

The Brighter Futures Initiative of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving¹

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BRIEF #3

The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving has made a twenty-five year commitment and allocated thirty-five million dollars through the Brighter Futures Initiative to prepare young children to enter school ready to learn and succeed during the early grades. The Initiative is built on the premise that young children who are healthy, have high quality early childhood experiences and have families who are supported in their childrearing will experience that success. It is one of the longest lasting commitments by any Foundation.

The History:

In 1990 the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving launched a ten year, ten million dollar effort to promote the school readiness of children in Hartford from birth through age five. The effort, called *Brighter Futures: Investing in Hartford's Children*, focused on:

- Family support and parent education,
- Quality child care and early childhood education,
- Comprehensive health care; and
- Responsive schools.

The Foundation adapted its grant making policies to give the Initiative greater flexibility.

- Grantees were permitted to apply for multiple grants within three years of one another;
- Grantees were eligible for grants from the Initiative and unrestricted grants from the Foundation at the same time;
- Grants were permitted beyond the traditional three year period; and
- Municipal and state agencies were eligible to receive grants.

Throughout the decade the Initiative gave grants to individual organizations. Over sixty grants were made during this period with the largest expenditures (41%) designed to improve comprehensive health care. These included grants that led to the creation of the Children's Health Council and the enhancement of the state's Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment program. The Initiative also supported the creation of the Hartford School Readiness Council and funded almost a thousand new school readiness slots for three and four year olds. Towards the end of the decade the first family centers were funded to support families in their efforts to prepare children to enter school.



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¹Much of the information in this brief is taken from:

Richard Sussman, Elysa Gordon, and Elena Trueworthy “Hartford Foundation for Public Giving Early Childhood Investments Discussion Paper” (September 6, 2012) and

Richard Sussman “Brighter Futures: Twenty Years of Philanthropic Partnerships with the Non-profit sector, Government and Hartford Residents” (June 15, 2012)



Although focused on individual grant making throughout this decade, the Initiative recognized the need to shift attention to the systems that supported young children and their families. The grants that created the Children's Health Council and the Hartford School Readiness Council are early examples of this shift.

In 2000 the Foundation renewed its commitment to Brighter Futures extending it for a second decade and increasing the available funding to fifteen million dollars. The age of the population served by the Initiative was increased from five to eight years to include the early years of school. Throughout this decade the Initiative intensified its efforts to strengthen the systems that supported young children and their families. A strong emphasis was placed on relationship building.

- The Initiative retained relationships with partners who were also working to strengthen systems for young children and their families.
 - ◆ The Hartford Area Child Care Collaborative was established in 1987 to address the availability, affordability and accessibility of child care. It is a network of more than 300 organizations and individuals, mobilizing expertise and support for programs that assist children and families.
 - ◆ The Connecticut Commission on Children was created in 1985 by the Connecticut legislature to bring together the various levels of government, the private sector, nonprofit agencies, and philanthropy to promote public policies in the best interests of children.
- In 2002 the Initiative proactively sought out community groups throughout Hartford to conduct needs assessment surveys and plan support centers in their neighborhoods to meet the needs of local families with young children. The family centers that were created continue to be supported by the Initiative as they have grown from drop-in centers to organizations providing holistic services to young families through collaborative relationships with other providers.
- In 2002 and 2003, studies were conducted of the school readiness of over 900 children entering kindergarten in collaboration with Hartford Public Schools. These studies documented the importance of parental involvement and early childhood education programs in preparing children for school. This information continues to help guide the policies of the Initiative.
- In 2003 the Initiative began the four year Child Care Enhancement Project, working with fourteen non-profit child care centers and eight City of Hartford Early Learning Centers to improve the ability of those centers to prepare young children to enter school. The project provided training and coaching in the use of an evidence-based curriculum along with other interventions to address the needs in those centers. School readiness did improve and remained higher even after the project ended.
- In 2004, the City of Hartford, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, Hartford Public Schools, and the Connecticut Commission on Children began a collaboration to chart a course for the city to strengthen early childhood policy and services. Six months later, the *Hartford Blueprint for Young Children* was produced to unite diverse programs and services in the City of Hartford over the subsequent five years and meld them into a cohesive coordinated, family-centered system that focused on public policymaking and financial investment to improve the lives of young children, ages birth to eight. The *Blueprint* advocated:
 - ◆ Forming a comprehensive framework to advocate and deliver services to young children and their families;
 - ◆ Creating a Mayor's Cabinet and an Office For Young Children;
 - ◆ Consolidating a variety of existing city government and school services for young children;
 - ◆ Establishing targets for twenty-six short and long-term strategic actions, building an information system to enable the city to set goals for childhood outcomes, and measuring the results; and
 - ◆ Building and strengthening practices that engage parents, families and other adults.
- In 2006, the three year Haskins Literacy Initiative was begun in five Hartford Public Elementary Schools to improve the ability of teachers to teach reading. The reading skills of students in these schools improved in kindergarten, first, and second grade resulting in reading scores above the national average.

