Chapter One
INTRODUCTION

THE GOALS OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD INITIATIVE

The Early Childhood Initiative (ECI) of Allegheny County (including the city of Pittsburgh), Pennsylvania, was an ambitious, large-scale effort to provide high-quality early care and education (ECE) services to disadvantaged infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children. As understood by ECI’s planners, such services go well beyond the simple supervision of children while parents work or attend school. Following the lead of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the leading professional organization in the field, ECI’s initiators believed that high-quality ECE has a strong educational component, with a focus on developmentally appropriate care, play, and learning activities, regardless of whether it is provided in preschool programs (including Head Start programs), childcare centers, or family child-care homes, and regardless of whether it is provided on a part-day or full-day basis.

ECI was launched in 1996 under the auspices of the United Way (UW) of Allegheny County. Its goal was to provide, within five years, high-quality ECE services to 7,600 children ages zero (birth) to five in 80 of the county’s low-income neighborhoods at a total expected cost of $59.4 million over the five-year period. By intervening early in the lives of at-risk children with intensive high-quality care and education, ECI hoped to significantly improve these children’s chances of being prepared for kindergarten, excelling in school, graduating, and becoming productive, successful members of society. To focus on at-risk children, ECI’s planners targeted neighborhoods that had
2 "Noble Bet" in Early Care and Education

high rates of poverty, welfare receipt, and unemployment, as well as large proportions of both students dropping out of high school and female-headed families. While the long-term benefits of high-quality ECE had been demonstrated by a number of small-scale, demonstration programs over the years, ECI aimed to create a model for the nation by being the first to establish a comprehensive system for delivering high-quality ECE services on a countywide scale.

Moreover, ECI intended to provide high-quality ECE services on a large scale through programs that were chosen and supervised at the community level by local neighborhood agencies, consistent with a growing emphasis on community direction among social service planners across the nation (see, e.g., Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1996; Schorr, 1997; and Zigler, Kagan, and Hall, 1996). Each targeted neighborhood was expected to select a local “lead agency” to supervise ECI’s activity in the neighborhood. ECI sought to give community residents and organizations considerable discretion over the kinds of high-quality services that would be offered in each neighborhood (e.g., existing versus new child-care providers, center-based programs versus family child-care homes) and over the administration and delivery of new programs. Each neighborhood was intended to have ownership of its particular ECI programs.

Finally, ECI aimed to make its high-quality ECE programs financially sustainable over the long term—i.e., when the initial, five-year infusion of dollars from foundations and private donors was exhausted. ECI’s planners recognized that, to achieve sustainability, a major commitment of public funding would be necessary. The business plan therefore called for an effort over the first three years of ECI’s operation to persuade the state of Pennsylvania to commit to taking over primary responsibility for funding the initiative at the end of the five-year startup period. Planners expected that if ECI could be

---

1 In 1994, a study conducted by the University of Pittsburgh’s Office of Child Development identified over 18,000 children under age six in Allegheny County who were living in poverty (Farber, Williams, and Groark, 1994). Many of these children were concentrated in specific neighborhoods. A significant number had been born to teenage mothers, were low-birthweight babies, or had received late prenatal care. A large body of research suggests that such children are, over the course of their lives, at high risk of dropping out of school or of becoming pregnant as teenagers, addicted to drugs or alcohol, involved in crime, or dependent on public assistance.
demonstrated as an effective model for providing high-quality ECE services, state policymakers could be persuaded to ensure funding for the long term—and possibly to adopt ECI as a model for the rest of the state. Their optimism was fueled by a national policy context in which many states were beginning to pay increasing attention to and invest increasing resources in ECE.

ECI’s planners hoped that ECI would “raise the bar” for all ECE providers, motivating them to improve quality. They also hoped that ECI would help bring order to a fragmented ECE system. For example, ECI administrators wanted to pool funding from various sources, such as state child-care subsidy programs, subsidies for children in the child-protection system, and federal subsidies to child-care providers (along with ECI funds), to more effectively provide ECE services to at-risk children.

