



What is Smart Start?

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## REPLICATING SMART START:

**"CAN YOU SEND ME A SMART START KIT?"**

**"WE'RE SORRY BUT THERE IS NO SUCH THING."**

Smart Start is a living, dynamic initiative that literally can not be fit in a box, or a notebook, or even a single monograph. It began as an idea, not a set plan with all the pieces in place and continues to evolve today. Its leaders at the state and local levels are trailblazers, navigating an uncharted, sometimes bumpy, other times exhilarating path. They are willing to take risks, comfortable with questions and committed to change.

In its first seven years of life, here are some highlights that illustrate the rapid pace of change that has been characteristic of Smart Start's development:

- In 1993, there were 12 "pioneer" partnerships representing 18 counties. Today in 2001, there are 81 partnerships representing each of North Carolina's 100 counties.
- In 1996, NCPC took over administration of Smart Start. It had a staff of five people. Five years later, its staff has grown to almost 60.
- In 1993, Smart Start received a \$20 million dollar appropriation. In FY 2001 (the year ended on June 30, 2001), the Smart Start appropriation was \$220 million.

"Smart Start will always be evolving," explains Karen Ponder. "We are creating change." To do so, Smart

Start is continually balancing among features which may appear incompatible at first glance but in reality each is necessary to Smart Start's success:

- Providing structure and guidance *and* promoting local control and decision making
- Building on best practices *and* encouraging creativity
- Providing strong leadership *and* promoting collaboration
- Offering support *and* helping a community become more self-sufficient
- Addressing the needs of the neediest *and* conveying the message that Smart Start is for all young children and families in the state
- Creating a strong local presence *and* informing citizens about how Smart Start at the state level touches their everyday lives

"We are always trying our best to be responsive to new needs that arise and lessons learned along the way as we move ahead, continuing to build our base and addressing the needs of North Carolina's children and families," continues Ponder.

Though there is no kit, there is much to be learned from Smart Start's experience. Below are four key lessons learned by NCPC and local partnerships:

- Consider "what might be" instead of "what is" as you design a structure for your initiative;
- Local control is essential to Smart Start's success;
- Build the broadest base of support possible. Never miss the opportunity to get your message out; and
- Create a strong business case for your initiative.

Each is followed by a series of strategies to help you implement them:

**Consider "what might be" instead of "what is" as you design a structure for your initiative.** In North Carolina, the structure of state and local public-private partnerships provides state-level oversight, local decision-making and ensures

business involvement. Although this structure makes sense for North Carolina, other states may use their resources and existing structures differently. As one executive director said when thinking about replicating Smart Start in other places, "Smart Start doesn't look the same in two counties. Why would it look the same in a different state?" As you consider replicating and/or adapting Smart Start keep the following in mind:

**Offer state and local leaders training and ongoing support to help move their focus from "providing services" to "creating systems."** To begin with, many people need lots of help to understand the difference between a service and a system. Creating a system involves engaging diverse stakeholders including families to engage in an on-going process of creating a vision, developing goals and identifying and implementing strategies to achieve those goals. It requires looking beyond programs and the needs of agencies to take a holistic, big picture view of what is needed by children, families and the community. It is not easy, but is the only way of ensuring lasting change.

**Give people time to get to know one another, to build relationships as they begin their work together.** As Clark Plexico recently told people from Oklahoma and Kansas who are interested in bringing an initiative similar to Smart Start to their states, "There's a certain amount of structure you can put in place. But be aware, there's a certain amount of process between people that you can't pass over. There needs to be time for communication

among people so they can share and sort through their ideas and discover and build common ground." To this end, Smart Start requested and received funding from the legislature to reinstate collaboration training that the first two waves of local partnerships found so helpful.

**Start slowly and surely.** Give the planning process the time and resources needed. During the first year, fund communities to plan, hire staff, bring stakeholders together regularly, create a vision, and begin implementing services on a small scale. This will provide opportunities to "practice" developing collaboration skills and make it more likely the group will experience success rather than become overwhelmed and frustrated.

**Pay special attention to financial controls.** "Make sure you have organizational specialists involved from the beginning in addition to people who know about children and families," advises Walter McDowell. "We skinned our knees at the beginning when a Smart Start employee misused some funds in a sloppy, not criminal way. This could have been avoided."

**Allow time to reassess and revise.** Too much pressure to succeed and show positive results can mean not stepping back and adjusting to make things better. Define an ongoing process of assessing and revising as integral to success from the beginning.

