

strengthening families

washington: a shared vision

In August 2006, the state of Washington was selected to receive a seed grant from the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds to incorporate a Strengthening Families™ approach into the work of the statewide prevention entity, the Washington Children's Trust Fund (now the Council for Children and Families (CCF)). Washington was poised to take on Strengthening Families. Groundbreaking work on risk and protective factors by researchers J. David Hawkins, Ph.D. and Richard F. Catalano, Ph.D. at the University of Washington, had been guiding the state's child abuse and neglect prevention work for over a decade. Strengthening Families provided an opportunity to apply a Protective Factors approach more broadly in ways that could engage the early learning and child welfare communities. The timing was right. In 2008 the state created a new Department of Early Learning, launched an innovative public/private partnership called Thrive by Five, invested in a progressive expansion of all-day kindergarten, and set out on a long-term path towards improving the quality of child care and early learning programs.

Over the years, Strengthening Families Washington (SF-WA) has become an increasingly well known vehicle for advancing policies and practices that benefit young children and their families in many systems. The common language provided by the Protective Factors framework has enabled SF-WA leaders to bring stakeholders together from a variety of fields, from early learning to child welfare, from mental health to the military. As the diverse group meets regularly to develop strategies to prevent child maltreatment and promote optimal development of children in Washington, the Strengthening Families approach is infused into different sectors. CCF Director Joan Sharp notes that success in engaging a broad group of leaders is the result of an approach that emphasizes coordination and collaboration to enhance their individual areas of work. Together, members of the Strengthening Families Washington Steering Committee, which has representatives from 17 organizations as well as unaffiliated volunteers, have developed a logic model and theory of change that reflects their shared vision for children and families in Washington.

EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS-BUILDING

When designing the state's Strengthening Families approach, one strategic choice was to use the state's Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) plan, *Kids Matter*, as a framework for its efforts. In 2009 the state included

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GOVERNANCE

The Strengthening Families Steering committee includes an array of public and private entities, including, the Council for Children and Families, Department of Health, the Child Care Resource and Referral Network, the Department of Early Learning, the Head Start State Collaboration office, the United Way of Washington, and many others.

Strengthening Families has advanced Kids Matter (the state's ECCS plan) in significant ways:

- The way Strengthening Families is defined helps answer how to strengthen and focus the family support component of the work.
- The language is very cross-sector friendly—it doesn't just apply in the family support box, but is a language that connects to priorities across systems.
- It not only connects to the outcomes that we care about related to prevention—it *also connects to promoting optimal development for children*. This brings new partners to the table who wouldn't necessarily be engaged otherwise.

Strengthening Families as a core strategy in its proposal for ongoing funding for its ECCS systems building work. The committees for Strengthening Families and ECCS/Kids Matter have recently merged as part of a larger effort to ensure that Washington's Strengthening Families work is aligned with and leverages other ongoing systems change initiatives. A strong partnership with the state's United Way association, a recipient of one of United Way's Strengthening Families United grants, is building the Protective Factors framework and Strengthening Families strategies into programming in local United Ways. A focus of current efforts is integrating Strengthening Families into the framework of the state's early learning plan. With several early childhood initiatives working simultaneously in Washington, coordination and communication have been crucial. The Protective Factors framework has provided a common language for these efforts while also bringing new stakeholders to the table.

BUILDING STRENGTHENING FAMILIES PRACTICE ON THE GROUND

In November 2006 Washington selected ten early care and education pilot sites to build knowledge of what works and to promote a Protective Factors approach in their programs. These ten sites conducted the Strengthening Families Self Assessment and participated in skill-building activities, networking, and development of an initial implementation plan. The pilot was completed in 2008, providing valuable information about strategies for bringing Strengthening Families to life in early care and education programs. The learning from the pilot sites is now being integrated into training offered to a variety of organizations. A report on the pilot can be accessed at:

<http://www.ccf.wa.gov/sfece/documents/StrengtheningFamiliesReport2008.pdf>

BUILDING PARENT PARTNERSHIPS

Fostering leadership and partnering with parents are central components of Washington's Strengthening Families strategy. The Community Café concept was developed in Washington by Strengthening Families parent leaders and represents a key SF-WA strategy. The Community Café approach is based on the World Café, a series of conversations that build upon one another to further understanding and discussion about "questions that matter." These community-based, culturally relevant conversations have three focal areas: building Protective Factors, promoting parent leadership, and creating lasting partnerships throughout communities. Many parents who have participated in these cafés go on to host their own cafés, mentor future hosts, and advocate for their families and communities in venues like the state legislature.