For the first five years of implementation, ECI was to depend primarily on private funds raised locally from various foundations, corporations, and individuals, with smaller amounts of funding from parent fees and government sources. ECI’s original business plan, approved by the UW at the initiative’s launch in 1996, estimated that the total cost would be $59.4 million over five years.\(^2\) Although philanthropic contributions would constitute the bulk ($51 million) of the startup cost, the plan recognized that buy-in from the state was essential for ECI’s long-term sustainability, and it therefore included a scale-down contingency in case the state could not be persuaded to assume responsibility. If state officials had not made a commitment by the end of the third year of implementation to take over funding after the five-year startup period, ECI was to be phased out. New children would no longer be enrolled in ECI programs, and those already being served would be allowed to continue only until the end of year five (2001). If state officials did make the commitment, implementation would continue, with the expectation that about 7,600 children would be receiving ECI services at the end of five years.

\(^2\) Planners projected that $51 million (86 percent) could be raised through local philanthropic sources; $6 million (10 percent) from government sources, including direct grants, state child-care subsidies, and other government programs; and $1.8 million (3 percent) from parent fees (with the remainder from accrued interest).
THE AIMS AND METHODS OF THIS STUDY

ECI ultimately failed to achieve many of its goals. Our evaluation, commissioned by the Heinz Endowments (ECI’s largest funder) after ECI had been sharply scaled back, was motivated by the desire to understand why ECI fell short of its objectives and to learn from its mistakes. This report seeks to summarize ECI’s organizational history, to analyze and explain critical weaknesses that hindered ECI’s ability to succeed, and to articulate lessons that will inform the design and implementation of future large-scale, public-private initiatives, whether in the field of ECE or in other areas of social services. We believe the report will be useful to several different audiences. First, we think it may help ECI’s stakeholders more fully understand some of the key sources of the initiative’s difficulties. Second, the lessons it sets forth about the design and implementation of large-scale, public-private initiatives are aimed at community leaders and funders not only in western Pennsylvania but around the country. Finally, we hope the report illuminates some of the large public-policy dilemmas that should be of interest to policymakers examining ECE issues everywhere.

The first major research task informing our findings was a series of intensive interviews over the course of 2001 with nearly one hundred stakeholders who were asked questions about their involvement with ECI, their perceptions of ECI’s goals and vision, and their knowledge of ECI’s operations. Rather than choosing a limited sample of stakeholders, we tried to approach comprehensiveness in selecting interviewees. This meant that we sought to interview virtually everyone involved in decisionmaking about ECI, from conception to business plan, implementation, neighborhood activities, state government interaction, and ultimate scale-down. We took care to seek out stakeholders who would have different perspectives, interviewing UW managers, ECI staff, members of the foundation community and other funders, neighborhood representatives, early childhood service providers, business leaders involved in ECI, government officials, academic experts, and early childhood advocates. The list of interviewees grew over the course of the project as we gained knowledge about ECI and as early interviewees recommended others for us to interview. We were satisfied that we had interviewed the great majority of key stakeholders and decisionmakers when the names we were given were those of people we had already interviewed. Virtu-
ally all targeted interviewees (or alternative representatives of their organizations) agreed to be interviewed.

We cannot publish the list of those interviewed, because interviewees were promised anonymity in order to encourage frankness. Many individuals involved with ECI, however, are necessarily named in this report in order to tell ECI’s story. To the extent that we have named individuals, we have done so only when discussing information that is widely known. Names are not attached to confidential information provided during the interviews.3

It is always possible, of course, that failing memories might undermine the reliability of interview data, particularly when interviewees have a strong incentive to tell the story in terms most favorable to them. Fortunately, direct factual disputes among interviewees were rare, even when interviewees had quite different perspectives on ECI’s problems. Nevertheless, documentary records were essential for resolving factual disagreements and verifying information about ECI’s history.

Our second major research task involved obtaining and examining a substantial number of ECI’s documentary records, including business plans, enrollment records, and financial records. Whenever possible, we used documentary records to confirm dates, verify enrollment, and assess costs. In addition, documents produced during ECI’s planning process helped us understand the initiative’s conception, vision, and goals. Finally, the original business plan and the revised plans articulated ECI’s intended implementation process.

