Although the motivation for ECI was an accepted body of research demonstrating the long-term benefits of particular kinds of ECE programs, the way in which the initiative was intended to operate was novel in two important ways. First, ECI aimed to create a countywide system of high-quality ECE services rather than just a small-scale pilot program. Second, it aimed to put the various ECE programs under the control of local neighborhood organizations (subject to quality standards enforced by ECI’s central administration). At the time of ECI’s inception, no models existed of high-quality ECE delivered on a large scale through grassroots, neighborhood control. ECI therefore needed to develop its own “theory of action” to explain how the initiative would work. That theory of action can be found in ECI’s original business plan, approved in 1996.

Figure 3.1 depicts ECI’s theory of action. The figure incorporates the plan of operation shown in Chapter Two, but expands it to include funders and the ultimate intended beneficiaries of the services, the children and families. In the business plan, ECI’s theory of action focused on an extensive list of activities to be conducted by a central administration at UW, consisting of both UW management and ECI management (ECIM), and an additional extensive list of activities to be conducted by lead agencies in each neighborhood. The central administration was expected to supervise the neighborhood lead agencies, and each lead agency was in turn expected to supervise the participating providers in its neighborhood (some of which were directly operated by the lead agencies).
According to the theory of action, funding would flow down through the structure. Funders would give their money to UW, which (through ECIM) would fund community groups. These in turn would fund providers, which would offer services intended to attract the parents of the children.

Supervision and quality assurance were also designed as top-down processes. The central administration was responsible for approving neighborhood plans and the budget expenditures of lead agencies. The quality of the ECE services provided to children was to be assured through monitoring by both the lead agencies and the central administration.

To implement a system of quality monitoring, standards of quality had to be defined, which was another responsibility of the central administration. Similarly, the central administration was expected to create standards for the operation of lead agencies; these standards were to be defined in a lead agency operations manual.
Meanwhile, lead agencies were responsible not only for managing and monitoring existing child-care centers and family child-care providers participating in ECI, but also for establishing new providers. In some instances, new centers would have to be created from scratch.

Unlike funding, supervision, and monitoring, information was intended to flow upward as well as downward. The business plan expected that parents would inform lead agencies of their needs and desires related to ECE; it required all neighborhood planning groups to conduct surveys of local parents. The neighborhood lead agencies would in turn inform the central administration of neighborhood needs. In the other direction, the central administration was expected to provide information to lead agencies and providers in the form of professional development and technical assistance services.

Perhaps the most important point to notice about Figure 3.1 is this: While most of ECI’s theory of action concerned measures to be taken by the central administration and the neighborhood agencies, the ultimate goals of high-quality ECE services for large numbers of children around the county were to be served by the relationship between providers and families. ECI’s theory of action created an extensive structure above that relationship rather than addressing it more directly. This put several layers of organization between the funders and the primary intended beneficiaries (i.e., the children to be served) and led to a number of problems in implementation.

The extensive structure implicit in ECI’s theory of action is a direct result of the initiative’s intent to simultaneously pursue community control and a centrally determined definition of quality. Both of these aims were supportable in themselves. The desire to impose an intensive, centralized system of quality monitoring was motivated by the plausible observation that, given the powerlessness of children in care, pervasive low quality in the child-care industry could be systematically addressed only through regular, rigorous inspections by monitors with a clear understanding of quality. The desire to permit community control was motivated by the knowledge of externally imposed, heavy-handed failures of the past; by the belief that grassroots involvement would promote success in implementation and sustainability; and by the laudable desire to permit those most affected by the initiative to have a substantial role in directing it.
Even though each strategy had merit, pursuing both simultaneously proved to be problematic. The combination not only required the substantial organizational structure illustrated in Figure 3.1, but also created internal conflicts when community desires ran afoul of ECI’s definition of quality. We explore these consequences next.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

One consequence of ECI’s multilayered theory of action was that each layer of administration added to the cost of the initiative. The original business plan optimistically assumed that the cost of ECI’s central administration at UW would amount to $286 per child (or 6.5 percent of a total cost of $4,407 per child) in year three of implementation. In fact, this was a serious underestimate: In year three (1999), central administrative costs were actually $1,231 per child (or 9.0 percent of the total cost of $13,612).\(^1\) Given the extensive array of responsibilities expected of ECIM, the business plan’s initial estimate of $286 per child appears exceedingly optimistic.

