate public policy agendas. In April, IISC performed its last facilitation of a gathering of the Implementation Team and Working Group leaders to come to a shared understanding of the various plans and strategies before members launched their efforts.

“By virtue of IISC’s help, we were able to come up with the really salient strategic issues that are still all relevant today.”

– Mary Walachy

Outcomes

There were and continue to be a variety of significant outcomes attached to the initiation, early phases, and ongoing work of Cherish Every Child Springfield.

Strategic Plan/Public Awareness

The Davis Foundation’s Mary Walachy notes first and foremost that the multiple months of work of the Design Team resulted in “a successful convening of the community to raise awareness and elevate consciousness and the importance of young children in Springfield.” In the process, Walachy explains, “We were able to come up with the really salient strategic issues that are still all relevant today, a few years after the fact.” This includes some challenges,

such as oral health, that no one had previously been addressing. All of this was then compiled into a concrete deliverable, the strategic blueprint, that Walachy calls “our roadmap for the future.” This document provides ongoing guidance to community agencies and collaborative efforts to implement the recommendations developed through the planning process.

Community Building

Margaret Blood remarks that the planning process was valuable in and of itself in that disparate players, including many organizations and individuals that had never before worked together, were given the opportunity to interface and unite around a shared agenda. Woody Greene adds that the broad-based and inclusive approach was significant, resulting in buy-in from critical players such as the business community and elected officials. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence exists of agencies continuing to kindle new partnerships and applying for joint funding on behalf of young children. Blood credits this community-building success to the Davis Foundation’s commitment and leadership as well as IISC’s ability to meaningfully engage many different players through a carefully designed structure and expertly facilitated process. An outside evaluator’s work corroborates this view, showing that what many participants found most valuable was Davis’ role in bringing the community together as well as the consistent facilitation and clear agendas provided throughout the numerous planning meetings and small group sessions.⁵

⁵Donohue Institute. Cherish Every Child Initiative: Short-Term Formative Evaluation. (Amherst, MA: UMass Donahue Institute, October 2004).



Skill-Building

Another identified strength and outcome of the process was the skill-building provided by IISC's trainings. The emerging leaders who attended the Facilitative Leadership® trainings left with concrete and relevant skills for collaboratively engaging others in their organizations and communities. In addition, many participants learned from the examples set by Marianne Hughes, Courtney Bourns, and other IISC facilitators. Design Team member Frank Robinson remarks, "The extent to which I can sit in a group like that and see someone facilitate at pretty high skill levels is helpful. I really did learn and take back and apply, and I'm not often in that position. I still borrow [IISC's] framework to guide my thinking." For Woody Greene, an experienced community facilitator, watching IISC staff do their work provided an opportunity for him to "sharpen the saw," improving and expanding his own practice.

Ongoing Work

Another significant outcome is expressed by Mary Walachy, who points to "a commitment on the part of some of those who participated in staying in the game of now working to address the issues raised as a result of the convening." Three years out from the planning of CHECHS, the initiative is still actively engaged in improving the lives of Springfield's youngest children. More than this, Margaret Blood remarks, "There's a host of activities that were not occurring before and there's an alignment that is exemplary and unique for any urban center probably in the United States." These activities include the training of educators to provide oral health screening and get children's teeth sealed;

the identification of 50 early educators to receive support to pursue an AA or BA degree; planning efforts with the superintendent of schools around universal preschool; and the bringing together of different family support programs under the guise of a home visiting model for parents of young infants in the community. In addition, CHECHS continues to keep the issue of young children's welfare in the minds of Springfield residents and at the top of the public agenda through the media and other community convenings.⁶

Lessons Learned

For Marianne Hughes, IISC Executive Director and lead consultant on the CHECHS initiative, this project is a classic illustration of what is required to convene a community-wide planning process. "What we lived through in Springfield are the fundamental pieces that absolutely need to be in place for these massive initiatives to really work." To begin, there was the willingness and ability of the Davis Foundation with its resources and connections to serve as "a truly authentic convenor of a truly authentic process." The Foundation's strong reputation in the community, including its tendency not to impose its own agenda, served it well in garnering trust in and commitment to the project. As Mary Walachy explains, "The only agenda was to do what's right for kids, and to engage others in determining what that meant."