3The great majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face, usually at the office of the interviewee and occasionally at the RAND office in Pittsburgh. A few interviews were conducted by telephone (typically for interviewees outside the Pittsburgh region). Interviews were semi-structured: We created interview protocols for several different classes of stakeholders (e.g., funders, neighborhood leaders, ECE providers, UW staff), modifying the protocols for the specific circumstances of each interviewee. Interviews typically lasted 60 to 120 minutes, but some lasted several hours over multiple interview sessions. Because we knew that many of the interviews would raise sensitive topics, we chose not to tape them, to avoid any possible discouragement of open discussion. Instead, we brought a laptop to each interview and took careful notes. Interviews were typically conducted by two RAND researchers, but sometimes three RAND researchers were present and sometimes only one.
As with the interviews, our aim in gathering documents was comprehensiveness: We sought all of ECI’s central records on enrollment and costs, all of its proposed and approved business plans, any documents describing its organizational structure, and early concept papers articulating its original vision. We had no difficulty finding business plans and conceptual documents, but available data on costs and enrollment were not complete. As a result, it was impossible to break down costs into finer classifications than those we discuss in Chapters Three through Five; we also had to make some minor assumptions to fill in gaps in the data. These assumptions are discussed in the Appendix. Although more-complete financial and enrollment data would permit a more finely grained analysis, we do not believe that our conclusions would be substantially changed by such an analysis.

Third, we constructed quantitative models to analyze cost and enrollment data and to understand how and why actual figures deviated from ECI’s original plans. We reconstructed the model that ECI’s planners used for the original business plan, and we then simulated modifications of the plan based on changes in two assumptions that contributed to the plan’s underestimation of ECI’s costs. This permitted us to estimate the relative contribution of several different factors to ECI’s costs (reported in Chapter Five). The cost models are described in detail in the Appendix.

Throughout the study, our analysis was informed by existing empirical literature. Our literature review focused on ECE but also included studies related to welfare reform and community-based social interventions. That literature is cited throughout this report; the References provides a complete list.

After completing the bulk of our analysis, we presented our preliminary findings to several small groups of key stakeholders representing the major constituencies involved in ECI. These formative briefings provided the opportunity to check our findings for factual errors and interpretive nuances. This report sums up the findings that followed from the interviews, document review, cost modeling, and

---

4It is possible that some of ECI’s records were lost in the transfer from UW to the University of Pittsburgh in 2001. It is also possible, however, that UW never had very good records on ECI, particularly on the allocation of costs.
literature review, with refinements from the subsequent feedback received in the formative briefings.

Before beginning the main analytic tasks of the report, we devote the next two sections of this chapter to critical background information, describing both the motivations that led to the creation of ECI and the obstacles that it had to surmount.

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

The primary initial motivator for ECI’s planners was the belief that high-quality ECE services would improve a variety of long-term developmental, educational, and social outcomes for the children served and, ultimately, for the children’s communities and the society at large.

For ECI, *high-quality* generally meant adherence to standards set by NAEYC, the premier membership organization for researchers and practitioners in the ECE field.\(^5\) NAEYC standards require high staff-to-child ratios, small group sizes, highly trained staff, and developmentally appropriate play and instructional activities, toys, and other materials. These standards are similar to federal requirements for Head Start centers but have higher requirements in certain areas, such as minimum staff qualifications. To support high staff qualifications, ECI aimed to raise the level of compensation for ECE provider staff, who are typically paid low wages and often lack health benefits. In addition, unlike NAEYC or Head Start, ECI imposed a rigorous quality monitoring system.

ECI planners expected that about 70 percent of children would receive these services in classroom settings on a part-day basis (generally 3 to 3.5 hours daily) for five days a week. The remainder would receive them in either a child-care center or a family child-care home setting for a full day (approximately 9 hours) of combined education and child care. Thus, ECI was to be both “education” and “child care,” but education was its main focus. To a lesser extent,

---

\(^5\)ECI standards for family child-care homes were based on standards set by the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC), which are quite similar to NAEYC standards but tailored to the home environment.
planners envisioned providing some health care and nutrition (i.e., breakfast and/or lunch) services to children in ECI classrooms and centers, also much like Head Start. In addition, ECI required some level of parent participation, an element common to most high-quality ECE programs.