Indeed, despite the fact that administrative costs were far higher (per child) than expected, ECIM may have lacked the resources to do all of the jobs it was tasked to do. ECIM did not have an especially large number of staff, but they were expected to fulfill a wide variety of responsibilities (as described above) for a large number of neighborhoods, lead agencies, and providers across the county. In addition to losing its key fundraising and community outreach staff, ECI appears to have lacked adequate staff in other areas. ECI had one director of quality assurance who oversaw one center-based specialist and one home-based specialist. These three staff were to inspect and evaluate prospective providers, continually monitor participating providers, and provide training and technical assistance (e.g., recommend equipment and curricula to purchase and help providers find qualified staff). They had to provide this support in over 35

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\(^1\) Central administrative costs included salaries of ECIM staff, part of the salaries of other UW staff who devoted part of their time to ECI, equipment and occupancy costs for ECIM, and some costs for fundraising and lobbying. Unfortunately, data are not available to distinguish among these individual categories.
neighborhoods, and had great difficulty doing so.\textsuperscript{2} Indeed, a number of neighborhood leaders were frustrated by the lack of assistance they received from ECI, a problem that was exacerbated by the fact that ECI was spread thin. For example, before prospective providers could be deemed ECI-eligible, ECIM’s small quality assurance staff had to inspect and evaluate them (while also continually monitoring and assisting those already participating). In some cases, according to interviewees, months went by before the evaluators provided feedback. In short: For ECIM to achieve all of its assigned tasks for all of the neighborhoods, lead agencies, and providers seeking to participate in ECI, administrative costs would have had to be even higher than the high costs that were actually experienced.

The available financial data that combine lead agency costs with the direct costs of providing ECE services do not permit us to assess the additional administrative costs at the lead agency level. Nevertheless, it is clear that ECI’s theory of action required a substantial administrative structure at the lead agency level. Although we have no way to estimate the magnitude of those costs, it seems likely that they contributed significantly to the total cost of the initiative. For example, consider the fact that ECI targeted 7,600 children in 80 different neighborhoods. If each neighborhood had chosen its own lead agency, each lead agency would have served on average fewer than 100 children. In practice, the initiative was less fragmented, because contiguous neighborhoods often joined together under a single lead agency. Even so, the 686 children who were served by ECI at its peak, in May 2000, were divided among 11 lead agencies, for an average of only 62 children per lead agency (although this number presumably would have grown as lead agencies developed new service providers).

\textsuperscript{2}Some positions went unfilled either for long periods of time or for the duration of the initiative. The center-based specialist position went unfilled for several months. In addition, ECIM was to have hired at least one full-time inclusion specialist to help providers work with special needs children, including children with behavior problems. (One foundation dedicated its grant specifically for this purpose.) UW never filled this position, despite repeated requests by lead agency and provider staff for assistance with special needs children. (In fact, several ECI programs ended up expelling children with behavior problems. This occurred because staff were unable to control these children’s behavior, and because the behavior was then complained about by the parents of other children.)
The major point to be made here is that ECI’s theory of action, by simultaneously imposing substantial top-down requirements and creating additional structures in each neighborhood, made high administrative costs inevitable. ECI’s theory of action envisioned an operational model that required substantial layers of expensive bureaucracy.

As Chapter Two makes clear, high program costs ultimately played a major role in undermining the initiative’s sustainability. Administrative expenses explain only part of ECI’s cost problems; we address other cost issues in Chapters Four and Five.