In addition, there was the critical role of content expert, in this case represented most prominently by Margaret

⁶ Updates on CHECHS-related activities can be found at www.cherishspringfield.org.



Blood of Strategies for Children. Blood’s research and policy background in early childhood issues brought depth and balance to the planning process. Her knowledgeable input, recommendations, and suggestions to connect with other content experts, such as Dr. Shonkoff, helped to guide the Planning Group and Design Team in the development of the prioritized recommendations that formed the heart of the strategic blueprint.

Woody Greene’s role as the project manager and weaver of the network was equally critical. Given the scope of the project, it was necessary to have a skilled person on the ground, not just for logistical support, but to keep the community informed and engaged in the process. Greene served as a diligent organizer and communicator who used his facilitation skills to continuously gather input from the community. Marianne Hughes remarks that CHECHS benefited tremendously from Greene’s charisma, intelligence, and dedication to the initiative. His constant presence helped to maintain momentum and ensure relevancy.

Skilled process design and facilitation, as provided by IISC, kept the project structured, motivating, and engaging. In essence, IISC served as the architects of the initiative. Furthermore, Margaret Blood remarks that lead IISC facilitators Marianne Hughes and Courtney Bourns were “very inspiring and great role models for keeping people hopeful about making positive change.”

Hughes notes that one of the biggest challenges to this kind of undertaking is “holding people’s

fear, doubt, and impatience.” With this in mind, IISC worked to “hold the center” of the initiative and counter the centrifugal energies that are often present in the early stages of planning.

IISC was helped in this work by the Design Team and Planning Group. Marianne Hughes notes that the CHECHS Design Team, which served as an engine for the planning phases, was extremely high functioning and very committed to the project. Its energy and ability to synthesize and prioritize feedback was critical to the success of the project. Equally critical was the extended reach provided by the Planning Group, which brought further boost to the initiative and an important net for community feedback.


In addition to the elements of success, the different players learned how they might improve upon their work and similar undertakings in the future. Many of these revelations revolved around the issue of boldness. For both Mary Walachy and Woody Greene, the initiative could have been more ambitious with regards to reaching and enlisting more participants early on. In Walachy’s view, this goal was tempered by cautiousness on the part of her foundation, which was entering new territory and trying to balance its previous role and practices with a more public persona and approach. “We were kind of pushing, putting ourselves out there as leaders on this initiative and it was really difficult to know how far to go with it. . . . I was probably timid about how big we wanted to step out.” Greene feels he might have reached more parents of young children in his enlistment efforts and that CHECHS could have

