
**SUMMARY OF EVALUATION FINDINGS THROUGH 2007, LINKED
WITH THE DISCOVERY INITIATIVE THEORY OF CHANGE**

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This report was prepared by the Discovery Initiative Evaluation Team for the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund in June 2008. The information used in this report was collected through 2007. Further details on the data collection are presented in the report.

We appreciate the input and feedback of the Memorial Fund staff and the time and information provided by the members and staff of the Discovery community collaborative groups, the staff of the statewide grantee organizations, the community liaisons and other consultants, and various other individuals interviewed during the evaluation. The analyses and conclusions in this report solely reflect the perspective of the Evaluation Team.

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As the Memorial Fund begins planning for the future beyond the Discovery Initiative, the evaluation is preparing summaries of what has been learned through the Initiative's first phase – 2002 through 2007. This report¹ highlights major findings from the detailed analyses that have already been presented, using information collected through mid-2007 and organizing them around the Initiative's theory of change. In December of this year, the evaluation will complete an interim summative report including analyses of additional data for the Initiative through 2007. The final evaluation report will summarize findings for the full period of the Initiative through 2009 and draw out lessons learned from the Initiative for the comprehensive community change field.

The first section of this report reviews the Discovery Initiative theory of change. This is followed by summary of evaluation findings to date related to each component of the theory.

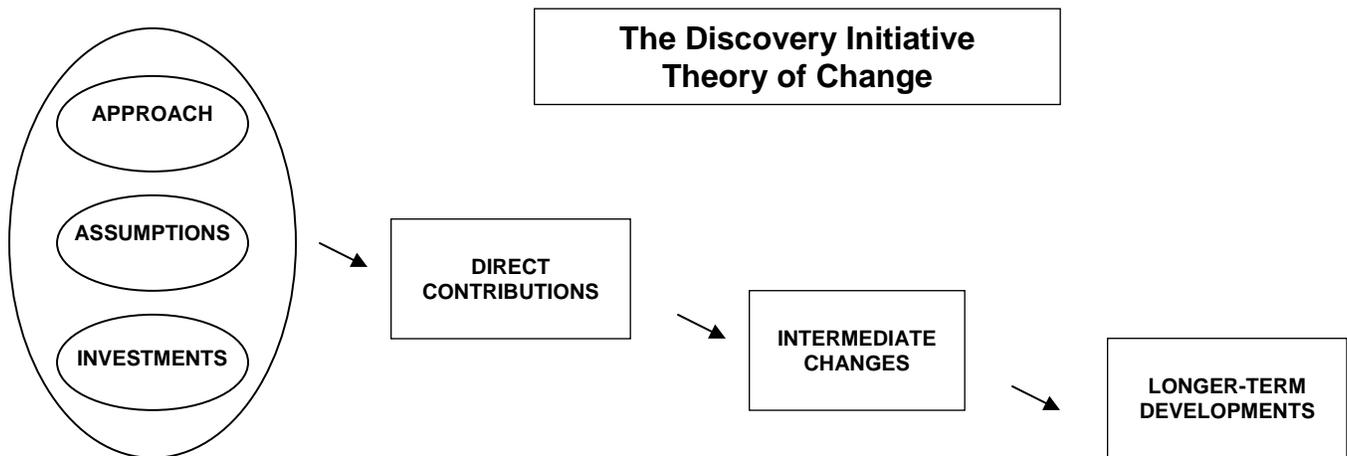
THE DISCOVERY INITIATIVE THEORY OF CHANGE

The Discovery Initiative theory of change links what the Memorial Fund does to support the Initiative with expected changes at the community and state levels.² The theory of change has evolved, reflecting experience during the course of the Initiative thus far. The evaluation uses the Discovery theory of change to guide the questions it addresses and the way it organizes and presents the results of analyses. The theory of change links activities of the Initiative, supported by the Memorial Fund, with the expected direct or immediate, intermediate, and longer-term results (see the diagram on the next page).