THE TIME NEEDED FOR COMMUNITY-BASED PROCESS

ECI’s theory of action involved a hierarchical bureaucracy at the same time it aimed to permit neighborhoods to direct their local programs. So ECI’s theory of action not only involved many decisionmaking layers, but also vested substantial authority in a layer that moved slowly. Community consensus building, for all its virtues, cannot be done quickly. This does not imply that neighborhood control was a mistake. Devolution of control and authority to the community level requires a tradeoff: Neighborhood-led programs may be more robust and effective than those imposed from the outside, but the necessity of developing skills, resources, and interest at the neighborhood level means that implementation should not be expected to proceed quickly. ECI’s theory of action and its need to show results within three years did not reflect this constraint. ECI’s planners failed to appreciate how much time neighborhood groups would need to mobilize, assess residents’ needs, identify space for child-care centers, develop detailed proposals, and, especially, establish new ECE programs.

Neighborhoods that successfully identified a lead agency, developed a viable service delivery plan, and became operational usually had well-established agencies that were already leaders in the community and ready to assume the lead agency role. These agencies had well-trained staff with experience in budgeting, hiring, subcontracting, and managing grants. They also tended to have more resources (largely in terms of staff and funding) than did agencies that were less successful.
Nevertheless, all lead agencies, including those that were the most successful, faced significant learning curves. To a large extent, they were starting new child-care and early education programs from scratch, often without experience in the field. To be fully successful, a community-based approach would have required a great deal of technical assistance, which ECIM lacked sufficient resources to provide. ECIM had only two staff who provided general technical assistance and outreach services for all communities.

Some neighborhoods needed assistance not only in the development of service plans and providers, but also in the creation of an initial community consensus. A number of community groups experienced great difficulty getting community stakeholders to reach consensus on a particular plan. In several communities, competing groups fought over the right to be the neighborhood’s lead agency. ECIM’s approach was to let these conflicts play out on their own, but some conflicts never were resolved. ECIM did not have a team of specialists with experience in community organizing.

Experience with other large-scale, community-based initiatives suggests that such a slow, arduous process is necessary. For example, the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s New Futures initiative, one of the most ambitious efforts to improve and expand the delivery of services to at-risk youths, originally had a five-year timeframe (like ECI) (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1995; Walsh, 1998). When they launched the initiative in 1988, New Futures planners hoped to create fundamental changes in the youth services systems in five cities (including Pittsburgh). Most cities sought to implement these changes by reaching consensus across diverse constituencies and by including community groups and their leaders in the planning and administration of new programs. Most New Futures sites did not realize substantial progress toward changing youth services systems and meeting their goals until well after the initial five-year period. Joan Walsh (1998, p. 29)

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3Exceptions include Louise Child Care, initial lead agency for Hawkins Village; the Hill House Association, lead agency in the Hill District; and the Allegheny County Intermediate Unit, lead agency in the Steel Valley and in Highlands. Louise Child Care ran several child-care centers in the county, Hill House was already operating its own child-care center, and the Intermediate Unit was operating several Head Start programs.
noted that “everyone now agrees that expecting large measurable declines in teen pregnancy and school failure in just five years was unrealistic for an experimental, multifront, community-building project like New Futures.” The same could be said for ECI’s goal of using a community-driven process to serve 7,600 children in 80 neighborhoods in five years—and to demonstrate results to the state in only three years.

Another recent large-scale effort that encountered similar problems was the Carnegie Corporation’s Starting Points initiative. Starting Points aimed for “systems change”: the creation of new governing and advocacy bodies (in 11 sites, including Pittsburgh) that would either make or advocate policy changes to improve the delivery of social services for at-risk children. Most sites sought to integrate services across a broad spectrum of government agencies and providers and to mobilize community residents behind the efforts. While evaluators identified a number of successful outcomes from Starting Points, they found that the initiative failed to create stronger connections among providers of ECE, child health, and family support services. For funders and policymakers, they advise that “the time frame for [large-scale] initiatives should be commensurate with the size of the goals and the level of change that is contemplated” (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2001, p. 32).

