

# Minnesota

This case study of Minnesota Build efforts from May 2003 through October 2004 draws upon the local evaluator's participation in Build meetings, a review of Build documents produced by the state team, and interviews with key actors.

## OVERVIEW/NARRATIVE/CHRONICLE

Over the past 18 months, Minnesota Build reorganized its staffing and committee structure to make operations more efficient and to strategically focus on early childhood policy development. Through extensive stakeholder involvement, successful engagement of business leaders, and technical assistance funded by the Build Initiative, Minnesota Build identified ways to close system gaps and finalized an early education legislative policy agenda. As the 2005 legislative session approaches, the Build team is positioned to mobilize public support and to tap into political and business leadership to promote its early education policy agenda.

**Minnesota Build reorganized to clarify roles and responsibilities, to make operations more efficient, and to strategically focus on policy development.**

Ready4K is the Build grantee in Minnesota. Ready4K (R4K) is a nonprofit advocacy organization created in 2001 with four strategic activities: Grassroots organizing, communication to build public awareness of early childhood issues related to school readiness, business engagement, and public policy development. The Build Initiative broadened the focus and stakeholders of Ready4K, from community organizing and advocacy outside the government systems to a systemic-focused public/private partnership including state government representatives. R4K, initially a time-limited campaign to improve outcomes for young children, is seeking funding to extend five more years to 2010.

Several organizational changes in R4K helped propel the work of Build forward during the past 18 months. The first case study identified confusion in the roles and relationships among the four R4K committees and the Build work plan. To rectify this confusion and to eliminate committee duplication and potential policy conflicts, R4K absorbed Build into the R4K structure. The work of Build is now conceptualized as the R4K policy work, with Build seen as a funder and partner. The Build project manager, a part-time consultant to R4K, became a full-time R4K public policy director. Aiming all of R4K strategic activities in the same direction required staffing changes in the grass roots organizing and communications area, and R4K recently created a new position responsible for communications and operations.

The R4K policy committee and the statewide Build Advisory Committee include members representing business, higher education, public schools, ECFE, Head Start, the Children’s Defense Fund, the Minnesota Initiative Foundations, Child Care Resource and Referral, MnAEYC, parents, Minnesota foundations’ early childhood funders group, legislators, and state agency stakeholders including representatives from the departments of Education, Health, and Human Services.

The Build Initiative added a new level of planning to others’ work already underway in Minnesota by focusing attention on developing a comprehensive and integrated approach, rather than simply advocating for more spending on existing programs. However, the first Build evaluation raised the potentially conflicting policy goals between Ready4K organizers intent on obtaining more funding for existing programs such as Head Start and ECFE, and the Build Initiative intent on reform and building a comprehensive system with a new level of accountability for publicly funded programs. To resolve this potential sticking point, the R4K board, staff, and consultants revisited their goals, activities, and expected outcomes and decided that public policy must be the leading strategy, with grassroots organizing, communications, and business engagement all working to promote the public policy agenda.

**Over the past 18 months, Minnesota Build addressed the system gaps identified in the Minnesota Build evaluator’s baseline assessment through extensive stakeholder involvement, successful business engagement, and technical assistance funded by the Build Initiative.**

The first Build case study ended with the Build team about to hold a two-day retreat followed by the convening of workgroups to develop a five-year work plan with strategies and timelines. The final product would outline a system of early care and education finance and governance to fill the key gaps in system planning identified in the Build baseline report prepared by the Build evaluator from Wilder Research Center. These gaps included 1) no consensus on a vision for an early childhood care and education system; 2) no funding or cost analyses; 3) few clearly identified champions; 4) no shared quality measures, and 5) no ongoing statewide monitoring system for assessing the developmental status of children at the time of school entry.

