



National League of Cities



Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

CITY STRATEGIES PAPER: *NLC's City Challenge for Early Childhood Success*

Early care and education is an issue that more and more municipal leaders recognize as vitally important to the future of their cities and towns. Research about early brain development confirms that what happens to children in their first years can have a lasting impact on their lives and on the community in which they live. Quality early experiences for young children (ages birth-five) pay dividends well into the future—reducing crime, improving school and employment success, and creating stronger families.

A recent NLC survey of municipal leaders underscores that early childhood success is a priority for cities and towns across the country. The survey found that one in four (25%) local elected officials rank child care and early education as one of the most critical needs for families in their communities. Despite the fact that early childhood programming has not traditionally been a municipal function, almost four in ten (38%) cities and towns report dedicating funding to early childhood development.

In 2003, under the leadership of President John DeStefano, Jr. (Mayor, New Haven, Conn.), NLC launched a year-long campaign to encourage municipal involvement in promoting early childhood success. The focal point of the campaign was the *City Challenge for Early Childhood Success*. The Challenge asked NLC members to develop multi-year early childhood plans for their communities. Cities and towns that were currently working on plans or already had plans in place were also welcome to join the Challenge and share their experience with other municipalities. As of December 2003, 108 cities and towns had made this commitment. (For a full list of campaign activities, resources and assistance offered to cities through NLC's Institute for Youth, Education and Families, see the Appendix).

This paper highlights a number of the initiatives “Challenge Cities” are developing to improve outcomes for young children. Each city has taken a locally-appropriate approach to the early childhood planning process in their community. Some cities and towns have focused on assessing early childhood needs and creating a collaborative of local partners to work on their plan. Others have put their energies into building public support for early care and education initiatives, or have worked to align their efforts with their state's early childhood policies. Both mayors and city councilmembers are spearheading local planning efforts, using their unique leadership positions in the community to move early childhood agendas forward.

Assessing Early Childhood Needs

One of the first steps that many Challenge cities have taken is to conduct an assessment of early care and education needs and resources in the community. Using an assessment tool developed by NLC or other methods, municipal leaders are analyzing the status of young children in their cities, taking stock of existing services, and soliciting community feedback about the most pressing concerns facing families with children from birth through age five. These assessments then serve as the basis for identifying key goals and setting priorities for action.

- For example, in **Kokomo, Indiana**, city officials conducted a community assessment on early care and education using NLC's Community Assessment Tool. They gathered extensive data on the well-being of children in their community, utilized comparison data from the state-level, and created an inventory of existing programs. The city also sought community input through their *Little Kids, Big Plans Week*¹ event. The city hosted a luncheon session during a conference put on by the local chapter of the Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children. During the session, facilitators at each table asked groups of participants about what they thought were the most critical challenges facing young children and families in Kokomo. Attendees were also asked to identify strengths in the community. In addition, individual surveys were distributed to solicit more detailed feedback. The results from these surveys will be shared with the community through newspaper articles and will be used to develop priorities for Kokomo's strategic plan.
- The **City of Fort Worth, Texas**, is working with a group of community partners to survey citizens about the most pressing concerns for young children in the city. A local non-profit organization, Camp Fire First Texas Council, posted a survey on their website for citizens to download and complete. The survey aims to evaluate general awareness of the importance of early childhood, knowledge of existing services, and includes a section specifically for parents. City partners are also conducting focus groups and individual interviews with community leaders as well as collecting data on child well-being. All of this information will help inform Fort Worth's planning process.

Collaboration with Community Partners

Challenge cities and towns are also building coalitions of community members to help develop their early childhood plans. These collaborations serve as a strong foundation for moving early childhood initiatives forward. Partners such as local non-profit organizations, schools, social service agencies, and businesses can provide expertise, staffing, and resources, or contribute funding to an effort. A coalition of important stakeholders can also wield considerable influence in the community and encourage broad-based support for an early childhood plan.

- The **City of Ralston, Nebraska**, sent a team of officials to the NLC City Forum on Early Childhood.² Mayor Donald Groesser, a city staff member, the superintendent of schools and the public schools director of student services all attended the conference. Upon returning from the forum, Mayor Groesser and the school superintendent announced the formation of an Advisory Commission on Early Childhood. The mayor and the superintendent appointed

¹ NLC's *Little Kids, Big Plans Week* was held October 19-25, 2003. Cities and towns across the country hosted community summits or townhall meetings focused on early childhood development. See the Appendix for details.

