

STRATEGY SPOTLIGHTS: Assessment and Strategic Planning

STRATEGY #1: Assessing Local Needs And Resources

A comprehensive local assessment of early childhood needs and resources provides essential input and information for municipal leaders who are seeking to support young children and their families. The goal of such an assessment: to gain a better understanding of how children ages birth to five are faring, what resources are currently available to serve them, and how community members view the current situation.

Having this information in hand can help local elected officials make more strategic decisions about where assistance is needed and how best to improve outcomes for young children. A community assessment also can be an ideal first step in developing a local action agenda around early childhood.

THE STRATEGY IN FOCUS

NLC has designed a tool for city officials to help them assess early childhood needs and resources in their communities. The NLC tool is divided into three sections, as follows:

- **Conditions of Young Children.** A good starting point for an early childhood assessment process is collecting data and statistics that can help answer the question, “How are young children faring in the community?” The suggested data indicators in Part I of the NLC tool are aimed at giving an overall summary of the well-being of children ages 0 to 5 in areas such as health, child care, and poverty. These basic statistics can help local leaders evaluate how a city’s young children are doing in relation to other cities and towns in the region or the state and can be a benchmark for measuring future progress. In combination with other information, data on the conditions of children can help pinpoint the community’s greatest needs to better target resources.
- **Inventory of Local Resources to Promote Early Childhood Success.** Most communities have numerous programs and services dedicated to addressing the needs of young children and their families. A clear picture of the landscape of resources is necessary to see gaps in services and to identify where support is needed most. Such an assessment also can spur ideas about how to combine efforts or collaborate to offer more complete services. Part II of NLC’s assessment tool is a simple checklist of programs, activities, or other resources available for young children. Cities also record what entities offer the service or program—including city, county, for-profit, and nonprofit organizations. The inventory provides room for listing specific activities and programs in each of four main categories: Planning/Public Awareness; Parent Education/Support; Early Care and Education; and Child Health and Safety.

- **Open-Ended Questions.** Consultation with local stakeholders helps provide a reality check on what is most needed in the community and what issues present the biggest challenges. Parents, early childhood service providers, and health care professionals can offer expertise and context that cities might not be able to find by looking at the data alone. The list of questions in Part III of the NLC tool can be used to help municipal officials focus discussions with various groups of concerned citizens around community needs.

A copy of the NLC assessment tool is available at www.nlc.org/iyef. City officials and staff should feel free to adapt NLC's tool, use another process, or create their own assessment based on their specific circumstances.

WHAT CITY LEADERS CAN DO

- **Consider a team approach to assessment.** Because data and other information about local resources will most likely come from a variety of sources, it may be helpful to bring key experts (both within and outside city government), data suppliers, and other knowledgeable partners together to work on the assessment as a group. Leadership from a mayor or councilmember can help secure buy-in from the agencies and partners needed to collect data and other important information for the assessment. The city's leadership and involvement also can help ensure that the process moves forward. One idea is to work with local colleges or child care resource and referral agencies (CCR&Rs) to locate or analyze data.
- **Use inventory information to produce a resource guide.** Cities that collect detailed information about community programs can use it as the basis for a Family Resource Guide. For example, in Lexington, Kentucky, the city used the inventory process as an opportunity to create a central catalog of written information (including pamphlets and publications) about community programs. Cities can take the lead in producing resource guides—with program names, contact information, and services available—to distribute to local parents.
- **Seek input from the community.** As part of the assessment process, cities should consider organizing a summit or roundtable discussions where representatives from multiple sectors in the community—businesses, civic groups, faith-based organizations, families, and child professionals—are invited to offer their perspectives on community needs. A series of smaller meetings with individual groups could be used to provide intensive feedback on specific issues. For example, during its assessment process, the Department of Human Resources in Richmond, Virginia, met with parents at a local Family Resource Center to solicit feedback on the needs of families with young children in the city.
- **Promote your assessment results.** Cities should work with their assessment partners to ensure that their assessment results garner the attention of the community. Only by building public understanding of local needs can cities expect to build momentum for action. One idea is to hold a press conference or

other public event to release the assessment results and bring new attention to the issue of early childhood success.