These efforts, initiated by the middle of the decade, defined the Initiative's emphasis on creating systems change by building networks working together to strengthen young children and their families.



In 2010 the Foundation again renewed its commitment to Brighter Futures, this time with a five-year, ten-million dollar investment. The Initiative began to focus upon building an infrastructure for early childhood systems. That same year the W. K. Kellogg Foundation provided a two year one million dollar grant to the Brighter Futures Initiative to demonstrate the value of aligning state, municipal, and local service systems to strategically improve the quality of early childhood services for disadvantaged children and their families.

The partners who make up the Kellogg Partnership Project are working together to achieve shared goals around common themes.

- Six Family Centers, dispersed throughout the city, are each operated through a partnership between a parent advisory board and a community-based organization. The centers have traditionally provided services for young children and their families. They are critical to the partnership project because they have access to many vulnerable Hartford families.
- The *Brighter Futures Family Center Circuit Rider* works with each Family Center to increase the quality and quantity of services provided, the number of families receiving services, and the funding available to provide such services.
- The *Family Civics Initiative* is a collaborative of the Hartford Department of Families, Children, Youth and Recreation and the Connecticut Commission on Children that has led to the reintroduction of the Parent Leadership Training Institute preparing parents to be a voice throughout the city.
- *Paving the Way* is providing an opportunity for Spanish speaking child care workers to earn an associate's degree in Early Childhood Education while developing their skills in English. It is a result of the Connecticut Commission on Children, the Hartford Department of Families, Children, Youth and Recreation, and the Hartford Child Care Collaborative working together with Capital Community College.
- The Hartford Public Schools' Adult Education Center is providing GED preparation or ESL classes in each of the Brighter Futures Family Centers.

As the Brighter Futures Initiative has matured over the past decades it has transitioned from responsive grant-making to proactively identifying issues, developing partnerships, and building systems that meet the needs of young children and their families in the Hartford area.

Guiding Principles:

Throughout its history the Brighter Futures Initiative has been guided by a set of core beliefs or principles. These principles have changed slightly since the beginning but, for the most part, have remained a consistent foundation upon which the Initiative is built. Those principles are:

- *Family Centered Focus* – Brighter Futures values and supports family relationships, builds on family strengths to achieve optimal outcomes for children and stresses the importance of development of all family members.
- *Prevention Focus* – Brighter Futures supports an early childhood framework and strategies that strengthen individual families and provide a stable foundation for healthy development.
- *Emphasis on High Quality* – Brighter Futures defines quality according to the highest recognized, agreed-upon standard and critical to any service is the degree to which it is implemented with fidelity.
- *Holistic* – Brighter Futures invests in strategies that support the whole child by integrating physical and social-emotional health, education, family supports, and other sectors that address the needs of children and their families.
- *Place-Based* – Brighter Futures focuses on the unique needs of a broad array of environments where children and families live and learn to ensure greater accessibility.



- *Systems Focused* – Brighter Futures recognizes that multiple systems operate and interact with one another to achieve long-term, sustained positive outcomes for children and their families.
- *Intentional Connectivity* – Brighter Futures makes a deliberate effort to connect resources, programs and sectors based on best practice, research and experience shared by partners and families in the community.
- *Cultural Competence* – Brighter Futures commits to demonstrating the understanding, values, capacities and staffing that respond to the unique needs of children and families from diverse cultural, ethnic, racial and economic backgrounds.
- *Civic Engagement* – Brighter Futures values the role that families play in shaping the programs, practices, and policies that affect them and seeks to help families access the tools they need to become leaders who partner with schools, community, nonprofit organizations and government to promote the healthy development for children.
- *Public Private Partnership* – Brighter Futures recognizes that public-private partnerships can build on the best resources and thinking in each sector and leverage the investments of the public and philanthropic sectors to broaden the reach of the philanthropic field to achieve positive societal change.