Through the Build Initiative, Minnesota embarked on what would be an 18-month planning process implemented by Ready4K staff, a business engagement consultant, a communications consultant, a consultant who specializes in working with parents and communities of color, the six rural Minnesota Initiative Foundations (MIFs), and other members of the Build team. The intentionally inclusive planning process brought together a broad base of stakeholders including state agency staff, early care and education providers, advocates, and other interested citizens to develop a plan for a coordinated, effective early childhood system in Minnesota that would help ensure that all Minnesota children

would enter school encouraged, supported, and fully prepared for learning success. The process focused on achieving consensus and support for an early childhood public policy agenda to create a more comprehensive and integrated early childhood system, with innovative, new ways of doing business, and a new accountability for results rather than simply advocating for more spending for existing programs.

Consensus on a Vision for an Early Childhood Care and Education System. In early June 2003, R4K convened a two-day retreat, “Building a Comprehensive, Quality Early Childhood System for Minnesota.” At the retreat, groups worked to develop initial strategy ideas for a comprehensive early childhood system, taking into account the existing programs and gaps. Much initial work was accomplished at the retreat, and over the summer work groups met to develop more specific strategies for the Road Map related to the three guiding principles of “Relationships Matter,” “Quality Matters” and “Resources and Accountability Matter.” The work of these groups was compiled into a comprehensive work plan titled, “Starting Early for School Success: Minnesota’s Road Map for School Readiness: A Five Year Plan.” R4K then convened 22 stakeholder meetings to present the Road Map, receive feedback, and talk about the policy agenda. Minnesota now has a growing consensus on a statewide vision for early childhood care and education.

This “Road Map” defines an effective early childhood care and education system as having two-parts: Direct services and infrastructure. It must have high-quality, culturally responsive programs and services that touch the lives of children and families daily and fit the diverse needs of Minnesota’s communities. It must also have a sound infrastructure—the key elements behind the scenes that make programs and services work. The agreed upon assumptions for successful implementation of the strategies in the Road Map are:

- Every child in Minnesota deserves adequate nurturing, opportunities, and the resources necessary to thrive and enter school ready to succeed.
- Getting children ready for kindergarten is a matter of the public good and requires commitment from the state along with businesses, nonprofits, and local communities.
- The Road Map cannot be implemented without the combined efforts of parents, families, and early childhood care and education programs as well as other champions, such as businesses, legislators, and community leaders.
- The Road Map must be responsive to local community needs and recognize that needs vary in the Twin Cities metropolitan area and greater Minnesota.
- Parents constitute an extremely effective group of advocates and must be mobilized if we are to see significant change.
- The early childhood care and education system will require a significant infusion of new public and private money to fully implement the recommended strategies, and it will require accountability mechanisms to

demonstrate improvements in the school readiness of Minnesota's children.

Funding and cost analyses. The Early Childhood Finance Reform Committee (formerly the Build finance subcommittee) met monthly for almost a year. It developed these principles of early childhood finance reform:

- Invest in success for all children so that all families with young children have access to some voluntary early childhood services and experiences.
- Target resources to those families who most need them.
- Early childhood education is a public good to which everyone contributes.
- Diversify sources and assume layered funding.
- Fund services and infrastructure, including child care assistance subsidies, tax credits, parental leave, professional development initiatives, child care facilities grants, compensation initiatives, supports for kith and kin care and legally unlicensed care, child care resource and referral services, and research and development.
- Combine portable and direct financing.
- Frame early childhood education as both an economic development investment and a school readiness investment that will leverage positive outcomes.
- Equity and Opportunity.
- Parent Choice.
- Minnesota's early childhood financing system shall have accountability mechanisms built in to increase responsiveness and effectiveness and allow for flexibility to meet families' changing needs.

The committee researched and prepared an overview of the funding streams for all early childhood programs in Minnesota. "Early Learning Left Out: Public Spending on Children in Minnesota," developed with the assistance of Dr. Charles Bruner of the Child and Family Policy Center of Des Moines, Iowa, was published in January of 2004. The "Early Learning Left Out" report was widely disseminated to Minnesota legislators, Minnesota Initiative Foundations' early childhood coordinators in 36 communities, and other key stakeholders.