What the Memorial Fund does to support the Discovery Initiative includes its **approach** as a partner with others, its **assumptions** about what will create and sustain change and improve how well young children in Connecticut do, and the **investments** it makes in grants, technical support, and leadership. Expected changes include **direct contributions** on strengthening community collaborations and state organizations, **intermediate changes** in specific early childhood education policies and practices, and **longer-term development** of capacity within the state to maintain early childhood as a statewide priority and continue to influence policy in the future.

¹ This report was prepared by the Discovery Initiative Evaluation Team for the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund in June 2008. The information used in this report was collected in 2006 and 2007. The evaluation team appreciates the input and feedback of the Memorial Fund staff, the members and staff of the Discovery community collaborative groups, staff of the statewide and regional organizations receiving grants from the Memorial Fund, and other stakeholders interviewed for the evaluation. The analyses and conclusions in this report solely reflect the perspective of the Evaluation Team.

² The Discovery Initiative theory of change is also illustrated in the diagram at the end of this report.



Approach. The Memorial Fund approaches its partnerships with communities, organizations, and state entities in a distinctive way. The ways in which the Memorial Fund's approach has been described includes:

- Engaging in respectful listening to others and being responsive to what is heard
- Being consistent in focus (early childhood) and underlying principles (parent engagement and collaboration) and transparent in its messages
- Being willing to modify strategies, reflecting learning and changing conditions
- Fostering relationships and establishing personal connections

These characteristics are seen by grantees and outside observers as hallmarks of the Memorial Fund's approach and ways in which the Memorial Fund may differ from other funders.

Assumptions. The evaluation has identified the following assumptions operating in the Memorial Fund's work. These reflect their beliefs about what it takes to develop community and state capacities necessary to make changes in early childhood policies and practices, and what it takes to sustain attention on early childhood issues and continue to influence policy. These assumptions include:

- Parent engagement and collaboration will ensure that plans and policies reflect diverse interests and experiences, bring a wide range of resources and expertise to the table, and create the foundation for sustained work.
- Having the commitment of elected political officials and school leadership is essential to getting and sustaining public funding for critical components of a community's early care and education system.
- Focusing on communities with large numbers of low-income children will have the greatest impact on disparities in children's outcomes.
- Engaging a large number of communities will build broad-based sustained public support and leadership commitment across the state.
- Working simultaneously in many communities and at the state-level will ensure that the necessary policies and investments will be put in place to support effective practice

changes on the ground.

- Focusing on capacity-building will enable communities and statewide organizations to be responsive to emerging needs, opportunities, and conditions.
 - Capacity building will help empower individuals and groups to work together to make early childhood a priority.
 - Capacity building will help develop mechanisms to ensure that the voices of diverse parents are heard and their interests are met and that community experiences and needs are considered in developing policy.
 - Capacity building will develop the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to craft and implement effective policies and practices.
 - Capacity building will increase attention to and broaden support for changes in early childhood policies and practices.

Investments. The Memorial Fund makes substantial investments in a variety of supports for its grantees – communities and statewide and regional organizations. It also invests in other state entities such as the Early Childhood Research and Policy Council and in partnership with state agencies. These supports continue to evolve as experience is gained from their implementation and as needs, circumstances, and opportunities change. The Discovery Initiative investments are in:

- **Supports for communities**, including grant funds, opportunities to meet with other communities and with statewide organizations, a website and listserv, access to technical assistance tools and consultation, and individualized feedback, encouragement, and support from a community liaison.
- **Supports for statewide and regional organizations**, including funding, opportunities to connect and work with Discovery communities and each other, and technical assistance and support for organizational development and for collaborative work.
- **Work with state entities**, including leadership exercised by the Memorial Fund executive, staff support and use of Memorial Fund meeting space, and funds provided to match state investments in parent education and community planning.