ECI planners were attempting to implement on a large scale the kinds of high-quality ECE interventions that have demonstrated significant and lasting positive outcomes for children (e.g., the Perry Preschool Project). Such a plan in itself was ambitious, but it was made even more ambitious by the addition of a community-driven process that was not a characteristic of the model programs that had inspired ECI planners (nor of the few large-scale ECE programs, such as the Chicago Child-Parent Center program, which is discussed in Chapter Seven).

The existing program that comes closest to ECI’s approach of marrying the concepts of high-quality ECE and a community-driven process is Head Start. Head Start involves a significant degree of local decisionmaking, with parents and other community members typically serving on advisory boards and having a voice in program de-
sign. Many parents also serve as classroom volunteers and eventually become paid staff.4

Nonetheless, Head Start does not require consensus within a community or the identification of a lead agency. While the process for becoming a Head Start grantee is competitive, any organization may submit a proposal, and the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF) (within the Department of Health and Human Services) applies straightforward guidelines in selecting grantees for specific geographic areas. Thus, agencies do not usually “battle it out” to determine who will be the Head Start provider in a given community. Furthermore, ACF has no expectation that grantees will be representative of the larger community in which they provide services.

COMMUNITY CONTROL VS. QUALITY CONTROL

Many neighborhood leaders felt that there was conflict with ECIM over the control of their efforts. ECI’s insistence on its own definition of quality inevitably placed constraints on the degree of freedom to be exercised by communities. Its original business plan did not acknowledge the extent to which quality control and community control might be in tension. When ECI was launched, neighborhoods were told to indulge their biggest dreams; some were disappointed when they found that their dreams were not always consistent with the vision of ECIM.

Our interviews suggest that community representatives had doubts about the way ECIM defined quality. Typically, they did not question the use of NAEYC standards but instead focused on ECI’s quality monitoring process. In their view, the way in which ECI operationalized high quality (e.g., with frequent inspections and observations by ECI’s quality assurance staff, and with rigid rules about which vendors could be used and about who could be hired, including the requirement that all résumés of prospective employees be approved by ECIM) went too far beyond NAEYC standards. In the perception of

4Note, however, that it is widely believed that local discretion on certain program parameters accounts for the uneven level of quality that exists across Head Start centers (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1997; Zigler and Muenchow, 1992).
most lead agencies and providers, ECIM and UW were overly rigid in their demands. The original RFNP was vague about ECI’s expectations in a number of areas. Community agencies were encouraged to be creative and to plan for the kinds of services their residents wanted. With this encouragement, several community groups spent many months creating service delivery plans that they later had to completely discard or significantly change. This problem was a consequence of ECI’s simultaneous pursuit of grassroots, community decisionmaking and its own vision of high-quality ECE.

For example, in Pittsburgh’s South Side, local planners spent over a year developing a community plan for four neighborhoods, including two public housing communities. Based on the results of parent surveys, neighborhood planners decided to focus first on establishing centers to serve three- and four-year-old children. When they submitted their plan to ECI (in January 1998), the planners felt confident that ECIM and the review committees would demand few revisions. Given the community-driven approach of ECI, they felt empowered to plan for the kinds of programs they wanted to offer. But ECIM insisted that the two centers include infant/toddler care. ECIM wanted all ECI centers to serve children in all age groups (ages zero to five), so as to provide continuity of care as children got older and so that parents with more than one child would not have to go to two locations. This condition had not been clear to the neighborhood planners in South Side, who had believed they were empowered to define their own needs.

Similar conflicts arose in other communities. In one neighborhood, the planning group hoped to provide ECI services using existing providers. Yet after their plan was approved, ECI staff determined that several providers were supplying such low-quality care that they should not participate. This discouraged local planners, who felt they had been misled about the degree to which they had ownership

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5For existing providers under consideration for participation in ECI, ECIM reviewed the summaries of the state’s licensing inspections for the preceding two years. If the summaries showed serious and chronic violations of licensing standards, the provider was given six months to remedy the problem and become eligible for ECI funding for quality supplements. ECIM believed that a provider was unlikely to make the effort to reach ECI’s quality standards if it had not shown a commitment to reach the less-stringent licensing standards of the state.
over their ECI plan. To be fair, ECIM had made it clear to all planning groups that not all providers included in a plan would necessarily be deemed ECI eligible. Nevertheless, this is another example that illustrates the inherent tension between ECI’s goals of enforcing a specific definition of quality and using a community-driven process.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE

Most interviewees agreed that UW had little experience in directly operating a large-scale service-delivery initiative such as ECI. UW’s primary competence lies in distributing funds, not operating programs. Running an initiative on the scale of ECI was a substantial institutional reach for UW. Nevertheless, UW had a number of advantages, including fundraising capacity and relationships with service providers and community agencies around the county. UW might have been an appropriate place for ECI if a strong administrative structure had been set up for the initiative. Unfortunately, ECI’s administrative structure only added to the problems implicit in the theory of action.

The administrative structure within ECIM was relatively straightforward; we do not address it here. The problems in ECI’s administrative structure were at the leadership level. Figure 3.2 depicts the intended ECI leadership structure, showing the relationship between ECIM and others at UW. On the administrative side in UW, ECIM reported to Joyce Wilbur, who reported to UW’s CEO, William Meyer; Victor Papale served as a consultant. Volunteer leadership was supposed to be provided by the ECI advisory council—a group of business leaders, ECE professionals, and community representatives. In addition, ECI, like UW as a whole, operated under the ultimate supervision of the UW board and its executive committee.

ECI’s leadership structure had two weaknesses. First, ECI lacked its own independent board. Second, in practice the organization chart quickly became more complicated than the one just described, as a result of the departure of key administrators and the proliferation of volunteer supervisory committees (which we describe below). Both weaknesses made it difficult for anyone involved with ECI to exercise strong leadership.
Absence of a Board

Resolving conflicts about the priority of competing goals requires a strong, empowered, independent board. Unfortunately, UW management itself was confused about authority over ECI, and in particular its relationship to ECI’s funders; UW leaders never felt full ownership of ECI and did not perceive that they had the authority to change the business plan. ECI’s organizational structure lacked a strong board with both the authority and the stature to clarify the leadership. Although the UW board’s executive committee maintained final authority over key decisions, ECI was just one of several matters with which it was concerned; its members lacked the time to provide sufficient oversight.

Confused Authority Lines and Proliferating Committees

The ECI structure became much more complicated than was originally intended. Figure 3.3 is an approximation of the actual leadership structure of ECI as it existed from 1998 to 2000.
On the administrative side, Victor Papale departed relatively early, and Joyce Wilbur left midway through year two of implementation (in July 1998). These were critical departures, because Papale and Wilbur represented two of the three individuals (with Martha Isler as the third) who were expected to provide ECI’s operational leadership. Wilbur was critical both for fundraising and for maintaining ECIM’s relationship with UW management; Papale had been responsible for promoting relationships with a variety of stakeholders. Wilbur was not replaced; John Sava was hired to fulfill some of the functions previously performed by Papale, but Sava’s authority was not clearly defined. Later, Claire Morrison, a new vice president at UW (formerly with the state’s DPW), was asked to supervise ECIM. At different times after the departure of Wilbur, ECIM reported to Sava, to Morrison, or directly to Meyer. We agree with the assessment of ECI conducted by Dickerson & Mangus, Ink., in September 1999, which identified the lack of a clearly defined chain of command as a major problem inhibiting effective administration (Dickerson & Mangus, 1999, p. 28). Although the theory of action assumed that UW and ECIM were an integrated unit (as suggested by Figure 3.1),
ECIM was never well integrated into the UW organization, so the problems with the chain of command became critical.

Another result of the departure of key staff was that individuals who had been hired to serve a specific role were given responsibilities outside their primary experience and expertise. ECIM staff were experienced in program design, but after the departure of Wilbur and Papale, ECIM was given additional responsibilities related to financial management and to relationships with both neighborhoods and funders. Some funders perceived that UW essentially discontinued the task of maintaining the support of key business leaders and contributors after Joyce Wilbur departed. More generally, UW did not hire for ECI a top executive with experience relevant to both the entrepreneurial startup of a new organization and the ongoing operation of a large-scale organization.