ECI’s planners were aware of a growing body of research suggesting that intensive, high-quality ECE programs can improve cognitive and developmental outcomes for children, especially children with developmental delays or from low-income families. This research is based on several different ECE programs launched since the 1960s (see Reynolds, 2000; Campbell et al., 2001; Karoly et al., 1998; Guralnick, 1997; Barnett, 1995; Yoshikawa, 1995; and Schweinhart, Barnes, and Weikart, 1993). While the specifics varied among the programs studied, all of the programs provided intensive, developmentally appropriate play and instruction (on either a half-day or a full-day basis) by highly trained staff. Most also required some amount of parent participation. To assess impacts on children over time, some of the interventions randomly assigned children to treatment and control groups; in other cases, evaluators established matched comparison groups to estimate program effects. Evaluation results generally indicate that these kinds of interventions can produce short-term improvements in cognitive abilities, as well as short- and long-term gains in social and educational outcomes (i.e., reduced grade retention, fewer special education referrals, higher test scores in reading and math, and higher graduation rates) (Reynolds et al., 2001; Reynolds, 2000; Campbell et al., 2001; Campbell et al., 2002; Karoly et al., 1998; Guralnick, 1997; Barnett, 1995; Yoshikawa, 1995; and Schweinhart, Barnes, and Weikart, 1993). A few studies have followed participants beyond high school and found long-term positive impacts on several adult measures, including higher earnings, reductions in welfare recipiency, and reductions in criminal behavior (Campbell et al., 2001; Campbell et al., 2002; Schweinhart, Barnes, and Weikart, 1993). Many of these results were widely known in the

---

6 In both experimental and matched studies, the comparison groups included children in a variety of child-care settings (including some children cared for at home by parents). The studies were designed to compare the effect of a specific ECE program with that of any alternative in which the child would otherwise spend his or her time.

7 For a good review of the literature, see Reynolds, 2000.
mid-1990s, when ECI was planned, and more-recent studies have confirmed favorable long-term findings.\textsuperscript{8}

Moreover, there is some evidence that the benefits of these programs to government and society outweigh their costs. The first systematic study to document such benefits was conducted by evaluators of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, an intensive half-day demonstration program (supplemented by weekly home visits) for three- and four-year-old children that was implemented in Ypsilanti, Michigan, in 1962 (Schweinhart, Barnes, and Weikart, 1993). The researchers used a prospective experimental design (with random assignment to treatment and control groups) to follow 58 children who had participated in the program and 65 children who had not. In comparison to the control groups, at age 27, a substantially higher proportion of program participants had graduated from high school, and much lower proportions of participants had been placed in special education classes, had been on welfare as adults, or had committed a crime. Program participants also had significantly higher earnings than controls did on average.\textsuperscript{9}

Based on these results, the researchers estimated that each $1 spent yielded more than $8 in benefits to program participants, government, and society (just over $7 in benefits to government and society alone) (Schweinhart, Barnes, and Weikart, 1993). A majority of these benefits (65 percent) were in the form of cost savings to society resulting from a reduction in crime. Another 28 percent of the benefits were in the form of higher income for program participants (net of reductions in welfare payments) and the resulting higher tax revenues for government. During the early planning and fundraising phases of ECI, planners and advocates cited this study most fre-

\textsuperscript{8}ECI’s planners may have overestimated the extent to which research has demonstrated which specific components of high-quality ECE lead to improved outcomes for children. The evaluations described above cannot determine the specific dimensions of a program that were necessary for it to produce its favorable results. In consequence, even today, considerable uncertainty remains regarding the specific determinants of favorable child-welfare outcomes in ECE programs (see Blau, 2001; National Research Council, 2001).

\textsuperscript{9}All of these differences were statistically significant. Differences between program participants and controls on other measures, such as IQ and number of years retained in grade, were no longer statistically significant at age 27 (Schweinhart, Barnes, and Weikart, 1993).
quently when arguing that ECI was a highly cost-effective investment for Allegheny County and the state. More recently, a new analysis of the results of the Perry Preschool Project (Karoly et al., 1998) used a more-conservative benefit-cost methodology and still found the program to be very cost-effective, producing over $4 in total savings per $1 of program costs. The researchers further concluded that such programs have the greatest potential to achieve net cost savings when, like ECI, they are targeted to disadvantaged children (i.e., those experiencing such stressors as poverty or poor nutrition).

