

The Boston Starting Points Initiative

Note: The following profile describes one of the 11 sites that were funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York as part of the Starting Points initiative. It was developed in conjunction with the Learning from Starting Points project, an assessment of the four and one-half year initiative, and approved by the Starting Points site as of July 1999. For more information see *Learning from Starting Points: Findings from the Starting Points Assessment Project*, prepared by Dr. Jane Knitzer with the assistance of Fida Adely and published by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University, 2001. This publication is free on the NCCP Web site: <<http://www.nccp.org>> or copies are obtainable at \$5.00 each prepaid at NCCP Attn. Publications, 154 Haven Avenue, New York, NY 10032. For further information, e-mail: nccp@columbia.edu, fax: 212-544-4200, or phone: 212-304-7195.

The Boston Starting Points initiative, Connecting the Dots for Boston's Tots (DOTS), is a partnership of parents, service providers, and community leaders who are working together to improve the well-being of young children and their families. The initiative's primary goal has been to create a model for a more integrated system of services at the neighborhood level for families with young children. Efforts have also focused on advocacy for more integrated policies, greater resources for young children citywide, and support for a statewide agenda to improve child health and development.

At the neighborhood level, DOTS sought to achieve these goals through program development and improvement and by building partnerships with providers, parents, and other community leaders. Specifically, they worked with neighborhood partners to implement an integrated system called "Circles of Caring." The focus of these community-level efforts has been North Dorchester, which is the largest neighborhood in Boston and has the highest proportion of children under the age of 15. Thirty-five percent of the children in North Dorchester live in poverty. Although the initiative has been focused in North Dorchester, Boston Starting Points has been working on building neighborhood capacity citywide. On the city and state levels, DOTS has been working with the mayor's office and more than 50 partners to develop a process for building and sustaining interdisciplinary teams that work together to plan and advocate on behalf of improved services for families with young children. The initiative brought together a variety of advocates to work toward common goals.

THE GENERAL POLICY CONTEXT

Mayor Thomas Menino is committed to improving the well-being of young children and families and strongly supports the efforts of the DOTS partnership. The

mayor's office sees North Dorchester as a model for the development of neighborhood-based comprehensive services that could be replicated elsewhere. Mayor Menino established the first citywide Office of Children and Families, which acts not only as a focal point for efforts that address the needs of children and families but as a voice for city leaders as well. Unfortunately, its budget is limited to \$60,000.

THE BOSTON STARTING POINTS INITIATIVE

Initiative Leadership and Auspices

DOTS is a collaborative partnership involving:

- *The Family Nurturing Center (FNC)*—a nonprofit organization that works in partnership with others to provide a range of a family support services to parents and children at health care centers, early childhood programs, schools, settlement houses, and other community-based sites across the city of Boston.
- *Dorchester CARES*—a coalition of neighborhood child and youth care providers that operate the Circles of Caring, an integrated system of formal and informal support for neighborhood families and children. It is one of the primary platforms for the DOTS collaboration. Additional funding has been secured to spread Circles of Caring to other neighborhoods.
- *Health Care for All (HCFA)*—a statewide advocacy organization that works to expand health care coverage for under- and uninsured populations and to expand and improve access to better health care through public education, training, and community organizing.
- *Mayor's Office of Children and Families*—a division of the Mayor's Office of Community Partnerships, the Office for Children and Families focuses on in-

creasing the ability of Boston families to obtain information about programs and services available in the city. It also seeks through the Children and Services Fund to provide financial resources to strengthen programs and improve quality.

- *Mayor's Office of Intergovernmental Affairs*—a government office whose mission is to coordinate the city's relations with federal, state, and local governments seeking to foster constructive links between the city and these entities. This office keeps the mayor informed on intergovernmental issues and assists him in representing the city's interests in these matters.
- *Parents United for Child Care*—a statewide advocacy organization that works to increase access to quality child care by nurturing parents to be a vocal constituency.

Other collaborating partners include the Boston Medical Center, Boston Children's Museum, the 0–8 Coalition, Boston Early Education Quality Improvement Plan (EQUIP),* and United Way/Success by 6.

The initiative is managed through an administrative team and a staff team. The administrative team is comprised of members of each of the DOTS partner organizations and sets broad goals for program and policy. The staff team is made up of organizers, a parent leader, and others who are responsible for the day-to-day operations of the partnership. The Carnegie Corporation funded two-and-a-half community organizers for the staff team. Parents coordinate other activities as well.

Site-Specific Starting Points Goals

As a way to achieve the overall Starting Points goals, the Boston Starting Points Initiative focused on three major site-specific goals:

- GOAL 1: Develop a model system for comprehensive community-based support at the neighborhood level for families with young children.
- GOAL 2: Increase parent leadership in planning, action, training, and advocacy across the city.
- GOAL 3: Work with partners to advocate for improved city and state policies for young children and families.

Site-Specific Activities and Accomplishments

GOAL 1: Develop a model system for comprehensive community-based support at the neighborhood level for families with young children.