**Allow your initiative to evolve as it develops.** As Jo Deck explains, "Smart Start began as a moment in time. We had no template to follow, only our strong will and our best attempts to implement the best of what we knew about supporting children and families. Smart Start is now a model that other states are looking at. While people can learn from our experiences, they need to remember that if their initiative is to be successful, it needs an open-ended element."

*Remember that you don't have to replicate an entire initiative. Sometimes certain aspects can be replicated and/or adapted to help you meet your state or community's goals.* Certain elements of Smart Start have been replicated in other states including T.E.A.C.H.<sup>®</sup> (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps). T.E.A.C.H.<sup>®</sup> has partnered with Smart Start in North Carolina to improve the education of child care teachers and reduce teacher turnover. This model is being replicated in 18 states. The state based replication models include Georgia (using federal child care block grant funds exclusively), Florida, Illinois, New York and Colorado (which also uses private funds through the American Business Collaboration for Quality Dependent Care).

*Local control is essential to Smart Start's success.* As an executive director explains, "Who else knows better what our county needs and who would work harder to make things better for our young children and families?" To help make local control work, Smart Start shares the following insights:

*Be aware that local control can be unwieldy at times.* Smart Start's 81 local partnerships differ in terms of their counties' needs and resources, the amount of time they have been in existence and their level of effectiveness in creating change. It's an amazingly complex system to try to guide, support and manage and to be part of.

*Create and implement clear policies and procedures from the beginning.* "As Smart Start has grown, so has our need for structure and accountability," explains Karen Ponder. "We are working hard to create user-friendly systems and know we still have a way to go." While some local partnerships have been grateful for increased structure and guidance, it has been frustrating for others. As Smart Start grows, it is becoming very bureaucratic," laments an executive director. "It's easy to lose the Smart Start forest for the trees." "The administrative rules keep changing," notes a local board president. "The state legislature spent lots of money on audits. We wrote 13 checks our first year. Two or three auditors spent three days going over our records. I kept thinking, the state is wasting more money on this than we are going to spend in our county."

An example of how Smart Start is responding to needs of local partnerships is the Multi-county Accounting and Contracting Plan (MAC). This plan allows for more efficient operations by developing regional processing centers for accounting and contracting services of local partnerships.

"One suggestion we would make to others is to have systems in place from the start," says Karen Ponder. "This will allow local partnerships to focus on what they want to accomplish rather than on record-keeping and avoid some of the frustration being experienced by some of our partnerships today."

*Build in opportunities for local partnerships to shape what is happening at the state level.* There is a rich resource of leadership and experience in local partnerships that a state organization can greatly benefit from. The Local Partnership Advisory Council (LPAC), made up of executive directors and board members of local partnerships, serves as an advisory board to NCPC. Local partnership representatives also serve on all NCPC state-level committees.

**Take a customer service approach in working with local partnerships.** The better you can meet local needs, the better they can respond to the needs of their communities. This requires adequate staffing be devoted to this effort. Prior to 2001, NCPC had only four Planning Specialists who had front-line contact with partnerships around content areas. They were each responsible for over 20 partnerships and only recently has an adequate level of staff been established to better support local partnerships. "We were seriously overburdened," explained one of the four. "We tried to have as much one-on-one time with our partnerships, but clearly it was limited."

**Offer a range of technical assistance activities to meet local partnerships' diverse needs.** NCPC offers a continuum of technical assistance services that includes the Smart Start tool kit, conferences, forums, education, mentoring, collaboration training and intensive technical assistance.

**Create regular, ongoing opportunities for local partnerships to support and learn from one another.** NCPC is making a concerted effort to enhance communication between partnerships by offering formal and informal ongoing opportunities including: conferences, Smart.Net (an in-house Smart Start web site on which NCPC and local partnerships can share news, forms and other information), multiple list serves, site visits and an Executive Directors' Forum that meets every other month and sponsors two three-day retreats yearly.

**Take seriously lessons learned from local communities.** In an unexpected, yet welcomed ripple effect of local control, counties' successes are shaping statewide initiatives. For example, local solutions for increasing child care quality and decreasing teacher turnover led to North Carolina's new five star licensing system that gives programs and parents a clear indicator of program quality. Local innovations also led to North Carolina Cares, a statewide health care supplement program for child care teachers.