In addition to the experimental research on model programs, nonexperimental studies of the effects of different child-care arrangements on child development have generally found that child-care programs operating at a high level of quality tend to produce better social, cognitive, and educational outcomes for children than do those assessed as low quality (Helburn, 1995; Howes, 1997; Howes et al., 1998; National Research Council, 2001; NICHD, 1999; NICHD, 2000; Peisner-Feinberg and Burchinal, 1997; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999; Ruopp et al., 1979; Vandell and Wolfe, 2000). The high-quality centers examined in these studies had high staff-to-child ratios, small group sizes, well-trained staff, and experienced directors, and they employed developmentally appropriate activities. In the case of family child-care homes, the research suggests that the provider’s level of education or training is the most important determinant of quality and is likely to have the most influence on child outcomes (Helburn and Bergmann, 2002; Vandell and Wolfe, 2000).11

---

10 As the researchers noted, this is a conservative estimate in that some likely benefits were excluded from the analysis, either because they were not measured (e.g., benefits for parents) or could not easily be monetized (e.g., avoidance of pain and suffering among people who would be crime victims in the absence of the program) (Karoly et al., 1998).

11 As already mentioned, however, the research literature tells little about the relative importance of each of these structural characteristics. For example, no one knows what the incremental impact of higher staff-to-child ratios is on child outcomes versus, say, the incremental impact of improved staff education. For a discussion of this issue, see Blau, 2001, and National Research Council, 2001.
THE “NOBLE BET”

Although ECI wanted to replicate the high quality of service and the long-term child welfare benefits of earlier ECE programs such as Perry Preschool, it went well beyond such programs in three important respects, making it uniquely ambitious:

• ECI aimed to provide high-quality ECE services not on a small, experimental scale in a demonstration program, but for large numbers of low-income children (7,600, representing nearly 80 percent of the targeted “unserved” population) throughout Allegheny County.

• ECI made community control an essential element of the initiative, believing that success on a large scale required that each neighborhood have substantial autonomy to define its needs and operate its services.

• Finally, and perhaps most ambitiously, ECI aimed to change public policy, persuading the state to devote substantial additional public resources to ECE and to accept responsibility for ECI’s funding in the long term, thereby ensuring its sustainability.

Indeed, although ECI’s planners recognized that the initiative’s countywide scope made it more ambitious than previous efforts, they may have underestimated the extent to which the initiative would be exploring new ground. ECI did not include a pilot or demonstration period in a small number of neighborhoods, because the planners believed that Perry Preschool and similar programs had already demonstrated the viability and value of high-quality ECE on a small scale. But ECI’s goals went far beyond anything attempted in the Perry Preschool and other experimental programs. Head Start, of course, is a nationwide ECE program that seeks to provide high-quality ECE services, but it serves a relatively small proportion of eligible children in most communities, and most experts believe that its quality varies widely across providers (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1997; Zigler and Muenchow, 1992). ECI had much the same goals as Head Start but intended to address Head Start’s weaknesses in both participation rates (by providing sufficient funding and
neighborhood involvement to ensure the enrollment of a high proportion of eligible children) and consistency of quality (by including a rigorous system of quality monitoring). Its challenges were fundamentally different from and greater than those facing a small-scale, clearly defined, experimental program such as Perry Preschool.

In addition to having ambitious goals, ECI faced enormous political, institutional, economic, and cultural obstacles. These included pervasive low quality among many of the existing child-care providers (reflecting in part the low market wages for child-care workers), political ambivalence about the appropriate public role in ECE, an underappreciation of the benefits of quality (by many policymakers and parents alike), wide variations in physical and organizational resources in low-income neighborhoods, and the challenges of building a large, new initiative from scratch. An early supporter of ECI in the business community described ECI publicly as a “noble bet.” In our view, that description is quite appropriate. ECI’s goals were noble, but their achievement would be difficult and required a calculated gamble. Indeed, to have achieved all of ECI’s aims would have been a heroic feat.

The implication is this: *Given the scope of the aims and the scope of the obstacles, success required that ECI have a clear sense of market realities in early care and education, a well-designed theory of action, an effective strategy for inducing a commitment of public funding, and a coherent organizational structure.* In Chapters Three through Six, we explain how weaknesses in these areas undermined ECI’s success. That analysis is preceded, in Chapter Two, by a brief history of ECI that may be of interest not only to those unfamiliar with the initiative, but also to stakeholders who may wish to re-examine ECI from a bird’s-eye perspective. Chapter Seven concludes the report with lessons for the future, including public-policy implications.

Before proceeding, however, it is useful to summarize the extent to which ECI succeeded or failed in achieving each of its key goals.

