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ABSTRACT

The Child, Youth, and Family Consortium at the University of Minnesota was convened to help policymakers develop relevant public policy that is well-grounded in research and theory. The Consortium has the mission of bringing together varied competencies of the University and vital resources of Minnesota's communities to enhance the ability of individuals and organizations to address health, education, and social policy concerns in ways that improve the well-being of Minnesota children, youth, and families. This paper presents background information on the Consortium and its mission, and a pilot model for information dissemination. The paper further describes some of the Consortium's activities as well as challenges encountered. The paper highlights the Consortium's activities, including facilitating connections with intercollegiate centers and departments conducting work in early childhood, working with community groups, and formalizing their relationship with the state department of education. It is noted that the Consortium takes a two-pronged approach to policy education: reactive work occurs during the legislative session, during which a field policy educator provides information, recommends names of expert witnesses, and builds relationships with key legislators; proactive work includes hosting joint policy forums, supporting University-site efforts at generating policy-relevant information, working with the Consortium Advisory Council, and developing the Web site. The paper then outlines challenges facing the Consortium, including maintaining a balance between reactive and proactive work, and balancing the varied interests of the partners and the Consortium. The paper concludes by asserting that the collaborative model of disseminating policy-relevant information to state and local policymakers is effective and that the Consortium is now recognized as a conduit to the University and a reliable source of information. (KB)

Disseminating Early Childhood Research to Local and State Policymakers
Head Start 5th National Conference

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University-community model for connecting research, practice and policy

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Children, Youth and Family Consortium

University of Minnesota

June, 2000

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I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss different models of information dissemination, specifically around early childhood research and practice. It is heartening to know that there are growing numbers of efforts to connect research, practice, and policy, and I commend everyone here for their interest and endeavors in this area. Today I'm going to talk about some of the policy education work we've been doing at the Children, Youth and Family Consortium, located at the University of Minnesota. I'm going to provide you with some background about the Consortium itself, the context for our work, and the "pilot" model we generated. I'll briefly describe some of our activities, as well as some of the challenges we encounter. I would like to acknowledge my Consortium colleagues in these efforts, who make important contributions to this work: Consortium Director Martha Farrell Erickson, Associate Director Jenny Keyser, Community Partnership and Communications Coordinator Michael Brott, MN Extension Family Program Leader Madge Alberts, and last, but not least, Program Coordinator and my co-author, Wendi Schirvar.

The Consortium is a unique entity in higher education. Housed under the purview of the Executive Vice President and Provost of the University of Minnesota, rather than within a particular college or department, its primary function is to serve as a bridge and connector of departments across the University and in the community. The mission of the Consortium is as follows: (OVERHEAD)

The Children, Youth and Family Consortium at the University of Minnesota has the mission of bringing together the varied competencies of the University and the vital resources of Minnesota's communities to enhance the ability of individuals and

As you can see, working on issues of social policy have been part of our work since our inception. Over the past year and a half, we've taken our mission around social policy to another level, having formulated and implemented a policy education initiative designed to connect the resources of the University to state and local policymakers. One of our target areas is early childhood.

It is our hope that we can help policymakers at all levels create and develop sound public policy that is well-grounded in research and theory. To that end, we are attempting to think creatively and collaboratively about how to "do policy education." We view this as a "work in progress." You'll notice that our activities and audience are not typical of the way more traditional policy work is done.

Keeping true to our mission and mode of functioning, we concentrated on connecting within the University and in the community. We facilitated connections with a strong intercollegiate infrastructure of centers and departments conducting work in early childhood. These include the Minnesota Extension Service, which has its family program leader co-located in our office; the Schools of Nursing and Public Health; and the College of Education and Human Development, particularly the Center for Early Education and Development, Institute of Child Development, and the Irving B. Harris Training Center for Infant and Toddler Development.

While these partners continue to be invaluable, we also have a strong community presence, working with groups including the Early Care and Education Finance Commission, which is co-chaired by the Lieutenant Governor and includes prominent business leaders and elected officials; the Minnesota Coalition on Family Policy, a group of organizations working to provide timely, accurate research pertaining to children and

families; and the Children's Coalition, a group of child-focused organizations who gather regularly during the legislative session to share information and present a coordinated front for children's issues.