While key staff were departing and ECI’s administrative structure was becoming more ambiguous, the number of advisory committees on the volunteer side was proliferating. The original structure included an advisory council whose function was to review community plans submitted in response to the RFNP. As chronicled in Chapter Two, UW added a preliminary review committee (PRC) in late 1997 to serve as an additional layer of review for community plans. A few months later, an ECI management committee was added to the mix, creating an additional layer of supervision on the volunteer side. The committee structure ultimately became so complex that even some of the people who served on the committees did not understand how they fit in.6

Consequences of Administrative Complexity

The complexity and weaknesses of ECI’s leadership structure had a number of negative consequences for ECI’s operation, including:

6In addition to these volunteer oversight committees, several other volunteer committees, or working groups, were established. For example, a career development committee, consisting mainly of ECE practitioners and academics, developed ECI’s pre-service training curriculum. Another committee helped to establish links between ECI and Head Start programs. In our assessment, these committees had a positive influence on ECI’s operation. For example, the Head Start committee laid the groundwork for ECI’s collaboration with local Head Start grantees, which resulted in 20 Head Start centers becoming licensed with the state to provide full-day child care.
• **A slow process of neighborhood approvals.** The complex administrative structure and proliferation of advisory committees hampered ECI’s ability to respond quickly to neighborhood plans. Community groups spent many months or even years developing proposals that met ECI standards. In some cases, ECI’s various approval mechanisms—both in UW administration and the volunteer committees—took several months to either approve or fund proposals.

• **A slow response to changed conditions.** Failings of the original business plan, including the unwieldy theory of action and mistaken assumptions about supply and demand (to be discussed in Chapter Four), were apparent soon after the initiative’s launch. The lack of clear leadership, however, meant that ECI’s response was slow. Business plan revision did not begin until nearly two years after ECI’s launch.

• **A power struggle between UW and ECIM.** Confusion over roles, especially over who had the authority to make key operational and strategic decisions, permitted disagreements between ECIM and UW management to escalate into full-blown, unresolved power struggles. UW management and ECIM developed early disagreements stemming largely from the fact that they prioritized the goals of the initiative differently. For ECIM, maintaining high-quality services was the most important goal. UW management placed a high value on serving substantial numbers of children and achieving sustainability. When costs per child turned out to be much larger than expected, ECI’s goals came into tension with each other, putting ECIM and UW management at loggerheads; some of the volunteer members of ECI’s complicated committee oversight structure were also involved in the struggle. The weakness of the organizational structure delayed resolution of the conflict.

The conflict between ECIM and UW management had negative consequences for ECI, both in terms of public relations and neighborhood operations. In the midst of the power struggle, communication broke down between ECI and important funders, volunteers, and business leaders, because UW management and ECIM could not agree on the message. A number of funders were left frustrated by the absence of information coming from ECI. In addition, the power
struggle led to crossed signals in directions given to lead agencies. Many lead agency representatives told us of their frustration about the instability of ECI’s policies, particularly in 1999 and 2000. Policy directives issued by ECIM would sometimes be rescinded by UW management the next day, according to interviewees. This kind of confusion seriously undermined confidence in ECI in the neighborhoods.

Eventually, UW management ended the power struggle in the spring of 2000 by fully asserting its authority over ECIM. Resolution occurred only after UW management confirmed that the major funders were in agreement about the need to scale ECI down. By this time, it was probably two years too late to make the major changes that might have salvaged ECI’s long-term prospects.

CONCLUSION

ECI’s theory of action was simultaneously bureaucratic and community based, and it exhibited the vices of both approaches and the virtues of neither. The theory of action meant that administrative costs would be substantial, that implementation would be slow, and that community control would clash with quality control. Moreover, a labyrinthine leadership structure precluded decisive response when these and other problems arose during the course of the initiative’s implementation.