- **Use the assessment process as the basis for action.** Cities can organize a coalition or task force charged with making recommendations for next steps based on the assessment. This group could include local elected officials, city staff, and community stakeholders (including parents). Its role would be to offer knowledgeable feedback on the assessment findings and to begin to determine priorities and develop strategies for addressing the needs in the community. For example, if your assessment finds that immunization rates are low, the group might propose a public outreach campaign to educate parents on the importance of immunizations and where to go for medical services. The assessment also can form the basis for a city plan on early childhood. Such a plan would identify long-term goals for improving outcomes for young children in the community and set priorities and a timeline for implementation.

CITY EXAMPLE

The City of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and the School District of Philadelphia were key partners in a recent effort, led by the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, to assess the existing system of supports for young children and their families in the city. The effort also recommended strategies to improve school readiness among Philadelphia's youngest children. Evaluations focused on three underlying keys to school success: health care, early care and education, and parenting and family support.

The planning process included parents, professionals who work with children, elected officials, and hundreds of community leaders committed to Philadelphia's young children. To evaluate community needs, the city and its partners collected data on everything from local demographics to the level of public investment in children. In addition, studies were commissioned to survey local families, assess quality at local child care centers, and evaluate the impact of parenting programs across the nation. Additional analyses, such as mapping efforts to visually represent the location of early childhood services within the city, enhanced the city's understanding of the gaps that needed to be addressed.

As a result of this extensive analysis, community partners came up with a set of recommendations for each of the three core areas, analyzed the projected cost for each goal, and identified who in the community would have responsibility for meeting these goals. Philadelphia was awarded an Early Learning Opportunities Act grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to implement some components of this plan.

A report on the effort, *Early to Rise: Improving the School Readiness of Philadelphia's Young Children*. Available at:
http://www.uwsepa.org/media/publication_files/uwexecsumm.pdf.

STRATEGY #2: A City Children's Budget

All cities can benefit by taking a critical look at the resources dedicated to young children in their community. One approach that can help inform planning efforts around early care and education is the development of a city children's budget.

A children's budget documents every city department's spending on services benefiting children. It is a comprehensive presentation of current funding levels for all types of programs that support children and their families. For example, a children's budget would include investments in health and nutrition programs run by a city's social services agency, funding for "story-hour" at a town library, as well as money that the fire department spends to send firefighters to local schools for fire safety demonstrations.

Most cities spend some amount of public money on services for young children, even if they do not have an "early childhood agenda." A city children's budget can help evaluate funding levels and highlight available resources for early care and education. It also can be a starting point for developing or modifying a municipal plan to address the needs of young children.

THE STRATEGY IN FOCUS

The main benefit of assembling a children's budget is that key information about public spending on children is all in one place. A clear and comprehensive view of where money is being spent, for what purpose, and on whom can be useful for a number of reasons. Cities can use a children's budget to:

- **Make strategic decisions.** Having a children's budget can be an essential step for implementing changes in funding priorities; identifying potential resources for early childhood programs or services that are currently lacking; or making the case for an increased investment in early care and education services that the city already provides. For example, a children's budget might show that most funding for children is spent on intervention (e.g., juvenile detention or child neglect intervention) and that relatively little goes to prevention (e.g., immunization or parent education programs). This gives the mayor and councilmembers an opportunity to argue for a shift in how resources are targeted.
- **Create a baseline to track budget trends.** When produced consistently over time, a children's budget can be used to identify trends in city funding priorities. It also can serve as a benchmark for measuring additional investments in early childhood services.
- **Increase coordination of services.** A children's budget can expose overlapping funding or duplication of services and encourage better coordination of programs and investments. For instance, the budget could reveal that both a city's Parks and Recreation Department and the Police or Fire Department run programs for parents on child safety issues. Combining these separate programs could allow the city to reach more parents while spending public funds more efficiently.