We've also had the unique opportunity to formalize our relationship with the state department of education, called the Department of Children, Families, and Learning (DCFL). In conjunction with Deputy Commission of DCFL, we arranged for and helped subsidize one of their assistant commissioners to serve as a liaison to the Consortium on child and family policy issues at the state level. Since a great deal of policy development and implementation occurs at the state department level, we viewed this as an ideal way to link University resources to DCFL, other state agencies, and state legislators and policymakers.

With these broad-based connections, we experimented, if you will, with different ways of "doing" policy education. We took a 2-prong approach to policy education—reactive and proactive.

Much of our "reactive" work takes place during the legislative session. My colleague Wendi Schirvar serves as what you might call a "field policy educator." During the legislative session, she's present at the Capitol, listening for opportunities to provide information in a non-partisan manner, as well as understanding in context the issues presenting themselves during the session. Then she is able to generate names of University experts who might testify in committee and build relationships with key legislators and their staff, with the goal of positioning the University as a resource for pertinent, non-partisan information.

Building and maintaining relationships with policymakers even when the legislature is not in session is time consuming but has numerous benefits. Keeping connected allows them to remember that the Consortium is an important resource and helps us plan our “proactive” work.

Our proactive work takes place year round, and includes hosting joint policy forums, supporting University-wide efforts at generating policy-relevant information, working with the Consortium Advisory Council, and developing a section of our web site focusing on policy education.

Hosting policy forums isn’t exactly a new idea, but we decided to take advantage of these established opportunities and put a little different spin on them. Organized under the overarching theme of “public policy that works for kids,” forums to-date highlighted

- a state legislator’s perspective on making child and family policy;
- child welfare issues at the county level;
- family involvement in children’s learning; and
- children’s human rights.

What is unique about our policy forums is the cross-section of attendees—University faculty, staff and students, community leaders and advocates, and local and state policymakers in the same room—and the modes of interaction. Forums are rarely lecture-driven; instead, they are structured to encourage interaction and exchange of ideas, no matter how controversial. And for the most part, these are co-organized with a University or community partner.

We actively support University-wide efforts at generating policy-relevant information. One of our University partners, the Minnesota Extension Service, has for

the past two years developed and supported a project called *Just In Time Research*, where University faculty and staff apply for funds to write briefing papers about policy-relevant research. The first topic was *Children, Youth and Families*, and the second, which is to come out in July, is *Revitalizing Community*. We assisted by encouraging faculty and staff to submit proposals; serving on the proposal review committee; disseminating the published volumes to various community leaders and policymakers; highlighting the volume during the legislative session; and posting the volume on the policy section of our web site.

In the fall, we experimented with another way to get our colleagues to think about the connections between research, practice and policy. The Consortium has an advisory council comprised of University faculty and staff and community leaders and policymakers. The advisory council meets twice a year, and offers feedback on Consortium activities. We decided to lead the group in a critical thinking exercise on the question of the efficacy of early childhood education. With the upcoming legislative session and the current controversies/backlash surrounding the brain development research, we thought that conducting a critical analysis was timely and appropriate.

Here's a picture of the way we analyzed the question at hand (OVERHEAD):

Early childhood care and education is an excellent investment of public funds. Our facilitator solicited statements in response to the question, which were recorded under the appropriate analytic category: history, assumptions, evidence, or implications. This was an incredibly rich exercise which the advisory council enjoyed. In addition, we made some key observations that help guide our work and also reinforced the thinking upon which policy is generally based. For example, assumptions (e.g., investment in ECCE

will have long-term, lasting effects on the health, education, and development of children; it's better to invest in prevention than intervening later when problems arise) were stated to a much greater degree than evidence. In fact, the link between assumptions and evidence was quite weak. There was not a sense that assumptions needed to be supported by evidence. This experience confirmed for us that a guiding principle of our policy education work needs to focus on raising awareness about the importance and usefulness of evidence, and helping to provide specific pieces of evidence when possible. A reasonable conclusion, and one well within the purview of the university.