The committee also reviewed Louise Stoney's "Child Care Financing Matrix" and began brainstorming and discussing a wide range of possible finance strategies. It estimated the costs for each of the specific strategies in the Road Map, based on what other states are doing and on technical assistance on financing options from Charlie Bruner.

Minnesota now has a draft business plan that articulates the cost – about \$210 million in new funding by the end of five years. This investment would have a significant impact on ensuring that low-income children under age 6 would have access to quality early learning in full and part-day settings. The quality and availability of early childhood parent education and early care and education

programs for young children ages 0-5 would improve, and the state would have new accountability mechanisms to measure results.

Champions of early childhood care and education. In the past 18 months, Minnesota Build confirmed the business case for quality early education and found champions in the business community.

Those involved in Build in Minnesota have taken advantage of high profile messengers who are ready and willing to advocate for early care and education issues, including Bob Bruininks, president of the University of Minnesota and Art Rolnick of the Federal Reserve Bank. In both cases, the Ready4K business committee helped organize conferences and meetings. The group is also working with Al Strouken, CEO of H.B. Fuller, who highlighted school readiness in his fundraising for United Way and agreed to chair the newly formed Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory Council.

From April through August 2004, Ready4K staffed the public policy task force of the Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory Council (MSRBAC) and convened a series of sessions for task force members that provided an orientation to early childhood and its importance for school readiness, a context for early childhood programs in Minnesota, a presentation of Ready4K's Road Map, and development of policy options. The task force, chaired by Rob Johnson, senior vice-president of Cargill met every two weeks for two and one-half hours at the Cargill corporate offices. By September, the policy task force completed a report, *"A Winning Start: A Plan for Investing Wisely In Early Childhood Development,"* which the full MSRBAC council approved in October, 2004.

Art Rolnick, senior vice president and director of research of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, and Rob Grunewald, regional economic analyst for the Federal Reserve, have been tireless champions for investing in early childhood development, and Rolnick is on the Ready4K Board of Directors. Rolnick and Grunewald were co-authors of a paper titled, "Early childhood development: Economic development with a high public return." This research found that well-focused investments in early childhood development yield substantial public, as well as private, returns, with up to 12 percent return on the investment. The Federal Reserve Bank proposal to create a \$1.5 billion investment that would fully fund a high-quality program for all 3- and 4-year-old children living in poverty in Minnesota has been widely circulated. Their proposal to empower low-income families to access high quality early care and education through scholarships is one of the approaches being considered as Minnesota Build examines new and innovative approaches to improving school readiness in Minnesota.

The Itasca Project—a high-powered group of 30 top CEOs in the Twin Cities, the Governor, the mayors of St. Paul and Minneapolis, the president of the University

and the president of the McKnight Foundation—has made early childhood one of its six key issues in the next two years.

On-going monitoring of program quality and school readiness. In coordination with Build, the Minnesota Department of Human Services is taking the lead on developing early learning guidelines for children 0-2, and the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) is developing guidelines for children 3-5. These early learning guidelines should be ready for dissemination early in 2005. MDE is piloting the developmental assessment of school readiness for children entering kindergarten in 20 communities, including all of St. Paul, and 19 of the 36 communities participating in the MIF Early Childhood Initiative. MnAEYC contracted with Anne Mitchell (through Build T.A. funds) to provide consultation to the Professional Development Council to help them identify next steps for developing a professional development system in Minnesota that identifies core competencies.

Minnesota now has a baseline for school readiness of our children at kindergarten entrance that indicates that over 50 percent of Minnesota's children are not fully proficient in the learning and social domains necessary for school readiness.