Results. The Discovery Initiative theory of change predicts that what the Memorial Fund does to support communities, state organizations and public entities will contribute to changes in Connecticut's early care and education system and ultimately improve children's development and early school success.

The **direct contributions** of the Initiative are expected to be in the strengthening of capacities and relationships. The Initiative is expected to support the development of collaborative groups in the Discovery communities that involve a diverse group of stakeholders who are able to manage and lead a community change process focused on increasing the supply and quality of early care and education, strengthening the linkages between early childhood programs and schools, and improving the development and early school success of young children. These groups are expected to pay particular attention to engaging parents and community leaders and connecting with other efforts in their community working on behalf of young children. Over time, it is expected that the community collaborative groups will link with others in their region and across the state to pursue policy and practice change.

The Initiative is also expected to support the development of organizational capacities – such as staff skills and technology – of statewide and regional organizations involved in research,

advocacy, and program innovation related to early care and education. These organizations are expected to build stronger relationships with each other and with communities and carry out collaborative projects. Similarly, the support of the Memorial Fund is expected to support the capacities of specific state entities (the Governor's Early Childhood Education Cabinet and Research and Policy Council), activities (the Parent Trust Fund), and agencies (the Department of Education's community planning grant program).

According to the Discovery Initiative theory of change, strengthened infrastructure and relationships will enable stakeholders to mobilize for specific changes in local and state early childhood education policies and practices. These expected **intermediate changes** would occur in how decisions affecting young children and their families are made, in early childhood programs and services, and in local and state policies that affect the four Discovery objectives.

Cumulatively, this work at the community and state levels will result in a critical mass of advocates and engaged constituencies (including parents), political momentum and champions, and enhanced organizational capacities and individual skills. These factors will contribute to the **longer-term development** of the capacity to maintain and build political momentum in support of early childhood issues in Connecticut.

EVALUATION FINDINGS RELATED TO THE DISCOVERY THEORY OF CHANGE

This section of the report is a summary of the evaluation findings to date, based on information³ about the work through the end of 2007, the previously anticipated end point of the Discovery Initiative.⁴ The findings are organized around the three components of the Initiative theory of change that have been examined thus far – the Memorial Fund's approach and investments,⁵ direct results on infrastructure and relationships, and intermediate results related to specific policy and practice changes.

APPROACH & INVESTMENTS

The Memorial Fund Approach

The Memorial Fund approach of listening, respectfulness, flexibility, and responsiveness is highly valued by communities, statewide organizations, and state-level stakeholders.

The Memorial Fund has cultivated a relationship of mutual trust and partnership with its

³ The findings summarized here are based on information from a number of sources, collected and analyzed over the past three years. These sources include interviews and questionnaire surveys with community grantee representatives and with organizational grantees, grantee applications and reports, interviews with Memorial Fund staff and consultants, focus groups and intensive site visits in selected communities, coding of electronic messages exchanged among communities, and interviews with legislators, advocates, and other stakeholders with a statewide perspective.

⁴ Additional analyses are underway to complete the evaluation of the first phase of the Initiative; as mentioned earlier, this report will be available by December.

⁵ The assumptions underlying the Initiative will be examined at the end of the Initiative, at which time more evidence will be available on intermediate and longer-term results. At that time, the evaluation will consider how well the assumptions have been borne out and put the Discovery Initiative assumptions and results in the context of those of related efforts.

community and state-level grantees and other organizations and groups in the state that is recognized and appreciated by the grantees and by outside observers. This approach has been described by grantees and statewide stakeholders as a powerful characteristic of the Memorial Fund's work, and was noted by many during interviews even when not directly asked. Numerous references were made to the Memorial Fund staff's openness, supportiveness and flexibility. This approach is considered to be a major factor in the Memorial Fund's effectiveness.

Memorial Fund's consistency in promoting a set of principles and objectives guiding the work is valued as a hallmark of the Memorial Fund's approach.