- **Improve the city’s ability to get competitive grants from foundations or other levels of government.** Philanthropic foundations often request evidence of a city’s commitment to children’s issues. A children’s budget can illustrate a city’s direct contribution to young children and families in the community. Additionally, some state or federal grantmakers may insist that a city provide a funding match in order to qualify for funds. A children’s budget can help city officials think creatively about how to meet any matching requirements.
- **Educate the public.** Municipal officials can use a children’s budget as a public relations tool to highlight what the city is doing for children. It also can be used to gain public support for expanding a program or raising new revenues to pay for additional services. On the other hand, a concise budget document can be used to build public understanding of budget realities and constraints in tough fiscal times.

WHAT CITY LEADERS CAN DO

- **Get the whole government involved.** City leaders can involve all city departments and agencies to create a children’s budget that gives a complete picture of municipal investment in children. City officials should ask every municipal agency—not just the usual suspects, such as the social or human services department—to look at what they spend on programs that benefit children. This comprehensive approach is important in determining the percentage of city money spent on children, and especially those ages 0 to 5. At the agency level, this careful look may reveal that some departments are doing more than they think to support children. It also can spur new ideas for better use of funds or additional investments.
- **Partner with local colleges or nonprofit organizations.** Finding staff time and resources to develop and analyze budget data about children may be a tall order for some cities or towns. Cities can solicit help from a local college or university to analyze data. Another idea is to partner with a local nonprofit with expertise on children’s programming. In Philadelphia, the city partners with a community organization, Safe and Sound, to produce an annual Children’s Budget. Staff from the city’s Department of Human Services collaborate with the nonprofit on the writing and design, with the city and national funders supporting the printing and distribution of the document.
- **Create multiple ways to look at the results.** A major challenge in designing a children’s budget is to organize collected data in a useful format. City officials should consider what “breakouts” would be most helpful for analysis and decision-making. Cities can organize the data in a number of ways: by department or agency; by age group served; by program or service type (e.g., child development, food and nutrition); and by purpose (e.g., prevention, early education). It may be most effective to use a combination of these categories. For example, in Solano County, California, the children’s budget is presented in three different ways, including by funding source.

- **Use charts and graphs.** Tables full of numbers can make anyone go cross-eyed! Pulling out key findings into easy-to-read graphs and charts can make a children's budget more accessible to key decision makers and interested stakeholders. The graphics also can provide a powerful illustration of a city's level of support for programs serving young children.
- **Include all investments in children, not just the city's.** Cities can consider expanding the scope of their children's budgets to include state and federal funding sources in order to get a more complete picture of how city resources fit into overall spending for children. Philadelphia's annual children's budget details all state and federal funding coming into the city for children's programs, in addition to the city's investments. This allows city officials to analyze the level and focus of the municipality's contribution and consider ways to leverage or augment state and federal money.

RESOURCES

Philadelphia, PA: *Children Budget*— For more information see:
<http://philasafesound.org/redesign3/sysreform.html>

Solano County, CA: *Solano County Children's Budget 2002*— For more information see:
http://www.childnet.org/pdf/2002_Childrens_Budget.pdf

Sonoma County, CA: *Spending Time for Children*— For more information see:
<http://www.fasc.org/spendingtime2000.pdf>

Contra Costa County, CA: *Children and Family Services Budget*— For more information see: <http://www.co.contra-costa.ca.us>

STRATEGY #3: Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

For years, many cities and towns in America have used geographic information systems (GIS) for a variety of purposes. City planning departments often create maps of voting precincts, historic districts, fire stations, parks, or public schools for citizen use. Some towns have more advanced tools that use GIS to provide “on-the-spot” directions and/or maps for fire or police vehicles needing to get to emergency locations quickly. Whatever its application, the ability to take critical information and map it visually makes GIS technology a powerful tool for city officials.

GIS technology can be particularly useful for municipal leaders conducting research and planning efforts around early childhood issues. Mapping demographic data about young children and/or information about early childhood services and programs can help city officials identify areas of greatest need, visualize trends in population growth, and guide decisions about priorities for funding. GIS mapping can be one component of a larger assessment of local early childhood needs and resources. It also can provide a helpful addition to a city children’s budget by mapping current investments.