---

12 See Blau, 2001, and Gormley, 1995, for more detailed discussions of some of these issues.

13 The term was coined by Charles J. Queenan, Jr., a prominent Pittsburgh attorney.
THE BOTTOM LINE

ECI was a complicated endeavor with many facets, so any summary necessarily simplifies and omits issues. This report, in its entirety, provides a lengthy discussion of ECI’s performance; the following provides a summary of ECI’s record in achieving its goals.

Quality

Evaluating quality of service and child welfare outcomes was not part of RAND’s charge and falls outside the scope of this report. Quality of service and child welfare outcomes are being examined by the SPECS (Scaling Progress in Early Childhood Settings) group, a research team from the University of Pittsburgh and Children’s Hospital in Pittsburgh. RAND did not review the SPECS methods, so we simply note the findings to date of the SPECS team here. According to the SPECS report (Bagnato, 2002), ECI succeeded in promoting quality in participating ECE programs and favorable outcomes for participating children. More specifically, the report states that ECI children demonstrated effective social and behavioral skills and went on to succeed in kindergarten and first grade, as measured by low rates of grade retention and referral to special education.14 The findings reported by the SPECS team are substantially what ECI’s planners aimed to achieve for participating children.

Although ECI may have succeeded in its goal of promoting high-quality ECE programs, it was far less successful in achieving its other goals (those examined in our evaluation), as we discuss next.

Scale

ECI fell far short of its aims in terms of the number of children participating. The initiative served only about 680 children at its peak, around May 2000.15 This is only one-quarter of the number expected

---

14See Bagnato, 2002, for detailed descriptions of results related to program quality and outcomes for children. Our evaluation addressed separate issues, and our conclusions therefore do not depend on the findings of the SPECS evaluation.

15The SPECS study reports a larger number because it counts the cumulative number of children served by ECI over time (1,140 as of October 2000) (Bagnato, 2002).
to be served at that point in time and less than one-tenth of the total number targeted for service.

If measured in terms of the total number of hours of service provided, ECI’s achievement still falls short, but less dramatically so. The original business plan assumed that 71 percent of ECI children would be in part-day programs; in fact, nearly 100 percent of ECI children were in full-day programs. The average number of hours of service per child was therefore far higher than expected. While ECI served fewer children than intended, it provided more-intensive service for each child. Even accounting for this difference, however, ECI at its peak was providing only about half as many hours of service as the original business plan had intended for that point in time.16

Partly because the service was more intensive than planned, costs per child were substantially higher than expected. In 1999 (year three of implementation), ECI’s cost averaged $13,612 per child-year.17 Although this is not dramatically different from the cost of other, widely cited high-quality ECE interventions,18 it is three times as high as the cost expected in the original business plan ($4,407). In Chapters Three through Five we explore a number of reasons for the disparity between expected and actual cost. Here we mention three prominent reasons. First, the shift from (largely) part-day services to full-day services raised per-child costs dramatically. Second, the plan assumed that operational cost per child was the same at all levels of enrollment, failing to recognize that cost per child is inevitably substantially higher in providers that are less than 100 percent enrolled. Third, ECI’s plan required a substantial bureaucratic structure both centrally and at the neighborhood level, peak number served is more relevant to our study, however, because ECI’s scale goals were defined in terms of enrollment achieved at specific points in time, rather than the cumulative number of children served.

16 We estimate that ECI was providing about 34,000 child-hours of service per week in May 2000, compared to about 73,000 child-hours per week expected by then in the original plan.

17 1999 was the last full year of ECI’s full-scale operation (as well as the last year for which we were able to obtain financial data). Details on the methodology and assumptions for calculating costs are provided in the Appendix.

18 For example, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project cost an estimated $12,148 per child (in 1996 dollars) (Karoly et al., 1998).
and it was unduly optimistic about the administrative costs associated with this structure.

Community

ECI’s community-driven strategy had some successes and a number of failures. Devolution of authority to the neighborhood level succeeded in a few neighborhoods (most prominently, Braddock and Wilkinsburg) where local leaders eagerly joined the ECI process and established plans that led to a strong working relationship with ECI management (ECIM) and, ultimately, the creation of new, high-quality ECE programs operated by neighborhood-based agencies. Moreover, community leaders in a number of neighborhoods affected by ECI joined together to establish an ongoing support and advocacy network for early childhood and school readiness issues.