² A training and networking meeting, *Plans for the Future: A City Forum on Early Childhood*, was held June 12-13, 2003. See the Appendix for details.

16 people to the Commission, including a city councilmember, a social worker, library staff, parents, and representatives from the local community college and the faith community. The City's partnership with the local school district has proven to be a key factor in moving the early childhood planning effort forward. The Commission has held several meetings open to the public, has already developed goals, and is currently conducting an assessment to help set priorities for action.

- In **St. Charles, Missouri**, City Councilmember Dan Nieland spearheaded the creation of an Early Childhood Care Advisory Commission, established by city ordinance. Its mission is "to raise awareness of the importance of every child's development from prenatal to age 6." The nine-member Commission meets monthly and is chaired by the director of United Services for the Handicapped, an organization which supplies early childhood education for both disabled and non-disabled children. Other members include representatives from the local community college and hospital, the operator of a for-profit child care provider, the director of a Head Start program, the administrator of the Parents as Teachers program, and Councilmember Nieland. The Commission's work is attracting attention and gaining momentum. In the fall, members of the Commission were on a panel presentation at a town hall meeting and highlighted the importance of positive early experiences for young children. Recently, the local St. Charles newspaper also ran two feature articles on early childhood.

Building Public Awareness

Another key component of the planning process in many Challenge cities is raising public awareness about the importance of early care and education. Fostering an understanding of the impact of the first years of life helps build momentum and support for city investments in early childhood initiatives and can help sustain a long-term agenda. Raising awareness is something that local elected officials, as visible leaders in the community, are uniquely positioned to do.

- For example, in **Nashville, Tennessee**, Mayor Bill Purcell hosted the first-ever "Mayor's Summit on Children and Youth" in April 2003 to increase the visibility and understanding of issues affecting Nashville's children. The event took place over the course of three days, with one day devoted to early childhood. Panels focused on health needs for children neonatal to age five and school readiness. Key discussions centered on how to raise immunization rates, reduce health disparities, and improve the quality of early care and education.

At the end of the Summit, Mayor Purcell announced priorities for the city's future work on early childhood issues, including: immunizing all children by the age of two; developing a citywide kindergarten readiness campaign; creating pre-kindergarten standards; expanding the Public Library's literacy outreach programs for child care centers; creating child-friendly spaces in homeless shelters; and making the Metropolitan government a leader in employer-sponsored child care.

- The City of **Fort Worth, Texas**, recently launched a monthly cable TV program devoted to early childhood issues, hosted by Mayor Pro Tem Ralph McCloud. The program will focus on parent education, featuring local experts and child development specialists who will respond to parent questions and concerns. The city also worked with the I Am Your Child Foundation to create a Fort Worth version of the Foundation's video, "*Why Early Childhood*

Matters.” The ten-minute video features Fort Worth’s Mayor Mike Moncrief, the Chief of Police, the Assistant Superintendent of Schools, and the CEO of the Star-Telegram newspaper. Four hundred copies of the video will be widely distributed for use by members of the local early care and education collaboration, elected officials at the municipal and county levels, and local business leaders.

- A number of Challenge Cities used *Little Kids, Big Plans Week* as an opportunity to raise public awareness about, and build support for, early childhood issues. For example, in **Columbus, Ohio**, City Councilmembers Charleta Tavares and Pasty Thomas hosted a “Leadership Breakfast Forum on Early Learning” where a panel of local experts discussed school readiness, pre-kindergarten education, and health concerns for children from birth through age five. Over 100 key community leaders and members of the early childhood community attended the event. Councilmembers Tavares and Thomas also attended an open house at an early childhood center to talk with parents about child care costs and the impact of state budget cuts.

Aligning City and State Policies on Early Childhood

Some of the cities and towns involved in the NLC Challenge for Early Childhood Success have already completed their plans for early care and education. They have served as helpful models for other Challenge cities, sharing innovative strategies and insights. In several cases, these cities have also made particular efforts to align city and state policies on early childhood. One approach uses the state’s early care and education policy as a template for a local strategic plan that is directly linked to statewide initiatives. Another strategy includes advocacy for state-level investments in early care and education as a key priority in the city’s action plan.