THE STRATEGY IN FOCUS

City leaders need data and information when planning new initiatives to support early childhood or when making decisions about how best to sustain or improve existing programs. They need to know how young children are faring in the community, what services are available to them, and what additional resources might be required to better address the needs of young children and their families.

GIS mapping can help city officials better understand and interpret key data about children in ways that are not possible with tables and charts full of numbers. The following are among the key issues that GIS can shed light on:

- **Service availability and delivery.** Mapping information on key services—such as prenatal care, pediatricians, parks, child care, hospitals, or health clinics—can help municipal leaders make decisions about what additional programs might be needed, where to prioritize funding, or how to combine current services. For example, a map including the location of child care facilities along with public transit routes could form the basis of a city effort to expand transportation options for working families.
- **Areas of greatest need.** Mapping technology can help city leaders identify specific early childhood initiatives that would most benefit their communities. By targeting municipal support for programs of a certain type, or for expanded services in a specific neighborhood, city officials can maximize the impact of often-limited resources. For example, mapping might show that there are a consistently high number of low-birthweight babies born in two or three neighborhoods in the city. Adding another layer of information may reveal a lack

of prenatal care programs or health clinics in those same neighborhoods, leading municipal leaders to increase funding for those kinds of health programs.

- **Population trends.** Mapping the population of children from birth to age five over time can yield a simple, yet powerful visual about the changing need for services. GIS can help pinpoint where population growth may have an effect on available resources now and in the future. This can provide valuable information for strategic planning. For instance, mapping could show that in the last three years, certain neighborhoods within a city have had an influx of families with very young children, while the number of families with middle school-aged or older children has decreased. These findings might lead city officials to adjust the relative amount of money spent on services for each age group.

WHAT CITY LEADERS CAN DO

- **Meet with your GIS department.** A first step for city leaders should be to meet with staff from the city department that handles GIS. Some cities have separate GIS departments, while others have planning departments that employ the technology. In early meetings, mayors and councilmembers can engage department staff in a discussion of the purpose and scope of a mapping project on early childhood issues, as well as practical issues such as the capacity of the current GIS system, data compatibility, and the availability of staff resources to work on the project.
- **Convene community stakeholders.** Before embarking on a mapping initiative, it may be helpful for city leaders to meet with key stakeholders in the community. These people may have ideas about what cities should map and about how the mapping effort could inform decisions about early childhood initiatives at the community level. Child care providers, nonprofit and community organization leaders, and parents all may have useful perspectives to contribute to the process.
- **Consult with data providers.** As with any GIS mapping project, early childhood-focused maps will only be as helpful and as accurate as the data they are based on. To avoid problems, it may be helpful to meet with key data providers—such as representatives of the city or county health and human services department, or child care resource and referral agencies that collect child care data. In addition to discussing what data are available, it may be necessary to address issues such as data formatting and compatibility.
- **Partner with colleges and universities.** Some cities and towns may have trouble finding staff time and resources to create and analyze GIS maps about early childhood issues. Cities can solicit help from a local college or university to gather and organize key early childhood indicators and develop maps.

CITY EXAMPLES

- In Toronto, Ontario, the city's annual Children's Report Card uses a series of maps to analyze services and resources for children in the city. The city's latest report card showed that an increase in the population of young children was concentrated in a few neighborhoods. The mapping effort highlighted the potential strain on existing child care services and, eventually, the capacity of the public schools in those areas. For more information see:
<http://www.toronto.ca/children/report/repcard4/repcard4.htm>.
- In the Philadelphia region, the Delaware Valley Child Care Council used GIS to create a regional map showing the location of transit routes, child care centers, and major employers in an effort to help address barriers to employment and child care. For more information see:
<http://www.spatialnews.com/features/onthestreet/street1.html>.

RESOURCES

ESRI— ESRI is a leading GIS technology company. Its website provides general information about and links to GIS systems, as well as specific product information. Of special note is the web page on state and local government that includes city “user stories.” General website: www.esri.com. State and local government page: www.esri.com/industries/localgov/index.html. Information about grant programs: <http://www.esri.com/industries/localgov/grant-programs.html>.