To tie all our activities together and continue our mission of serving as a “gateway,” to the University, the Consortium has a large, active website (www.cyfc.umn.edu). One section focuses on policy education and includes content information on our policy forums; research briefings and fact sheets produced by our University partners; weekly legislative summaries during the session; monthly policy features highlighting policy-relevant work conducting at the University; and links to relevant state and national policy websites. We are also gathering brief quotes from University faculty and staff—what they’d like to let policymakers know—and continuing to add research summaries and briefings.

As we’ve been engaged in this policy education initiative over the last year and a half, we’ve come to face some ongoing challenges, namely

- striking a balance between being reactive and proactive;
- maintaining an appropriate role for the University in the policy world (presenting our work as educational rather than lobbying);

- building relationships with key policymakers and staff; and
- balancing the varied interests of partners in this work.

It's hard to know how reactive and how proactive to be. We think to have a presence in the policy arena, you have to play both roles. The university can provide information and resources to a policy discussion or to policy development differently than can an advocacy group. And meeting the needs for information reactively and proactively helps build trust and relationships with policymakers and their staffs. We at the University, however, do need to be cautious about providing information so that it is clear that we are nonpartisan (or in our state, that means being tripartisan!) and not advocates (we are a state university receiving a bulk of funding from the state legislature). It took a while until people clearly understood the role of the Consortium/University in serving as a conduit for information on research and practice around children, youth and family issues.

Our biggest challenge probably came in working to balance the varied interests of partners and ourselves. This winter we were planning to jointly organize with the Department of Children, Families and Learning and the Senate and House Early Childhood Committees a policy forum on early childhood service integration. Last year the state legislature commissioned the department to study how early childhood services could be integrated and more effective and efficient. The initial plan was to have an open forum, a joint hearing, to explore how early childhood service integration was occurring in MN and generate information for the study.

Our role was to aid in forum planning and provide educational materials. We were excited about this opportunity and looked forward to bringing new partners to the

discussion and directly educating legislators. As this was a fairly new way to host a policy forum, and because there are political constraints, we allowed the DCFL to lead the planning efforts. DCFL, as a state department, is bound by the contents of the Governor's budget and is influenced by the Governor's policy goals. As a result, DCFL is often limited in its ability to pursue certain avenues of discussion. Despite attempts at planning, the forum was cancelled days before it was to occur.

We learned a lot from this experience, namely the need to clarify roles and expectations of all partners, have Plan B, and being acutely aware of the difficulties of partisan politics. We took from this experience both the disappointment about a missed opportunity and a goal to figure out the best kinds of policy education activities to engage in with state departments and legislators.

All in all, however, we feel quite positive about this collaborative model of disseminating policy-relevant information to state and local policymakers. Our efforts are beginning to yield fruit, as the Consortium is recognized as a conduit to the University and a reliable source of information. We look forward to the continued work with the hope that our state can meet the needs for our youngest and most vulnerable citizens and their families.

Children, Youth and Family Consortium University of Minnesota

Mission Statement

The Children, Youth, and Family Consortium was established during the Fall of 1991 to bring together the varied competencies of the University of Minnesota and the vital resources of Minnesota's communities to enhance the ability of individuals and organizations to address critical health, education, and social policy concerns in ways that improve the well-being of Minnesota children, youth, and families.

ALTERNATIVE, CONFLICTING & COMPETING PERSPECTIVES

(What objections could be raised against this claim? Are there other views or ways of thinking about this? Do you agree with this claim? If not, why is your view a more adequate one?)



ORIGINS, ROOTS, SOURCES

(Where did this idea come from? What forces and events propelled it? Why is there an interest in it? Whose interests are reflected?)



“Early childhood care and education is an excellent investment of public funds.”



CONSEQUENCES, IMPLICATIONS

(Where does this lead if we follow it out to its logical conclusion? How would we act on it? What are likely to be the consequences if we act on it? If it is true what else must be true?)



UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS, EVIDENCE FOR & AGAINST THE POSITION

(What does this claim assume? What evidence can you identify that supports the claim and its underlying assumptions? What evidence can you identify that refutes the claim and its underlying assumptions?)



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