

Evaluation of the North Carolina Partnership for Children Leaders Collaborative

Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant
Final Report 2012-2015

Executive Summary



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Smart Start Leaders Collaborative (Leaders Collaborative) strengthens local leadership capacity by improving learning outcomes for young children in North Carolina communities. The Leaders Collaborative, created by the North Carolina Partnership for Young Children (NCPC), specifically works to ensure that the most vulnerable children have the experiences needed to enter kindergarten ready to succeed by focusing on results-based accountability, reducing disparities between groups of children, and more effectively engaging diverse community partners in collaborative leadership to develop solutions that address challenges faced by young children and their families.

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation sponsored a preliminary cohort of the Leaders Collaborative, which was revamped based on lessons learned. The revised Leaders Collaborative was then funded by a four-year federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant. NCPC coordinated annual cohorts of executive directors from local Smart Start partnerships and up to four NCPC staff members. This report summarizes the results from the four cohorts funded between 2012-2015.

Each year, up to sixteen participants came together on a regular basis over the course of nine months. Participants learned tools for engaging new and existing community partners and worked in their local communities to create shared agreements to address disparities among children, build data capacity, and develop mechanisms for quantifying and sharing progress. In between sessions, participants implemented new tools for leadership and collaboration directly into their community work. The Leaders Collaborative significantly focused on racial equity by providing training and practice for participants to address situations where structural and institutional realities led to disparate outcomes between groups of children. In addition to concentrating on this area throughout all the sessions, one of the eight Leaders Collaborative sessions focused solely on this topic and 21 local communities implemented a local Leading for Equity retreat with community partners.

The Leaders Collaborative was designed to fortify the Smart Start model to improve early childhood outcomes, which can only happen through collective action and coordinated efforts. Through the development of skills to engage diverse community partners and align contributions, the executive directors of local partnerships were better equipped to reduce disparities between groups of children by creating effective partnerships and collectively strengthening early childhood systems and programs.

The Leaders Collaborative has shown an increase in the quality and quantity of partnerships and collaborations focused on addressing disparities among young children across the state and issues related to equity.

All four cohorts reported measurable gains in knowledge of their leadership style and skills, learned new tools for building community partnerships, developed and used these new skills in ways that had a measurable impact in their communities, and built new relationships to further the vision and mission of Smart Start locally and statewide. Leaders Collaborative participants report a positive difference in both the ways in which they facilitated local meetings and the ways in which statewide meetings took place. Participants across all cohorts reported that as a result of their experience they developed significant assets that contributed to the overall Smart Start network. They built a strong statewide network of colleagues among the executive directors of local partnerships and with NCPC: cultivated a shared language and tools for hosting conversations, adopted a mindset, focused on proactively seeking positive solutions; and developed the ability to use data to inform decision-making and measure impact.

The Leaders Collaborative participants consistently identified the following specific distinctions and tools as ones they used in their daily work:

- The appreciative leadership approach
- Serving as a convener and facilitator of community processes rather than the person who needed to have all of the answers (known as the “host not hero” distinction)
- Engaging more partners generally as well as engaging more strategic partners to support the local work
- Learning to use data more effectively to drive community decision-making
- Gaining a much deeper understanding of issues related to equity and how to effectively address disparities between groups of children
- Using protocols to facilitate community conversations and processes
- More effective meeting planning and implementation

- More confidence in planning and convening community partners, particularly around challenging problems for which there were not immediate solutions
- Improved communication skills

In each cohort at least two (and as many as six) **participants stated that the Leaders Collaborative had such a profound impact that it had dramatically altered their work.** In more than one case this happened to the point that long-planned retirements or professional transitions were cancelled because the leaders were so rejuvenated.

Collectively, this demonstrates that the focus of the Leaders Collaborative, which presents new topics and then requires the participants to apply this new knowledge in their local communities, has effectively supported application of knowledge into practice consistently across all four cohorts.



In addition to getting feedback from the participants through surveys and focus groups, surveys of local community partners assessed the impact of the Leaders Collaborative on the way Smart Start work took place. **Across all four years community partners confirmed that the skills executive directors learned in the Leaders Collaborative had a direct impact on local work happening on behalf of young children.** The community partners consistently identified the following as changes they had experienced and observed: more effective meetings, more extensive community engagement, and greater focus on addressing disparities between groups of children.

Among the 21 communities that planned and implemented local Leading for Equity retreats with community partners, **significant capacity and momentum was built to address disparities in communities.** Community partners who participated in local equity retreats were particularly complementary of that experience and the positive impact it had on addressing disparities between groups of children. Community partners reported general improvements in the amount and quality of local conversations about early childhood issues and on specific equity issues; improvements were also noted in the number of actions taken to address these disparities. Some community partners also noted that they were making changes within the organizations they operated to bring a more focused equity lens to their work.

Another goal of the Leaders Collaborative was to create stronger relationships among the participants to strengthen the Smart Start Network. All four cohorts reported positive impact on this goal, although Cohort III faced unique challenges with group cohesion due to early turnover in group membership.

Participants in all four cohorts reported hesitation at the onset of the program about making the time commitment to participate in the Leaders Collaborative. By the end of the experience, however, **100% of participants said they would recommend the experience to their peers.**

Over the course of the four years NCPC adapted the Leaders Collaborative to reflect lessons learned from the evaluation to better meet the goals of the project. Of these many positive changes, perhaps most notable was the creation of leadership development assessments and a competency-focused peer coaching program provided to all participants to allow greater opportunities for skill building.

The Leaders Collaborative achieved its goals and has been a very positive experience for the participants, community members and the overall Smart Start network. **The intensive leadership development experience significantly advanced the knowledge and skills of the partnership executive directors and rejuvenated their commitment to their work, both locally and statewide. The experience has had a strong positive impact on local communities' ability to meet the needs of young children and to reduce disparities between groups of children with new and more diverse partners getting involved and helping to make a positive difference at the local level.** The overall Smart Start network has grown stronger as a result of the Leaders Collaborative, as it has provided shared language and new approaches for leaders committed to helping each child reach his or her potential to prepare them to succeed in a global community.