The Memorial Fund's focus on and commitment to early childhood issues has had a catalytic influence in this area, according to statewide grantee organizations and stakeholders. In the Discovery Initiative, the Memorial Fund emphasizes and reiterates parent engagement and collaboration as central principles it expects to see in the work it supports. Both community and organizational grantees and other stakeholders believe that this consistency has been critical.

While collaboration is often called for in private and public initiatives, the Memorial Fund's continued emphasis on meaningful parent engagement and leadership has generated and strengthened both demand and capacity in this area. Communities have used the Memorial Fund's commitment to parent engagement (as well as collaboration) to reinforce and give external validity to their efforts in this area. Sometimes, the Memorial Fund's insistence on ensuring that parents are represented in the collaborative groups and that political and school leaders be involved in the work has allowed communities to exercise leverage with other stakeholders to get action on these issues. Legislators, advocates, and others see the results of the Memorial Fund's commitment to the underlying philosophies and values of the work, especially to parent engagement, as key in keeping these values on the forefront at the state-level as well.

Having a relationship of trust and mutual partnership with grantees allows grantees to make choices based on their own assessments of their capacity and engage in an honest exchange with the Memorial Fund about their limitations.

The freedom to change strategies as lessons are learned from experience and to respond to needs as they arise is seen as a key element of the Memorial Fund grantmaking approach. Community grantees have taken on the work of Discovery at their own pace, some starting the process later or taking longer to build their collaborative. This lead time has been supported by the Memorial Fund and is viewed as part of the work.

Similarly, statewide grantee organizations have been allowed time to develop their capacities. When several grantees indicated that they were not ready to take on a grant to carry out a communications strategy, the Memorial Fund invested in technical assistance to build the internal capacity of the organizations to take on the work.

The Memorial Fund is actively engaged in communication and interaction with its grantees and partners to assess and learn.

The Memorial Fund staff regularly engage with grantees through meetings, individual conversations, and written processes. Staff participate in all community capacity-building technical assistance workshops and presentations and encourage grantees to contact them directly. They regularly attend events in the communities and engage in discussions with community leaders at the request of community collaboratives when appropriate. In addition, the community liaisons meet monthly with the Memorial Fund to plan technical assistance,

provide feedback on community progress, and discuss strategies to address issues arising in communities. Memorial Fund staff have made visits to all communities at key points in the Initiative, most recently as communities were developing plans for the 2008-09 period. These activities have allowed the Memorial Fund to assess the progress being made and get a clearer understanding of challenges and opportunities facing their grantees. They have also helped establish personal relationships with the Memorial Fund and provided opportunities for the community to engage others in their work.

Statewide and regional grantees say they have benefited greatly from the Memorial Fund staff's advice, insight, and knowledge of the field, in general. They also noted that the attendance of Memorial Fund staff at key meetings was seen as lending credibility and visibility to grantees' work. Statewide and regional grantees made many references to the Memorial Fund staff's openness, supportiveness and flexibility. According to these grantees, the relationships they have had with Memorial Fund staff provided critical support, brought clarity to their own thinking, and fostered the growth of their organization and its work.

Investments in Capacity-Building Supports

Relationship-building is a key ingredient in building the capacity of statewide and community grantees.

Intentional relationship-building has been core to the Discovery support strategy with communities and statewide and regional organizations. Community grants require evidence of collaboration among key stakeholder groups. Communities value the opportunities provided by the Discovery Initiative to learn through relationships – particularly with liaisons and peer communities. With the Memorial Fund's encouragement, statewide and regional grantee organizations report having stronger working relationships with each other.

The Memorial Fund's capacity-building strategy has added consultant supports and incentives (grants) for communities and statewide organizations to work together – among communities, among organizations, and with each other. These opportunities have been developed in response to a number of factors -- interest expressed by communities in regional work, the lack of coordinated advocacy messages and strategies, and the need for mechanisms linking communities more directly with state policy work.