**Minnesota Build finalized an early childhood legislative policy agenda, narrowing for now the scope of system-building efforts to early education.**

Finalized in the past few months, Minnesota's early childhood legislative policy agenda brings together the policy recommendations of Ready4K's Road Map and the MSRBAC. The consensus policy agenda recommends starting up a Minnesota Early Learning Fund (MELF)— a private/public partnership – and raising \$30 million dollars over two years that would fund quality early childhood services for low-income children and families and other quality improvement strategies. In addition to the MELF legislation, Ready4K's policy agenda includes three bills which would begin to establish key system elements such as early learning standards, assessment, professional development, and a quality rating system.

The systems work has a strong foundation of successful programs in Minnesota – such as Early Childhood Family Education, Head Start, K-12 School Readiness programs, Early Childhood Special Education, Preschool Screening, and child care – and the groundwork established by the Early Childhood Finance Commission and the former Minnesota Department of Children Families & Learning's *No Better Time: Starting Early for School Success* report. That report relied extensively on a broad review of the literature on early childhood systems, in particular the work of Sharon Lynn Kagan, and also the Child Trends report on school readiness.

In addition to early childhood care and education for children age five and younger, the scope of Build in Minnesota's long-term system-building efforts peripherally includes health, children's mental health, nutrition, parenting education, family support, and special education. While this scope is still the ideal system, current efforts are aimed at early care and education. Minnesota has narrowed its school readiness frame to focus on empowering parents to take advantage of high-quality early education opportunities for children as well as early childhood parent education, and on putting in place key elements of an early childhood system such as standards, assessments, and quality ratings.

**Minnesota Build's next steps focus on implementing its early childhood policy agenda through mobilizing public support, tapping into political and business leadership, and securing public and private funds.**

The political and fiscal climate in Minnesota has been uncharacteristically difficult for early care and education the past couple of years. Following the election in 2002, state government reorganized. The innovative Department of Children, Families, and Learning, which integrated child care, Head Start, school readiness, and parent support programs in one department, reverted to a more typical Department of Education, and the child care program moved back to the Department of Human Services. The state cut \$86 million from early childhood programs for low-income children, \$3 million from Head Start, \$7 million from Early Childhood Family Education, and \$2 million from School Readiness. It also tightened eligibility for child care assistance. The 2005 legislative session may again be facing a projected \$400 million deficit. Nevertheless, Ready4K and its Build team have positioned themselves with the Governor, key legislators, and state agency commissioners to participate in the setting of an early childhood policy agenda.

R4K advocates and grassroots organizers will be using the policy agenda to engage the public and strategically target constituent communication with key legislators. The major Twin Cities newspaper editorial boards have made early childhood a priority and have kept early childhood in the papers in a major way for the past several months.

Business champions, such as the chairs of MSRBAC and its policy task force (Al Stroucken, CEO of the H. B. Fuller Company, and Rob Johnson, Vice-President for Cargill) are providing leadership to move the MELF forward. The president of the University of Minnesota is chairing the Early Childhood Workgroup of the Itasca Project. Ready4K, MSRBAC and the Itasca project are meeting regularly to align the policy agendas of each group and to work collaboratively to get the Governor's support.

Minnesota Build has set the following priorities for action in 2005:

- Implement the Minnesota early childhood policy agenda

The 2005 policy agenda is the first stage of implementing Minnesota's Road Map to School Readiness. Legislation is being proposed that would start up a new public-private Minnesota Early Learning Fund, and direct the departments of Education, Human Services, and Health to develop early learning standards, expand school readiness assessments to all school districts over five years, develop a quality rating system, and improve early childhood preschool screening for health and developmental problems. The Fund would finance both aspects of Minnesota's early childhood system: programs and services for children and families, and the infrastructure that supports the quality, affordability, and accessibility of those services. The Fund would empower parents to gain access to quality early care and education by providing scholarships to low-income, high-need families. At the same time, it would elevate quality throughout the early childhood system by providing incentives for professional training and infrastructure improvements.