Develop and improve programs in the community

- Established the Neighborhood Resource Center (NRC) in North Dorchester to develop the “Circles of Caring” model for comprehensive community-based supports and services targeting young children and families in one place. The components of the Circles of Caring model include nurturing programs (structured family education programs to increase parenting skills), prenatal and primary care, child care, home visits, leadership development and advocacy, and links to other services such as adult education and housing. NRC is a gathering place for community organizing, service integration, resources exchange, and “Welcome Baby Central.” The DOTS partnership, the Family Nurturing Center, and Dorchester CARES are housed at the center.
- Established the Welcome Baby Program as a community outreach and organizing program to ensure that families with newborns are connected to neighborhood health care, child care, and family support programs. Through the program, trained home visitors and volunteers visit families, deliver a baby gift basket, and offer information about neighborhood resources. Visits are made on a self-referral basis (i.e., parents call and ask for a visit). As of April 1999, 100 Welcome Baby visits were completed (800 babies are born each year in Dorchester). Welcome Baby is coordinated by FNC and Dorchester CARES. A survey conducted of 97 families that were visited by Welcome Baby staff found that:
 - 53 percent learned about other resources and services;
 - 25 percent learned about child development;
 - 16 percent learned that there are people in the community who care;
 - 2 percent learned about how to help others in the community; and
 - 2 percent experienced personal change.

* Boston's 0–8 Coalition is an interagency collaboration designed to expand and improve the quality of comprehensive services for the care and education of children from birth to eight years of age. The collaboration involves social service organizations, parent advocacy agencies, Boston public schools, family child care providers, health agencies, child care centers, and families. It does this by establishing neighborhood clusters (nine in all) to manage the “Community Partnerships” funding that was allocated for this purpose. The coalition is funded by the state Department of Education, the Mayor's Office of Families and Children, and the Schott Foundation.

Develop leaders in the neighborhood

- Trained more than 100 service providers in 1999 on service integration methods at a workshop titled “Babies Can’t Wait.” Attendees included early childhood professionals, family care and other providers, health and family educators, and teachers from across the city. The Infant and Toddler Service Summit, a statewide initiative to promote better services for infants and toddlers, funded this training.
- DOTS staff members have collaborated with neighborhood child care organizations and family care provider networks through the 0-8 Coalition and their neighborhood clusters. A greater number of care providers have been involved in planning neighborhood activities as a result of their participation in these clusters.
- Created “Advocacy Action Kit” as a resource for community advocates.

GOAL 2: Increase parent leadership in planning, action, training, and advocacy.

Develop leaders citywide

- Created opportunities for parents to participate in leadership training, advocacy for young children, and educational programs. A number of the DOTS partners work with parents in this capacity, including Parents United for Child Care, Health Care for All, FNC, and Dorchester CARES. The partners have held workshops and training on leadership (including public speaking, public policy, and listening skills), advocacy, information sharing, and building parent leadership. Parents are actively involved in training other parents, advocacy, and planning.
- Three DOTS partners came together to use their parent leadership experience to develop a new program for those already involved in parent groups and interested in developing more general leadership and advocacy skills. This four-week, 12-hour training was held for the first time in May 2000. A second component to this program places interested parents in paid internships with local organizations.

GOAL 3: Advocate with partners to improve city and state policies for young children and families.

Develop and implement a legislative agenda focused on improving the availability and affordability of child care statewide

- Led an advocacy effort to increase the supply of quality child care efforts through the Affordable Child

Care for Everyone (ACE) campaign. This legislation for state-supported child care is still under consideration. To date, the ACE campaign has been successful in doubling the child care tax credit for working families. Parents United for Child Care, with the O-8 Coalition and its neighborhood clusters of child care providers and Boston’s EQUIP is leading this effort.

- Successfully advocated with other partners for increases in resources for early care and education in 1999, including:
 - \$21 million increase for Community Partnerships for Children state preschool program for three-to-five year olds, (although they had hoped to fund the program for birth to six year olds);
 - \$1.5 million increase for kindergarten through fifth grade literacy programs;
 - \$2 million increase for the Massachusetts Family Network;
 - \$34 million increase in subsidized child care; and
 - Increased funding for after-school care and full-day kindergarten.
- Through the first ever city-state collaborative RFP process, obtained 32 new infant/toddler care slots in three Boston neighborhoods—Dorchester, Roxbury, and the South End—and multi-year funding for family support services.

Engage the public around young children

- Worked with the Mayor’s Offices of Children and Families to heighten public awareness and understanding about the importance of the early years of childhood through events such as the Week of Children, Month of the Child, and a Community Sing.

Develop and implement a legislative agenda focused on increasing children’s access to health care statewide.

- Successfully advocated for the expansion of state health insurance to make available free or low-cost health care for all children under age 19 in families with incomes of up to 200 percent of the poverty level (previously 150 percent). Health Care for All led this effort.

Promote community-based partnerships to improve access to health care

- HCFA and other DOTS partners are working through the Boston Health Access Project to ensure that com-

munity residents with children under age six are enrolled in the state health care plan if they are eligible. Outreach efforts are being led by HCFA with the support of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and the mayor's office. Outreach workers have been recruited from seven different immigrant communities to do health education and enrollment work.

- In collaboration with other DOTS partners, HCFA established and continues to lead the Healthy Homes/Healthy Kids Coalition, the goal of which is to increase awareness concerning safety issues in the home, focusing particularly on injury prevention, asthma, and lead poisoning. The coalition has developed and distributed a brochure titled "How Housing Affects our Children's Health: A Guide for Boston Residents."