Grantees' ability to take advantage of capacity building supports is dependent on their internal capacity and specific needs when a particular opportunity is presented.

It was understood from the start of the initiative that communities would need intentional capacity-building support, as many communities began the Discovery Initiative with little experience in or infrastructure for collaborative work on early childhood issues. Through the end of 2007, capacity-building supports were primarily focused on developing community infrastructure to plan for and carry out an early childhood education agenda.

A range of information, tools, and resources have been made available to communities in a variety of ways. Communities have generally taken advantage of the opportunities to be introduced to them, but their use of any particular support has been dependent on both internal capacity and the specific needs of their collaborative at the time. A particular issue is the difficulty in applying what is learned at workshops and training sessions. The ability of the community participant to bring this information back and make use of it in the community is affected by whether the training is immediately relevant to the community work at the time it is delivered and the amount of follow-up support available.

Statewide and regional grantee organizations have described the benefits of working with the Memorial Fund as providing leadership, advice, and visibility to the work. More formal supports have included individualized organizational development assistance to some grantees, funding for evaluation, technology upgrades, and staff training, and networking opportunities. In 2006 several statewide organizations were provided with a consultant to facilitate coordination and collaboration in their work.

The Initiative's mechanisms for re-introducing information, tools, and resources have helped some communities to make use of them as needed.

Though some tools and trainings are not taken up by the communities when they are originally offered (for the reasons mentioned above), the capacity building strategy has built-in mechanisms for archiving and continually reminding the communities about information, tools and resources. Two resources that are particularly valued by communities for this purpose are liaisons and the Discovery website. Liaisons encourage communities to take advantage of trainings and use toolkits. They reintroduce communities to skill building tools and opportunities when the time is appropriate. The website captures tools and resources from trainings and makes them available to communities on an as needed basis.

DIRECT CONTRIBUTIONS – INFRASTRUCTURE & RELATIONSHIPS

Infrastructure

Communities have created and strengthened broad collaborative “tables” around early childhood issues.

The grants and technical assistance provided to the Discovery communities during the planning period and since implementation began in 2004 are intended to help a broad-based group of people organize so that they can develop a shared vision and implement strategies that will make progress toward the Discovery objectives and benefit young children in their communities. A specific organizational structure – such as a 501(c)(3) organization or merging with the local School Readiness Council -- was not specified for these groups. However, it was expected that each community would develop a collaborative mechanism or group to facilitate and sustain broad engagement of diverse stakeholders. This collaborative was expected to plan and carry out activities pursuing local process, practice, and policy changes on behalf of young children and join with other communities and statewide organizations to pursue changes at the state-level.

The Discovery communities in most cases have developed a collaborative entity with a leadership structure, subgroups working on specific issues, and planned activities. Typically, they have engaged the following groups: early childhood providers, schools, children's service agencies, cultural institutions like libraries and museums, and local funders (including the United Way). To a much lesser degree, city government and the business sector have been engaged. Parent participation in the Discovery collaborative's work is generally seen by its members as essential to success. This perspective is very different from one in which bringing parents onto a community group is done to meet a funding mandate. (See the next section for additional findings related to parent engagement.)

Staff capacity is a key element of infrastructure that the Initiative has helped support and strengthen in communities and in statewide organizations.

The Discovery community collaborative groups have used much of their Discovery Initiative grants to hire a local coordinator. Individuals in this position are recognized by the communities as key to supporting the collaborative and keeping its work on track. Support for staff is something that is often hard to come by from other sources and funding these positions going forward is seen by communities as critical to their future.

Many statewide and regional grantees have been able, with Memorial Fund support, to increase their staff size, add staff with critical skill sets and expertise, and/or enhance the skills of existing staff. Staffing has been critical to the ability of these organizations to increase their attention to early childhood issues and to engage in research, policy analysis, and advocacy in that arena.