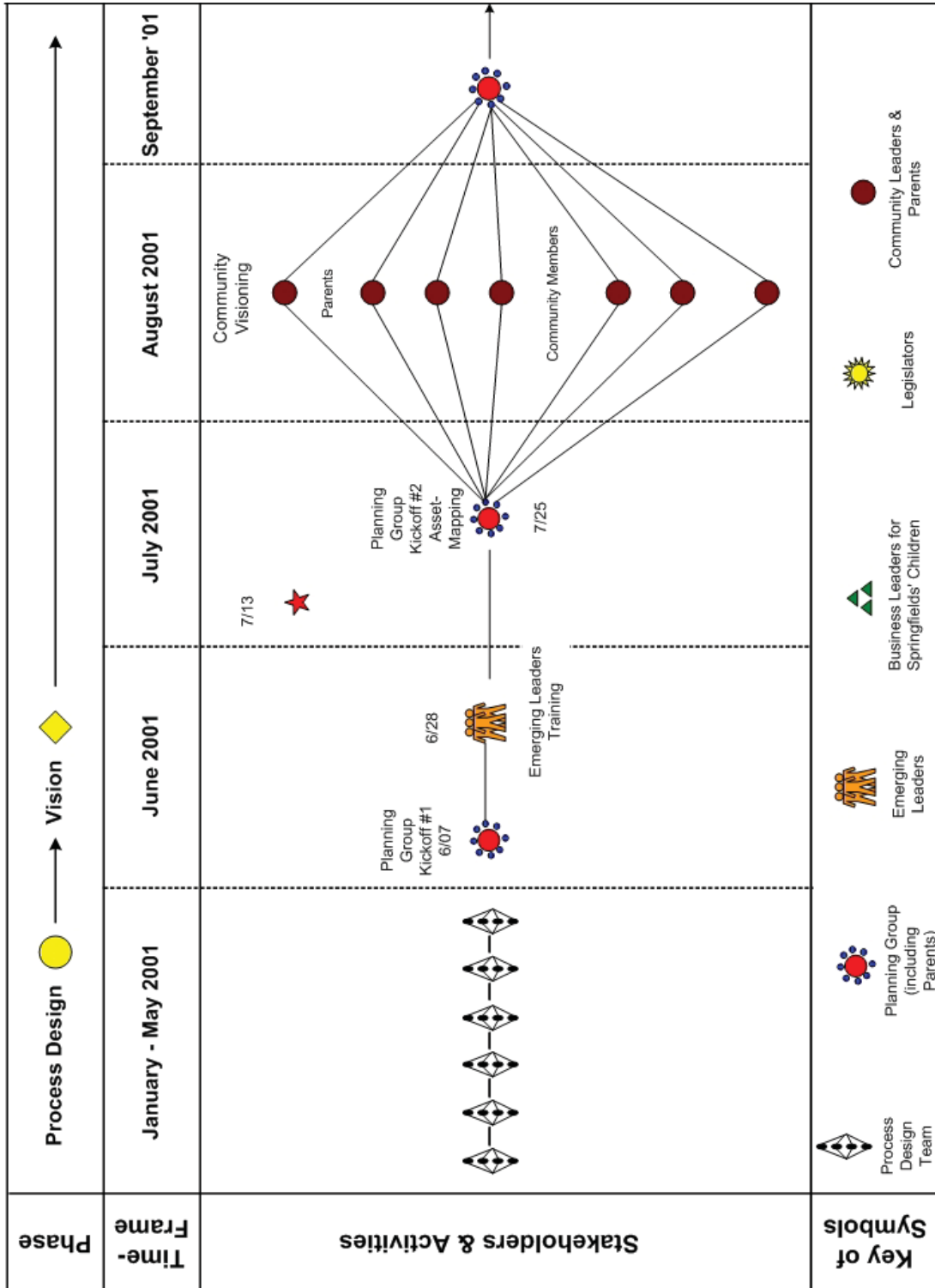


done a better job of aligning itself with other existing initiatives in Springfield. At the same time, however, he recognized the need to balance these goals with concern for overstressing capacity.

For IISC, the issue of boldness related mainly to the question of how much to ask of participants in a lengthy and time consuming process. Two principle areas, the transition from planning to implementation and the connection of leadership training to the overall initiative, begged further reflection on this front. Looking back, both Marianne Hughes and Frank Robinson point to the need to re-contract with and retrain members of the Implementation Team given that its work, while a continuation of what came before, was of a very different nature. Hughes questions whether it might have made sense to contract with Design Team members through the implementation phase, while Robinson remarks that in some cases Design Team members could simply not have continued as they moved out of the community and on to new responsibilities.

Frank Robinson also suggests that more could have been done to integrate the emerging leader trainings into the overall planning initiative. In the future, he recommends creating a structure that ties trainees to the process so that expectations are more explicit. He would tell young leaders, “You are being trained to help implement the project and because we’re giving you the training and the organizations from which you’re coming, we expect you to give back ten hours of x, y, and z over the next six months.” Robinson thinks that this will help to broaden the base of participation.

With these questions and suggestions in mind, Cherish Every Child continues to make strides in its efforts to achieve its lofty and important vision as the number of people touched by the initiative’s spirit of collaboration continues to grow. Margaret Blood’s initial notion, and IISC’s underlying operating principle – that a well designed and facilitated collaborative process that engages the community in finding its own solutions yields smart and strongly supported strategies as well as lasting results – appears to have been well-founded and on its way to making a difference for Springfield’s children. 



IMPLEMENTATION