**Build the broadest base of support possible. Never miss the opportunity to get your message out.** According to Monica Harris, "Creating public awareness and public support is not about creating a flashy public service announcement (PSA). It is arming people - parents, business people, the faith community, service providers - with information so that they become spokespeople and future champions for your effort." A home visitor adds, "Word of mouth is the best way to 'sell' any program. It's user-friendly and tried and true." To begin building your base of support:

**Help state and local leaders understand that children learn wherever they are cared for.** Research shows that learning begins at birth - if not before. And that the relationships and experiences of children's early years - at home and in child care - help shape the people they are and will become. Strategies being used in North Carolina to convey the importance of the early years include: providing parents and home caregivers with child development information, mentoring and other assistance, taking community leaders on tours of child care programs for a hands-on demonstration of what and how children learn, integrating this concept into Smart Start's communication efforts, and building on the passion of Smart Start's biggest champion, Governor Hunt, who continues to convey this message in every speech he gives.

**Focus on all young children and their families and make it clear you are doing so from the start.** Smart Start is for ALL children 0-5 - all races, income levels, ability levels, those in child care and those not - and their families. Monica Harris advises, "Be aware of messages you may be conveying unintentionally. At the beginning, we spent a lot of time building the case for Smart Start based on North Carolina's great need. As a result people mistakenly thought Smart Start was just for families in need. We now have to go back and devote time and energy to remind people Smart Start is for all children. We are showing, for example, how when a teacher is trained or a program receives new and safe equipment, it helps all children."

**Create a consistent look to communicate your main message.** Because Smart Start is so many things to so many people, NCPC needed to make it real and put a face to what Smart Start is. They wanted to show that Smart Start means every young child and family. To do this, NCPC uses lots of pictures of children and families in their materials. The materials look professional, but warm and friendly as opposed to bureaucratic.

**Create a strong business case for your initiative.** Articulate the link between supporting families and quality child care and economic development. Help business leaders and others see the ripple effects of quality child care. Explain that parents are more productive employees, better able to focus on the task at hand

knowing their children are being well cared for. Cite study findings<sup>4</sup> that show children who attend better quality child care do better in school which has implications for the future workforce and quality of life of a community - major considerations for companies.

**Be prepared to help business leaders make a strong business case.** Clark Plexico explains, "Sometimes early childhood people shy away from making a business case. They think it is crass. But that's a mistake because we need to work together. When I told Gerry Cobb ( NCPC's former Development Director) that we had a chance for substantial funding but needed to make the business case, she was able to help me put together some scenarios that would help both Smart Start and AT&T. The toll free resource line, for example, is easily identified with a telephone company. It provides a good service for families and helps us create the brand loyalty we want across the state." Sandra Conway agrees, "My love is education. But in my role at First Union, I need people to talk to me in business terms and to help me make a strong business case for our support."

**Exercise patience.** Clark Plexico found the patience he had learned as a state legislator to be a valuable and necessary attribute in gaining corporate support from AT&T for Smart Start. "I knew I wasn't going to get everything I wanted right away. It was a chipping away process - as change so often is. You make a good case and then find allies who will support you for varying reasons - some because your cause makes sense, some because you will support them."

<sup>4</sup> See Cost, Quality & Child Outcomes Study Team (1995). *Cost, quality, and child outcomes in child care centers, Executive Summary*. Denver, CO: Economics Department, University of Colorado at Denver.

## **IN CLOSING,**

Here is a story shared by a county Smart Start Quality Initiative Specialist who has been working with a child care center developing a short and long-range quality improvement plan. Plans are being implemented and her work is almost complete. It's a reminder that Smart Start is all about the children and that children's lives in North Carolina are being touched by Smart Start everyday:

*A small boy with strong arms and shining eyes followed his teacher and me to the door of his classroom. "Are you the lady who's getting us all the new stuff?" he asks me quietly.*

*"No, not me, exactly," I answered. My mind raced ... how in the world could I translate Smart Start into four year old wisdom. "Governor Hunt," I said, "thought that you guys really needed some new stuff to play with and so he asked the people of North Carolina if he could get it for you. The people who live in this state thought you were important enough for us to get it for you so they said 'yes' and told me I could order it for you. Whole bunches*

*of people are getting you all the new stuff. I just get to order it." I took a breath, winced and looked hopefully into his bright but puzzled eyes.*

*"Can I give you a hug?" he asked.*

*"Absolutely," I said.*

*"Thanks." His hug was warm and sure and deep.*

*"I'll pass it along," I said.*

*"O.K., tell 'em thanks!" he urged me.*

*"I will. I promise," I told him as I left the classroom.*