Capacity to use data for advocacy and planning has been another focus of support and has been enhanced by the Discovery Initiative.

During the Discovery Initiative, the Memorial Fund has contributed to the strengthening of grantee organizations' capacities for data collection and analysis. Organizations report benefits, including greater relevance of their work and greater responsiveness to immediate issues. Data from several grantee organizations have been used to inform the work of the Governor's Early Childhood Education Cabinet. These organizations' reports and analysis are used by the advocacy community and regularly cited by the media.⁶

Community assessment was an early focus of technical assistance to the Discovery communities, and communities were expected to base their action plans on community data. A number of Discovery collaboratives have undertaken report cards on the conditions of young children in their communities, often with the assistance of Connecticut Voices for Children. Others have conducted inventories of early childhood resources and published resource guides, usually aimed at families of young children. Understanding of community needs and resources is viewed in Discovery as an important step in preparing for community early childhood planning.

The Memorial Fund is widely seen as providing and supporting leadership capacity at the state-level.

The Memorial Fund's leadership in state policy work was frequently identified as a major contribution by stakeholders of all types. This leadership included David Nee's role as co-chair of the Research and Policy Council and work with the Early Childhood Education Cabinet, the Memorial Fund's work in creating a public-private partnership with the state, and the role the Memorial Fund has played in convening funders, providers, policy officials and others around these issues. The Memorial Fund's role in using funds to leverage other resources was seen as an innovative and powerful approach, which not only increased the access of communities to technical assistance and parents to leadership training, but also attracted the attention of elected leaders and state agency officials to the issues.

⁶ Recently communities were provided with statistical information on the status of early care and education services and of young children's outcomes specific to their town or city and with analysis of state and federal resources for children's services and supports allocated to their community, along with guidance on how to collect comparable data on local resource allocation.

Relationships

The Discovery Initiative has contributed to the strengthening of relationships among statewide organizations. This is true for newer organizations and those that had been active in the area of early childhood for a number of years.

Leaders in statewide grantee organizations give credit to the support and encouragement of the Memorial Fund for the development of more focused relationships. They report coordination and joint work around research, analysis, and policy proposals and around developing legislative strategies. They also report increased support of each other's advocacy activities.

Despite closer relationships among grantee organizations and more connections with communities, there is widespread acknowledgement that more work is needed in these areas.

Grantee organizations are still struggling to coordinate their messages to policymakers and to develop the capacity to mobilize for action as a group. Communities continue to focus much of their efforts on local action and engagement. State policy issues are generally delegated to individual collaborative group members, who do not necessarily serve as representatives of their community body.

Parent engagement and leadership is acknowledged as important and one in which communities and state organizations continue to invest.

Many Discovery communities have made use of resources provided by the Discovery Initiative to think innovatively about parent engagement and leadership, and about half have initiated or expanded parent leadership training opportunities in their area. At the state level, Connecticut Parent Power, a statewide parent action network supported by the Memorial Fund, develops an annual policy agenda and an action plan to promote these priorities. Parent Power provides parents with training in advocacy and opportunities to join together in meeting with legislators and taking other action.

At the same time, parent engagement and leadership continues to be difficult to achieve both in communities and at the state level.

While the Discovery collaborative groups generally have parent representatives involved and many have parents taking leadership roles, most acknowledge that they have not been able to engage large numbers of diverse parents in the collaborative's work. Critical decision-makers at the state level do not yet see parents as having a strong voice in state policy, although they feel this is critical to sustaining legislative interest in early childhood issues.

INTERMEDIATE RESULTS – CHANGES IN POLICY & PRACTICE

Community representatives believe that their work through the Discovery Initiative has improved early childhood education in their communities, especially in the quality of early education programs and in stronger connections between early education and schools.