- **Wilmington, Delaware**, began its planning process several years ago through a collaboration with the Delaware State Early Care and Education Office. The city used the state’s strategic plan, “*Early Success: Creating a Quality Early Care and Education System for Delaware’s Children*,” as the springboard for its own planning efforts. The Wilmington Early Care and Education Council, created by city ordinance, met biweekly to craft a municipal agenda. The city’s early childhood goals and priorities are based on the eight key domains identified by the state plan, including quality programs, professional development, family engagement, and public will. This alignment enabled the city to leverage state support for key components of their strategic plan. The Delaware Early Care and Education Office and the Delaware Department of Education together have already committed almost \$20,000 to the city’s early literacy training program for child care providers and parents.
- In **Burlington, Vermont**, the city produced a “Family Report” that provides both an assessment of current early care and education activities and sets priorities for action. Some of the key elements of Burlington’s early childhood work acknowledge the importance of advocating for expansion of state-level initiatives on early care and education. For example, the city is participating in the Vermont’s Partnership for Children and Families’ preparation of a strategic early care and education plan for the state. The city is also advocating for passage of a state early education bill that would sustain and expand Vermont’s funding of pre-kindergarten programs. City lobbying efforts around this state legislation include

meetings with members of Vermont's Senate Education Committee and collaboration with the state's major early childhood advocacy group to support specific provisions of the bill.

Additional Early Childhood Resources & Tools

- **NLC Website**—NLC's early childhood resources can be found under the heading "President's Agenda" in the Leadership section of the NLC website: www.nlc.org/nlc_org/site/leadership/. Additional materials are posted on the YEF Institute section of the website: www.nlc.org/iyef/.
- **Futures Report**—The NLC Advisory Council's report on the 2003 President's agenda, entitled *Our Children, Our Future: Promoting Early Childhood Success in America's Cities and Towns*, provides an overview of the importance of early childhood success and highlights reasons why local elected officials should be engaged in this issue. It also describes key roles that city officials can play and examples of successful city initiatives.
- **Supporting Early Childhood Success Action Kit**—An action kit for municipal leaders, entitled *Supporting Early Childhood Success*, was released in conjunction with the Advisory Council's report. This kit goes beyond the Futures Report's motivational focus by providing more specific ideas and strategies for local action.
- **Early Childhood Needs and Resources Community Assessment Tool**—This assessment tool was designed to help local officials better understand the status of young children in their cities, as well as existing local activities or initiatives that support successful early childhood development.
- **Strategy Guide on Financing Early Care and Education**—This strategy brief for municipal leaders entitled *Financing Early Care and Education* contains an overview of the major federal and state funding sources for early care and education, as well as a discussion of a number of financing options and approaches that city leaders can employ when funding early childhood initiatives. City examples that highlight innovative ways to support early care and education are also included.
- **Little Kids, Big Plans Week Organizing Guide**—NLC developed an *Organizing Guide* to assist cities and towns interested in hosting an early childhood townhall meeting, mayoral summit or other community event. The Guide was prepared specifically for cities participating in Little Kids, Big Plans Week (October 19-25, 2003) but provides information that can be used in designing a community forum at any time of year. The Guide includes suggested organizing steps to follow, format options, sample agendas and a press release.
- **Early Care and Education City Network**—This network offers members monthly electronic updates with information about local government initiatives to support early childhood, strategies for municipal leaders, and summaries of current early childhood events and research. To join the network, contact Tonja Rucker at the YEF Institute: rucker@nlc.org or (202) 626-3004.

Appendix: NLC's Campaign for Early Childhood Success

Overview

In 2003, under the leadership of President John DeStefano, Jr. (Mayor, New Haven, Conn.), NLC launched the Campaign for Early Childhood Success. The campaign is designed to encourage municipal involvement in improving outcomes for young children ages birth-five years.

As the focal point of the campaign, Mayor DeStefano challenged cities and towns across America to develop multi-year early childhood plans for their communities. Over one hundred cities took the City Challenge for Early Childhood Success. Each one is working to create a long-term, strategic agenda for addressing the key needs of that municipality's youngest residents in areas such as early learning, health care, and parent education and support.

Campaign Events & Resources

Throughout the Campaign year, NLC, through its Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute), offered several opportunities for participation in the Campaign and developed a number of resources to support city efforts to improve early care and education.

December 2002

Campaign for Early Childhood Success Launch—The full Campaign was launched at the 2002 Congress of Cities (CoC) in Salt Lake City with a track of early childhood workshops, a call to action by Mayor DeStefano in a plenary session, and the dissemination of several new publications. Publications released included, a new NLC Futures Report, *Our Children, Our Future: Promoting Early Childhood Success in America's Cities and Towns* and the YEF Institute's latest action kit for municipal leaders, entitled *Supporting Early Childhood Success*. For more information about these publications, see "Additional Resources."