Publication:

“*Using Geographic Information Systems for Policy and Planning*,” National Resource Center for Information Technology in Child Welfare. This publication discusses the benefits of using GIS in planning and policy-making. Available at: http://www.nrcitcw.org/documents/ttt_gis.pdf.

STRATEGY #4: Outcome-Focused City Planning¹

In an outcome-focused planning process, municipal leaders identify specific benefits they hope to achieve for their cities. In other words, the process begins by first identifying the desired end result. Outcome-focused planning may be useful to municipal officials seeking to develop a comprehensive early childhood plan for their communities. It provides a strategic model emphasizing the importance of identifying specific goals up front, and then defining a plan of action that will meet those goals.

THE STRATEGY IN FOCUS

A model developed by the United Way of America's Success by 6® program offers a framework for applying outcome-based planning to early childhood initiatives. Success by 6 works with local stakeholders (often including municipal representatives) to create a comprehensive community initiative aimed at promoting healthy development and learning readiness among young children. The aim of the program's strategic planning efforts is to define what changes are needed to reach a community's desired outcomes, and how Success by 6 and its community partners can create those changes.

The Success by 6 outcome-focused planning process directs the community's attention to seven key questions. Municipal leaders can use these questions to guide their planning around early childhood issues, perhaps working through answers with a group of stakeholders in the community. The questions are:

- **What community issues are viewed as a top priority?** Choosing a limited number of priority issues that are most critical for young children can be a challenge for any city. Criteria that can help determine key issues include: the number of children affected; the cost to the community; likely support from key constituencies; the ability to have a significant impact on the issue; and whether the issue has been addressed by other efforts in the community. (NLC's Early Childhood Needs and Resources Community Assessment Tool also can be useful in identifying priority issues. For more information see: <http://www.nlc.org/content/Files/ECE%20City%20Access.pdf>.)
- **What group of people should benefit and in what ways? What are the outcomes desired?** City leaders can use data gathered from a local assessment to decide what changes or benefits are desired for a specific population. Target populations may be identified by geographic location (e.g., neighborhood or district), by demographic characteristics (e.g., age or race), by relationship to an issue of concern (e.g., pregnant women, single parents), or by a combination of categories. Intended outcomes should be described in very specific terms to help frame the most effective strategies.

¹ This Strategy Spotlight was based on two United Way of America publications: "Outcome-Focused Planning for Community Mobilizations" and "Success by 6 Expansion Initiative: First Year Summary Report of Outcome Measurement, June 2000."

- **What barriers stand in the way of the outcome(s)?** Answering this question requires specifying the major problems to be overcome in order for the target population to reach the desired outcome. These barriers may include specific characteristics or circumstances concerning the target population, such as a lack of information for parents or a lack of access to services.
- **What changes in organizations, city systems, and infrastructures can help to remove or reduce the barriers?** Cities and their partners should identify changes in actions or practices, as well as in the allocation of resources and in other attributes of community systems, that will help the community overcome any barriers to desired outcomes. For example, if the outcome is that Hispanic parents will know how to enroll their children in the State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), a barrier might be that all of the SCHIP materials are in English only. The necessary change would therefore be to make materials available in Spanish.
- **Who or what can help?** Municipal governments do not have to take on the challenge of improving early care and education in their community alone. Rather, cities should identify individuals, groups, and resources that are available to help remove barriers and assist the target populations. It also might be useful to identify formal and informal affiliations (e.g., churches, cultural clubs) that are prominent in the lives of the target populations and to explore how these entities might help play a role in minimizing existing barriers.
- **What approach will city leaders take in bringing about these changes?** Cities should identify approaches or strategies that they can take to influence organizations and systems in a way that will help achieve the desired outcomes. For example, one approach might be for city leaders to facilitate a closer working relationship between the city health department and the local school system so that immunization records can be shared to identify children in need.
- **What are the necessary actions for each strategy and who will be responsible?** This may be the most challenging part of the process—especially for municipal leaders who must juggle city resources and commitments. Cities need to specify the tasks required to act on the chosen strategies, and then delegate responsibility for these tasks, in part by identifying partnerships that will help put a plan into action.