But disappointment is widespread in many of the neighborhoods that were targeted by ECI. Some local leaders felt that ECI did not live up to its promise of permitting neighborhoods to define their needs and the ECE services they wanted. In their view, ECI’s process for approving neighborhood plans imposed unreasonable delays, and ECI imposed a narrow definition of quality that precluded much local discretion. This left substantial resentment in some neighborhoods, especially those that did not get an early start in the process and were eventually cut off when ECI was scaled down in 2000. Even in neighborhoods that successfully launched ECE programs under ECI’s sponsorship, lead agencies felt undermined in 1999 and 2000 when ECI’s ground rules were in flux. A number of lead agency staff expressed frustration at their inability to get consistent policy answers during this period.

Sustainability

Although ECI helped to raise the profile of ECE as an important policy issue in communities around Pennsylvania and in state government, it failed in its explicit goal of achieving a state commitment to support the initiative with public funds.

Privately funded initiatives to promote high-quality ECE are now operating in several other communities in the state, including
Philadelphia and York; ECI was the first of such efforts, and the publicity it achieved likely helped to promote similar initiatives elsewhere. ECI attracted the attention of important business leaders, first in Allegheny County and later statewide, and the efforts of such leaders have helped to give ECE a more important (if still limited) role in the agenda of state government in Pennsylvania.

But ECI’s lobbying efforts with the governor, the secretary of public welfare, and other state officials did not produce a commitment to provide public support for the continuing operation of the initiative, which has now scaled back to include only two of the original neighborhood agencies, serving approximately 300 children.

The inability to garner a commitment from the state was apparent relatively early. At UW, some of those responsible for supervising ECI recognized that sustainability would have to be achieved by other means and sought to make changes in the initiative to make better use of existing state funding streams. This effort was only partly successful, and it led to a power struggle over the direction of ECI as well as to frustration and resentment in the neighborhoods. Sustainability of the two remaining neighborhood agencies supported by ECI has not yet been demonstrated and will be a major goal for these two agencies over the next three years while their foundation funding continues.

**Positive Aspects of ECI’s Legacy**

Although ECI failed to achieve its greatest ambitions, its legacy is not entirely negative. ECI succeeded, first of all, in building the capacity of a number of low-income neighborhoods to provide ECE services that apparently are of high quality. In the economically depressed suburb of Braddock, for example, not a single licensed day-care center was operating prior to the arrival of ECI. ECI’s lead agency in Braddock now supervises the operation of five licensed centers, established through the support of ECI, in Braddock and the surrounding neighborhoods. The value of those services is suggested by the favorable results that the SPECS team reports for ECI children.

ECI also succeeded in helping a number of Head Start providers to improve their programs. Traditionally, Head Start offers a part-day program, an average of 3.5 hours per day for most providers in
Allegheny County. A number of Head Start providers were interested in expanding their service to include full-day, “wrap-around” care. Prior to ECI, no Head Start programs in Allegheny County were licensed by the state to offer care and receive state subsidies. ECI funds and technical assistance were used to achieve licensing and to add wrap-around care in 20 Head Start programs serving over 300 children.

The attention that ECI drew to the importance of quality not only contributed to the creation of similar initiatives elsewhere in the state, but also reportedly motivated improvements in the quality of several major nonparticipating child-care centers around Allegheny County. Some have become accredited with NAEYC and others are moving toward accreditation.

In addition, ECI demonstrated the ability of the Pittsburgh community to mobilize large-scale support and funding from diverse constituencies and political perspectives. The mere fact that ECI was launched is a testament to the imagination, motivation, and collegiality of leaders in the Pittsburgh region, from the foundations to the business community to the neighborhoods. Many communities could not have organized and launched such an ambitious initiative; the fact that Pittsburgh could do so suggests promise for bold plans in the future (with, one hopes, better design and execution).

Finally, ECI’s troubles may ultimately serve a useful purpose by illuminating the serious public-policy dilemmas associated with ECE. Public policy in Pennsylvania and across the United States is profoundly ambivalent about the appropriate role of government in the care and education of children younger than school age. ECI’s failures were partly attributable to conflicting values related to the developmental needs of children, on one hand, and incentives for parents to work, on the other. The public policies of states and the federal government have not yet resolved these tensions. In the final chapter of this report, we explore some of the public-policy challenges associated with ECE.