Community efforts as of the end of 2007 had been focused on local level policy and practice changes. The Discovery community collaborative groups have relied on strategies for bringing people and institutions together – parents, providers, teachers, and school officials. These strategies are intended to develop shared knowledge and common practices among professionals, to give parents more information and support for their role as their child's first teacher and best advocate, and to involve community members in discussing issues related to early education and school success. Local wins have principally been in the area of direct service intervention (such as professional development, parent training, resource guides, and kindergarten transition support activities). Some communities are beginning to take on the role of organizing people to address these issues at a systemic level to make broad-scale changes and institutionalize them in policy. This has been encouraged by the Initiative in the past and is receiving more attention now as communities are supported to engage in regional work and to connect more directly with state policy activities.

State-level stakeholders see the Memorial Fund's work as critical in laying the foundation for recent legislative actions expanding early childhood education in Connecticut.

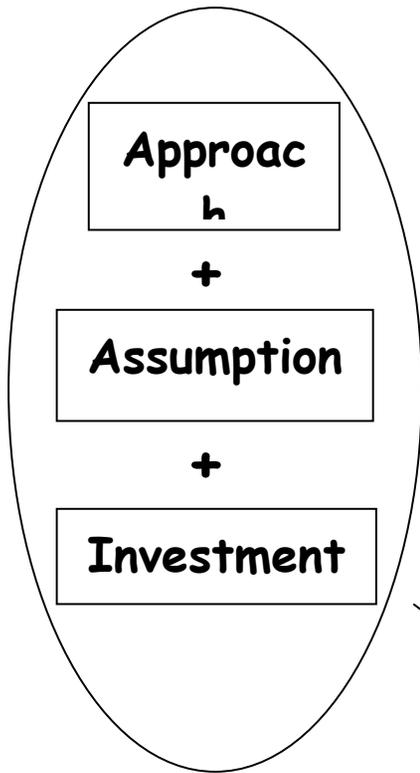
The Memorial Fund's leadership at the state level and support of statewide organizations has been cited as having been critical in helping create the environment and political will to make early care and education a legislative priority in the 2007 legislative session. The Memorial Fund's contributions have included its long-term commitment to early education, its ability to encourage attention to the issues without being seen as promoting one solution over others, personal relationships and leadership of the executive director, support for the work of advocacy and research organizations and for the development of community bodies able to work together and partner with the state in planning and implementing state policies. The substantial increase in state funding for the School Readiness Program authorized in 2007 and sustained in 2008 and the public/private partnership between the Memorial Fund and state agencies to support community planning to make best use of those new funds – are two important steps toward a full-fledged early care and education system in Connecticut.

SUMMARY

Bringing together the evaluation findings to date under the Discovery Initiative theory of change supports the following summary statements:

- The Memorial Fund's approach to working with its grantees and with other partners is itself seen as critical to the contributions of the Discovery Initiative in communities and at the state-level;
- The capacity-building strategies described in the Discovery theory of change continue to evolve to reflect experience and changing conditions, and have been implemented and taken up by communities and state organizations;
- Infrastructure and relationships have been strengthened, between and among statewide organizations and community grantees and the Memorial Fund;
- Commitment to promoting and responding to parent engagement has grown at the local and state levels, but remains difficult to achieve and sustain on a broad scale; and
- Community collaborative groups, state organizations and the Memorial Fund have contributed to early childhood education policy and practice changes at the local and state levels.

What remains to be seen is whether the community and state capacities can be sustained and strengthened over the next two years and whether they will be sufficient to keep early childhood education on the policy agenda in the upcoming tough economic times.



THE DISCOVERY INITIATIVE THEORY OF CHANGE

**Direct
Contribution**
S
(infrastructure)

**Intermediate
Changes**
*(changes in process,
policies & practices
leading to improvements
in 4 objectives)*

**Longer-
Term
Development**
*(critical mass, enhanced
capacities, political
momentum & cumulative
results leading to sustained
capacity to attend to
EC issues & influence
policy)*