Next steps include taking the policy agenda out to R4K's early childhood partners, getting their feedback, and gaining their support. R4K staff will also be actively courting legislators to author legislation and to influence the fiscal targets for committees that manage the early childhood accounts.

- Develop public-private finance strategies for funding a comprehensive, coordinated early childhood system.

The R4K finance committee continues to meet regularly to research finance strategies for funding an early childhood system in the long term, including tax credits and other tax vehicles, per-child preschool funding formula, reducing criminal sentences for non-violent offenders of victimless crimes and redirecting those savings to early childhood, and redirecting some post-secondary enrollment options funding from K-12 to early education.

Ready4K has submitted a grant proposal to the McKnight Foundation in the amount of \$1 million to start-up the Minnesota Early Learning Fund (MELF). R4K will be working closely with MSRBC and other partners in exploring how the MELF would be governed, and where it should be housed.

- Generate public support for influencing the legislative agenda of the Governor and for getting bi-partisan legislative support for R4K's early education policy agenda.

R4K staff will be embarking on a series of "Road Shows" throughout Minnesota to present the 2005 policy agenda and to get public support throughout Minnesota. R4K's partnership agreements with 10 local groups in the Twin Cities

area and in a few communities in Greater Minnesota will bring additional advocacy and support from R4K's early childhood partners. In addition, R4K is strengthening its links with K-12 public school teachers and administrators to support an early childhood agenda and will coordinate with K-12 lobbyists to support their respective legislative proposals.

- Implement a public awareness and communication plan to inform the public and mobilize broad support for the 2005 legislative early childhood agenda.

R4K, the Minnesota Initiative Foundations' communications directors, the University of Minnesota communications department, and the McKnight Foundation communication staff are coordinating an extensive public awareness campaign that began October 2004 and will run through December 2005. The public awareness campaign will inform Minnesotans about the importance of early childhood education, help create a groundswell of support for improving access to high quality school readiness experiences, and lay the groundwork to influence public policy on this issue.

## **POLITICAL LEADERSHIP**

The November elections shifted some power in the Minnesota Legislature back to moderate Democrats who support more funding to improve the quality and availability of early care and education. Build is positioned to take advantage of political leadership to promote its comprehensive school readiness agenda on three key fronts:

- Since July 2004, Ready4K and MSRBAC have been working with the Pawlenty administration, including Education Commissioner Alice Seagren, to find common ground on school readiness policy. Governor Tim Pawlenty has agreed to speak, along with Commissioner Seagren, on December 9 at a statewide Business Forum on School Readiness. MSRBAC and Ready4K, through Chuck Slocum, have been working behind the scenes with the Governor's staff on a possible early childhood and school readiness policy announcement.
- Ready4K was instrumental in spurring the creation of the bipartisan Minnesota Early Childhood Caucus, now with over 90 members, 30 of them Republicans. The caucus convened 14 early childhood legislative forums all around Minnesota to hear from constituents about their early care and education concerns. These legislative forums became one of R4K's central organizing tools in October 2004.
- Ready4K has involved state agency middle management staff in policy deliberations and systems planning, including some new connections with middle management staff in the Minnesota Department of Health. Although

school readiness has been an important issue for the commissioners of Education, Human Services, and Health, little progress has been made on expansion of state-initiated early childhood initiatives due to the state budget deficit.

## **RECOGNITION OF THE NEED FOR SYSTEM BUILDING, THROUGH CREDIBLE DATA AND INFORMATION**

Having data and solid evidence over time have spotlighted where school readiness stands in Minnesota and the need to make it better.