WHAT CITY LEADERS CAN DO

- **Begin with the end goal in mind.** Municipal leaders and community stakeholders should work toward consensus on what they want to accomplish around early care and education. If initiatives are to make improvements in the lives of young children, any actions that are taken must relate directly to the desired outcomes. For example, in Macon, Georgia, stakeholders agreed that increasing access to

services for young children and their families was an outcome they wanted to achieve. They then worked to link existing services more effectively to facilitate access for all families.

- **Base decisions on substantiated facts.** Cities can use data and information about systems, populations, families, and neighborhoods to support planning efforts. While conducting a formal assessment of community needs and resources is not required, it helps to have facts to back up the effort—including research data, administrative data from city departments, as well as feedback from community members about the state of young children and programs that serve them.
- **Create community partnerships.** Working with community organizations toward common outcomes can help to create a stronger city plan on early childhood. Partnerships also can result in a higher rate of success in achieving the desired goals. For example, in San Antonio, Texas, the city partnered with local TV stations to run public service announcements (PSAs) about the importance of early child development. The partnership was facilitated by the outreach efforts of the mayor, who personally requested that local stations offer prime time slots for the PSAs.
- **Choose plausible targets for change.** Targeted early childhood outcomes should be bold enough to create meaningful change for children, but not so ambitious that they are destined to fall short of achieving their aims. The city of Anchorage, Alaska, for example, created a set of far-reaching goals that touched on multiple outcomes while identifying specific areas for action. Among the effort’s bold yet achievable goals: creating a directory of all services and programs serving children, youth, and families in the city that is easily accessible and regularly updated.
- **Consider using a logic model.** City leaders may find it helpful to employ a logic model, or “roadmap to results,” in the outcome-focused planning process. A logic model visually depicts what actions and/or changes will impact outcomes for young children in the community. The Success by 6 logic model identifies the links between activities, system outcomes, and the intended impact on children:

Inputs ⇨ Activities ⇨ Outputs ⇨ System Outcomes ⇨ Child Outcomes

RESOURCES

United Way Success by 6— The Success by 6 program is currently being replicated in more than 300 United Way-led Success by 6 programs in 42 states. For more information see: <http://national.unitedway.org/sb6/>.

The Finance Project— The Finance Project provides a broad array of publications and information resources to assist in the development and implementation of strategies to

improve the financing and delivery of services for children and families. For more information see: <http://www.financeproject.org>.

Promising Practices Network for Children, Families, and Communities— This website highlights programs and practices that are effective in helping children, families, and communities. For more information see: <http://www.promisingpractices.net/default.asp>.

STRATEGY #5: Measurable Outcomes For Early Childhood Plans²

One of the challenges many municipalities face as they create early childhood plans is developing measurable objectives for the goals they set. This exercise forces cities to address two difficult questions:

1. What data indicators should be used to measure the results of specific actions or initiatives?
2. What are appropriate or reasonable targets to set?

While there is no simple answer to these questions, municipalities can combine their understanding of local circumstances with expertise from practice and research to select and track indicators.

THE STRATEGY IN FOCUS

An indicator is a measure that describes a condition. Indicators include numbers, percents, fractions, or rates used to paint a picture of a specific outcome or situation. An example of an indicator is the percentage of children immunized by age two.

Data indicators can contribute to the success of an early childhood initiative in many ways. They can:

- Serve as criteria to inform difficult decisions on where to act and how to invest limited resources;
- Provide insight into what is working and help guide adjustments as initiatives progress;
- Help educate others about a strategy by illustrating specific changes that are desired;
- Keep stakeholders focused and engaged; and
- Encourage long-term funding by demonstrating results.

The Pathways Mapping Initiative (PMI)— at www.PathwaysToOutcomes.org— has compiled a knowledge base to document what we know about achieving complex outcomes, such as school readiness and family economic success. PMI's School Readiness Pathway includes a section on “Assessing Progress” that presents two sets of helpful indicators. Cities can use these indicators as a starting point for their efforts to develop appropriate, city-specific measures to guide early childhood planning. The PMI indicators include:

² This Strategy Spotlight is based on a conference call and conversation with Vicky Marchand, Senior Associate, Pathways Mapping Initiative.

