

[Roundtable Discussion Symposium, Rating: 5.0]

Title: Developing and Evaluating Community-Wide Investments in Interventions for Children: Foundation, Evaluator, and International Perspectives

Chair: Kimberly Boller, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

Panelist 1: Abbie Raikes, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Funding Evidence-Based Community Partnerships to Enhance School Readiness: The Early Learning Initiative in Washington State

Panelist 2: Diane Paulsell, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.
Evaluating the Early Learning Initiative in Washington State: The Importance of a Pre-Intervention Baseline

Panelist 3: Tom Costello, Atlantic Philanthropies
Bringing Everyone to the Table: Funding Intervention Approaches that Bring Policy Makers, Communities, and Researchers Together

Panelist 4: Gail Birkbeck, Atlantic Philanthropies
The Disadvantaged Children and Youth Programme in Ireland: Empowering Service Providers to Conduct Rigorous Evaluations

Community-wide interventions designed to improve children's well-being are attractive to policy makers, foundations, and community stakeholders because they provide a mechanism for constructing or strengthening services and systems of care and early education. Large-scale investments in providing evidence-based community-wide interventions both in the United States and around the world have targeted municipalities, states, and entire countries. There are special challenges involved in implementing and evaluating community-wide interventions. Implementation challenges abound as funders and community partners work together to identify what types of services are needed, which evidence-based models would best meet the needs of targeted communities, how to blend funds across collaborating agencies and service providers, and how to ensure fidelity and quality to large-scale adoption of practices that may not have been tested in the "real world." Evaluation challenges include identifying rigorous designs that are able to provide evidence of the impact of community-wide initiatives. For example, some believe

that there it may not be possible to rigorously evaluate such investments because a suitable control group or comparison group cannot be identified (Hollister and Hill 1995). Both implementation and evaluation are plagued by definitional issues, including what is meant by community-wide (usually defined by a geographic area) and what happens when eligible residents come into and move out of the service area.

Implementation and evaluation reports on two initiatives launched at the turn of the century provide lessons for recent community-wide efforts in Washington State and in Ireland. In 1999, England began Sure Start, an area-based initiative with the aim of improving the health and well-being of families and children from before birth to four, so children are ready to flourish when they go to school. An implementation evaluation demonstrated that families and children in the service areas actually received very few of the services that were available (Tunsill et al. 2005). The evaluation design and methodology focused on measuring the impacts of Sure Start on children and families had a number of weaknesses, including lack of baseline equivalence between the treatment and comparison communities and low response rates (Melhuish et al. 2005, Melhuish et al. 2008). Although the evaluation reports document impacts at age 3 on a large sample of children, the methodological issues undercut the generalizability of the findings. In 2002, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation launched an early childhood initiative (focused on birth through age 3) in Trenton, New Jersey, to determine if focused efforts to bring about community change could make measurable differences in children's health and well-being and help ensure their readiness to enter school. Recent findings on implementation indicate mixed success in establishing fidelity to the evidence-based service models and in the uptake of services by the target population (Walker 2008). In addition, impacts have been challenging to document given the lack of recent citywide data (Walker 2008). Both of these examples suggest that an early focus on setting and meeting standards for fidelity and dosage is critical, as are creative

evaluation strategies that employ a range of approaches to documenting change at all levels—system, program, early care and education workforce, family, and child.

In this roundtable discussion symposium, representatives from two foundation-sponsored community-wide investments in early childhood services and systems will introduce the overarching goals of two recent initiatives; implementation plans and progress; and evaluation frameworks. The discussion will be enriched by the participation of representatives of the evaluation efforts underway on the projects who will highlight the methodological issues that have surfaced in conducting rigorous research on these community-wide interventions. The chair will facilitate a lively discussion with the audience and focus the four panelists and attendees on answering questions about both the successes and challenges faced in mounting the two efforts and lessons for other community-wide initiatives. Here we briefly describe the two initiatives and highlight features of their evaluation approaches.

The Early Learning Initiative in Washington State. In 2006, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched the Early Learning Initiative, a 10-year strategy for improving the school readiness of Washington State's children. To achieve this goal, the foundation is engaged in a statewide public-private partnership to implement the initiative's three main components: (1) development of comprehensive, high-quality, community-wide early learning initiatives in two demonstration communities in Washington State, (2) enhancement of statewide systems that support early learning, and (3) support for implementation of promising practices in Washington State communities. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. has designed an evaluation to: (1) provide information for continuous improvement in the demonstration communities, (2) provide information to inform state policy and the development of best practices, and (3) assess the effects of long-term investment in early learning systems. The design of the evaluation consists of four main analytic components that together will accomplish these goals: (1) an in-depth

implementation study, (2) a kindergarten readiness study, (3) short-term impact studies, and (4) a long-term impact study.

Disadvantaged Children and Youth Programme in Ireland. The Atlantic Philanthropies seeks to keep children engaged in learning and healthy through investments in prevention and early intervention. The foundation is focused on informing government policy in two countries regarding disadvantaged children and youth by piloting and rigorously evaluating innovative approaches to improving outcomes for children. Organizations providing these innovative services engage with independent evaluators to conduct rigorous studies of the services they implement. To build the capacity for rigorous evaluation, the foundation has invested in academic institutions to train qualified researchers and garner international expertise. Additionally, with co-funding from government, the foundation is supporting the development of a technical assistance provider to help service providers better conduct and use data in practice. Representatives from the foundation will describe the innovative and evidence-based services being implemented by 15 organizations, discuss the process used by organizations to develop the services, and report on the progress of the independent evaluations being carried out to demonstrate the effectiveness of the services. They will also discuss the challenges of engaging government and using evidence to influence policy.

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