- Art Rolnick's economic analysis, coupled with his association with Jack Shonkoff and other early childhood experts, has raised awareness about the value of early education. It is becoming common knowledge in Minnesota that learning begins at birth and that significant brain growth takes place before kindergarten.
- Developmental assessments by the Minnesota Department of Education of children entering kindergarten over the past 2 years have found that as many as half are not fully prepared. These findings have had a significant impact on business leaders and have helped make the case for increased business investment in early care and education.
- *Early Learning Left Out: Public Spending on Children in Minnesota*, prepared in January 2004 by Minnesota Build's Early Childhood Finance Reform Committee with the assistance of Dr. Charles Bruner of the Iowa Child and Family Policy Center, showed that just 1% of Minnesota's state budget is spent on early education. [With the cuts made in the 2003/04 biennium, this amount has dropped to less than 1%.] This report has been widely disseminated to Ready4K stakeholders and Minnesota legislators for use in public awareness and education.

## **SHARED VISION ON WHAT CONSTITUTES AN EFFECTIVE EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM**

A primary focus of Minnesota Build in the past 18 months has been to develop a clear and consistent shared vision among the Build advisors, the R4K Board and staff, the core constituents (Head Start, ECFE, and child care), and business leaders in order to avert a "policy train wreck." Foremost, Minnesota Build resolved the potentially conflicting policy goals of organizing existing program constituencies to increase funding for existing programs and systems change, which is about a new way of doing business, potentially alienating core constituents and harming political connections.

Mutual trust and momentum to promote a common vision have emerged from traditional stakeholders who in the past advocated for their own programs at the

legislature, and who now come together as Voices for Children to advocate on behalf of all young children in Minnesota. New allies have been recruited and begun to be powerful new voices in the media, with their colleagues, and with the Governor and legislators—most notably business leaders through the Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory Council (MSRBAC) and the Itasca Project, a high-powered group of top CEOs and political leaders in the Twin Cities. Increasingly, parents, new leaders from the faith community, pediatricians, the Minnesota Initiative Foundations, and the media are joining the broad coalition of the Ready4K School Readiness campaign.

The shared vision or “road map” for an effective early childhood system in Minnesota is the culmination of more than two years of extensive and inclusive stakeholder meetings. Setting priorities and not advocating for specific programs or causes made it challenging to keep everyone at the table. Ensuring that diverse perspectives were heard – parents, communities of color, rural Minnesota – meant timelines had to be flexible. Moreover, the climate of budget cuts compelled programs to think more about self-preservation and how to restore the funding cuts than about systemic change. Nevertheless, the five-year early education plan describes an effective early childhood care and education system that has two-parts: high-quality programs and services that touch the lives of children and families daily, and the infrastructure—the key elements behind the scenes that make programs and services work. The Road Map sets the stage for improving the quality of early childhood care and education, for serving more children and parents, and for achieving measurable results. The early childhood policy agenda is a statement, not about supporting specific programs and services, but about empowering low-income parents to access high quality early learning programs for their children and about improving market supports to develop more high quality early learning settings.

## **ACTIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS**

For Build in Minnesota, the past 18 months have brought a growth in business leadership, state agency collaboration with the Build team, and agreement on a plan for an early learning system -- but few steps taken in building that system. All efforts now are strategically focused on passing R4K’s 2005 early education legislative policy agenda, which is the first stage of implementing Minnesota’s Road Map to School Readiness or what could be considered a down payment on the envisioned early childhood care and education system.

- The Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory Council, staffed by the R4K executive director and policy director, defined the school readiness problems, confirmed the business case for early education, and offered a range of solutions that await implementation.
- The Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education are collaborating with the Build team to disseminate early learning guidelines

and program quality standards and to expand the school readiness assessment at kindergarten entrance.