- **Outcome Indicators** – PMI’s 19 outcome indicators measure readiness for school success at the time of school entry in the following areas: physical and motor development; social and emotional development; language development; cognitive development; and disposition to learn.
- **Interim Indicators** – These 23 indicators measure progress toward the preconditions of school readiness (good health, supportive environments, and strong neighborhoods) among children ages 0 to 5 and their families. Interim indicators include: low birthweight births; children with health insurance; parents who have read to their children in the last week; and family connections to supportive networks and services.

For each of the 42 PMI indicators, the Pathway to School Readiness includes a definition, an explanation of the indicator’s significance, and sources from which data can be obtained. These indicators, it must be noted, are not performance measures related to service delivery; they do not measure such things as children served or teacher/student ratios. Rather, they are specific measures of outcomes for children and families. For cities and their partners in early childhood efforts, it is important to consider both outcome and performance measures in framing a local strategic plan.

WHAT CITY LEADERS CAN DO

- **Use existing databases.** Many indicators can be gathered using databases that are already maintained at the city and/or county level. The following are among the easily accessible data that can help show progress on early childhood outcomes: birth certificates, school district data, social services records, health records, immunization records, injury and disease registries, and receipt of benefits information. Although it may not be comprehensive, this information is gathered regularly for whole populations, so trends can easily be analyzed.
- **Partner with local universities.** Colleges and universities can be a big help in gathering additional data to supplement existing information. For example, local faculty may be interested in conducting a survey of families as part of a class project or an ongoing research study. Professors or graduate students also can help with data analysis. However, cities may find that sustaining this type of data collection over time can be a challenge.
- **Set city-specific goals.** Unfortunately, there is no clear-cut answer to the question, “What is the right target?” Different cities will have different definitions of what constitutes success. For example, if one city’s immunization rate is 50 percent, then increasing it to 60 percent may be a reasonable target for the first year of an intervention. In another city, a goal of 100-percent immunization may be reasonable if 85 percent of children already are being immunized.

- **Keep the process moving forward.** Cities should pay more attention to adopting helpful data indicators and then tracking progress over time than to identifying the “right” target from the start. Debate over the best indicators could go on indefinitely. It is important not to let discussion about data indicators become a stumbling block to setting goals and moving forward in a planning process. Also, city leaders should remember that not everything they might want to assess is measurable. For example, the number and quality of a child’s relationships with adults may be a powerful predictor of school readiness and success; however, we do not have a valid, affordable method for gathering this data over time.
- **Create alignment with state-level indicators or other local efforts.** Municipal leaders should check to see if their state or county is working to develop school readiness or early childhood success indicators. For example, most states have responded to President Bush’s “Good Start, Grow Smart” by developing quality criteria for early childhood education. These initiatives can help inform the selection of measures at the city level. City-level indicators do not have to match exactly, but there is value in having comparable data at multiple levels.

RESOURCES

School Readiness Indicators Initiative— The School Readiness Indicators Initiative is a multi-state initiative that uses child well-being indicators to build a change agenda in states and local communities. The goal: to improve school readiness and ensure early school success. The task of participating states is to develop a set of child outcome and systems indicators for children from birth through fourth grade. For more information see: <http://www.gettingready.org/matriarch/default.asp>.

Child Trends Data Bank— This database contains the latest national trends and research on more than 80 key indicators of child and youth well-being. For more information see: <http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/>.

Pathways Mapping Initiative (PMI)— PMI’s “School Readiness Pathway” is a web-based tool that provides a framework for thinking through what it takes to increase the number of children who are ready for school learning at the time of school entry. It highlights actions that individuals and organizations can take to achieve three crucial goals: good health; supportive social and cognitive environments; and safe, strong neighborhoods. The Pathway also provides examples of successful local initiatives in each objective area. For more information see: <http://www.pathwaystooutcomes.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewpage&pageid=294>.