March 2003

Plenary Session at the 2003 Congressional City Conference—President DeStefano was joined by actor/director Rob Reiner for a major plenary session on early childhood. During the session, Mayor DeStefano commissioned 12 Early Childhood Champions and also issued a challenge to the membership to develop early childhood strategic plans (See below). In addition, Mr. Reiner also aired a new video for policymakers entitled, *Why Early Childhood Matters*, produced by the I Am Your Child Foundation (which he co-founded) and provided copies of the video to all attendees.

City Challenge for Early Childhood Success—At the 2003 Congressional City Conference, Mayor DeStefano challenged at least 100 NLC member cities and towns to commit to developing strategic plans on early childhood. These kinds of plans establish goals and objectives for a community in areas such as early learning, health care, and parent education and support. Cities that already had plans were also welcome to join the Challenge and share their experience with other municipalities. One-hundred and eight cities and towns have joined the Challenge.

Audioconference on Early Childhood Planning—On March 27, 2003, the YEF Institute hosted a free, hour-long audioconference entitled, *Planning for Early Childhood Success: Practical Steps for Cities & Towns*. This call was specifically designed for cities and towns participating in the Challenge and highlighted concrete ideas for conducting local assessments and for designing and strengthening action plans. The call featured city representatives from San Antonio, Texas, New Haven, Conn., and Santa Monica, Cal.

June 2003

Plans for the Future: A City Forum on Early Childhood—Seventy-five participants from 40 cities and towns attended this two-day national training and networking meeting in Washington, DC, on June 12-13, 2003. The meeting provided targeted assistance and support to municipal officials committed to the City Challenge for Early Childhood Success. Discussion topics included collaboration and priority setting, building public support, and ideas for financing, implementing and enhancing existing plans. Throughout the forum, participants had a variety of small group sessions with similarly situated cities to facilitate peer learning opportunities.

September 2003

Early Childhood Learning Communities—The City Forum on Early Childhood held in June provided an environment for many small group and one-on-one discussions that allowed participants to learn directly from one another. To continue and expand these important conversations, the YEF Institute launched two “Early Childhood Learning Communities” in September 2003. Each Learning Community is made up of approximately ten local officials and/or key municipal staff who are interested in exploring topics related to early childhood on a regular basis. Through quarterly conference calls, Learning Community members will share challenges, discuss strategies, mentor one another, gain valuable insights on what works, and develop new approaches to supporting early childhood.

October 2003

Little Kids, Big Plans Week—NLC designated October 19-25 as Little Kids, Big Plans Week, when local officials across the country hosted townhall meetings or community summits focused on early childhood. These events offered city leaders the opportunity to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood development, celebrate existing programs, or launch new initiatives. The YEF Institute developed an “Organizing Guide,” including a sample press release and city resolution, to offer assistance to cities as they planned their events. Over 25 cities and towns participated in the week and held events that ranged from mayoral breakfasts and community meetings to tours of early childhood program facilities. To cap off the week, Mayor DeStefano and Washington, DC Mayor Anthony Williams hosted a national press conference at the Penn Quarter Child Development Center in Washington.

Release of New NLC research report—NLC’s Center on Research and Municipal Programs conducted a survey of municipal officials and city staff on early childhood and other family issues in the winter 2003. *Strengthening Families in America’s Cities: Early Childhood Development* is the first research report based on the survey findings. The report shows that city

leaders in the U.S. view early childhood development as a top priority. The study also found that many cities and towns are taking steps to promote early care and education in their communities.

December 2003

Events at 2003 Congress of Cities—Several events are planned for the 2003 Congress of Cities in Nashville, TN to recognize the cities and towns participating in the City Challenge for Early Childhood Success:

- **City Challenge Reception**—Mayor DeStefano will host an afternoon reception to honor the 108 cities and towns committed to the Challenge for Early Childhood Success. City officials will be acknowledged for their leadership on early care and education issues and will be presented a certificate of achievement and appreciation.
- **Recognition at General Session**—Mayor DeStefano will formally acknowledge the cities and towns that have committed to the Challenge for Early Childhood Success during the Delegates Luncheon. Representatives from Challenge cities will be recognized as a group for their decision to promote early care and education in their communities.
- **Workshop Featuring Challenge Cities**—A special CoC workshop, *Strategic Planning for Early Childhood: NLC's City Challenge*, will highlight the progress Challenge cities have made and how their experiences can be useful to fellow city officials.

For more information:

For additional information about NLC's Campaign for Early Childhood Success, please contact Tonja Rucker in NLC's Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, Ph: 202/626-3004 or E-mail: rucker@nlc.org.