Though members of each community design their own unique cafe, a Community Café Collaborative Leadership Team of parents coordinates this effort at a state level. The team provides orientations for communities that hope to begin holding their own cafés. A budget of \$2,000 will pay for snacks and child care for a café series, and support efforts to build sustainability in the community. In addition, close to 100 partner organizations around the state provide in-kind contributions to support the cafes. This includes venues, food, books from a reading foundation as an incentive, and many other partners. The Leadership Team also encourages café hosts to develop partnerships with local organizations and agencies and to create their own local leadership team. SF-WA has contributed to national replication of Community Cafes by supporting development of the Café Host Orientation Kits now available on the National Alliance of Children's Trust & Prevention Funds website, <http://www.ctfalliance.org>.

Washington has seen tremendous enthusiasm for the Community Café approach since it began in 2007. The Community Café Collaborative strives to meet the demand for cafés and build a flexible structure to support the statewide deployment of this strategy, but remains steadfast in its commitment to developing a model that allows for an optimal level of community input and co-design.

ENRICHING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Training and professional development around Strengthening Families is a focus for work in the coming year. A Steering Committee subgroup on Professional Development will be coordinating work that is taking place in three areas: general introductions to Strengthening Families, professional development in early learning, and child welfare caseworker training. A "Strengthening Families 101" presentation is available upon request to for those who would like an introduction to the Protective Factors and other basic Strengthening Families concepts. As Washington's Department of Early Learning begins to develop a system of professional development in its early learning framework, several Strengthening Families stakeholders will be bringing their knowledge of the Protective Factors to the process, embedding them into the plan and delivery system.

FAMILY-STRENGTHENING CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE

Recent transitions at multiple levels of the child welfare system present both a challenge and an opportunity to develop Strengthening Families work in this area. While administrative positions were filled by interim staff at the time of this report, the Council for Children and Families hopes to engage the new child welfare leaders once they are appointed to build on emerging efforts to incorporate the Strengthening Families approach into the training of child welfare staff. The goal is to educate caseworkers about early childhood development and the importance of ensuring that the youngest children in their caseloads are enrolled in quality early care and education programs.

EVALUATING STRENGTHENING FAMILIES IN WASHINGTON

Strengthening Families Washington operates from a Theory of Change which provides a framework for evaluation. As systems change is a key area of emphasis in the state's Strengthening Families work, a significant part of the states' evaluation work tracks progress in this area. SF-WA benefits from their linkage to the state's Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems plan, which implements broader data-gathering efforts as part of the evaluation required in that grant. Evaluation processes and tools have also been established for some of the programmatic efforts undertaken, such as presentations and trainings on the Strengthening Families approach and Protective Factor framework, Community Cafes, etc. An evaluation consultant is currently working with the leadership committee's evaluation work group to fine tune an evaluation plan.

community cafés that strengthen families

Washington State is supporting a parent-led project called Community Cafés to mobilize parents towards building better communities, services and systems for themselves and their families. The Community Café (CC) approach grew from a seed planted by the Illinois Family Partnership Parent Café at the Strengthening Families through Early Care and Education Summit in San Diego in 2007. Building on the World Café process of structured small group conversations, Community Cafés, and the Parent Cafés that inspired them, engage parents in a dialogue about the Protective Factors at the core of Strengthening Families. Washington's Community Cafés also include a set of conversations about leadership and what it means to take and show it, then a set of conversations about partnerships and the type of relationship-building necessary to make community and policy changes.

Over 150 parents and staff across the state have been oriented to the Community Café approach, 68 of them parents. The Community Café process actively engages over 500 parents and community members in Washington alone, powered by over 70 volunteers, who have donated more than 4,000 documented volunteer hours. Parents have led the process from the beginning. Though members of each community design their own unique café, a Community Café Collaborative Leadership Team of parents coordinates this effort at a state level. The team provides orientations for communities that hope to hold their own cafés. No paid staff was used to design, manage, budget, implement or evaluate cafes though small amounts of funding were used to provide parent leaders a gratitude stipend and subsidize meals, child care, mileage, and supplies.

At the local level, a \$2,000 grant to a community pays for snacks and child care for a café series, and supports efforts to build sustainability in the community. Almost 100 partner organizations around the state provide in-kind contributions to support the cafés including sites for holding the cafes, food, books as an incentive from a foundation, and other contributions. The Leadership Team also encourages café hosts to develop partnerships with local organizations and agencies and to create its own local leadership team.

The whole structure is designed to create a ladder of leadership opportunities and capacity-building for parents. Parents build relationships with organizations at the local, state, and national levels; write grants and letters; learn computer skills; design conversations; implement evaluations; give public presentations; mentor other parents; and do a myriad of other jobs. They have been invited to several national conferences and meetings and started cafes in seven states. Four national non-profits are partnering to use the approach to support state prevention efforts. Parents receive a stipend to design and customize trainings and fly out of state to present them. There is also a mentor option for new hosts and a national monthly conference call to support Community Café practice.