- R4K has worked on developing consensus on a statewide vision for early care and education, the components of a system, and the cost of implementation. This has led to more concrete strategies around three goals:
- Relationships matter: In partnership with parents, support and promote nurturing relationships between children and adults that contribute to the health, learning and well-being of young children. Strategies include offering parent education classes through child care and early learning programs and promoting best practices for the transition from home to school.
- Quality matters: Raise the quality of all early learning settings where Minnesota's young children receive care and education. The development of early learning guidelines for children's skills upon kindergarten entrance is one strategy.
- Resources and accountability matter: Marshal the organizational and financial resources needed to implement this framework and be accountable for the results.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT**

Minnesota Build made significant progress in the past year involving state agency employees overseeing various programs for young children, including initial work on a quality rating system for early child and education programs, methods for assessing the school readiness of kindergarten children, early learning guidelines, and ways to improve the quality of informal (family, friends, and neighbor) child care. The involvement of the Departments of Education, Human Services, and Health with the Minnesota Build Advisory Committee has been a mutually beneficial relationship.

Developing and sustaining relationships with state government personnel responsible for parts of a coordinated early care and education system lays the groundwork for an integrated system and open access to decision makers. These relationships also provide the Build team greater convening power with diverse stakeholders and continuity in system planning within state government with personnel not directly affected by election results. For state staff, their participation gives them access to a diverse group of early childhood stakeholders and a forum for sharing and receiving feedback on Department plans and priorities. Overlapping goals and a shared commitment to building an effective, coordinated early care and education system makes the continuation of these relationships of paramount value to the Minnesota Build work.

In addition to working with Build, staff in the Departments of Education and Human Services (formerly colleagues in the Department of Children, Families &

Learning) are working together on early childhood strategic planning within state government. Outside government, work is underway, under the auspices of R4K, to improve linkages between early education and K-12.

## **POLITICAL MOBILIZATION AND ADVOCACY**

Political mobilization and advocacy are a strong component of Minnesota's school readiness efforts, given that Minnesota Build is embedded in Ready4K, a school readiness advocacy organization.

After cutting early childhood care and education funding in both 2002 and 2003, the 2004 legislative session was contentious, partisan gridlock, ending with no agreement on any major bills including the state bonding bill. Ready4K's bill to expand the state's school readiness assessment at kindergarten entrance did not get out of committee and will be reintroduced in 2005.

Minnesota is well-positioned for the 2005 session. The Minnesota Early Childhood Legislative bipartisan caucus has grown to 90 members. Ready4K has activated diverse constituencies -- the usual and, notably, the unusual suspects -- to promote early learning system building. The three-pronged approach of stakeholder involvement, grassroots community organizing, and business engagement are all aimed at influencing the 2005 legislative agenda of the Governor and getting bipartisan legislative support for a school readiness agenda.

Stakeholder Involvement. The Build Initiative has enabled Ready4K to continue to involve a broad group of stakeholders, particularly through the work of committees and workgroups:

- BUILD Statewide Advisory Committee
- Public Policy Committee
- Early Childhood Finance Reform Committee
- Governance Workgroup

Participants include representatives from a broad list of stakeholders including early child care and education programs (*Head Start, Child Care, Child Care Resource and Referral, Early Childhood Family Education, K-12 School Readiness Programs, Community Action agencies*), early childhood advocates and professional associations (*Minnesota Licensed Family Child Care Association, Child Care Works, Children's Defense Fund, MnAEYC, Alliance for Early Childhood Professionals, Minnesota Children's Trust Fund, Congregations Concerned for Children, Council for Civic Parent Leadership*), state and local government agencies (*Minnesota Department of Health, Minnesota Department of Human Services, Minnesota Department of Education, Hennepin County*) foundations (*McKnight Foundation, Sheltering Arms Foundation, Minnesota Initiative Foundations*) and business.

Over the past year, these stakeholders have reviewed and shaped Ready4K's policy position and strategies, "Starting Early for School Success – Minnesota's Road Map to School Readiness, a Five Year Plan." Ready4K has made substantial progress in bringing together these many diverse stakeholders to speak with a unified voice at the legislature on Ready4K's public policy agenda.

Grassroots Organizing. A new approach to community organizing, built around the goal of building support for the public policy agenda, has generated an increased level of trust and shared vision, and resulted in partnership agreements with allied organizations to mobilize their constituents as advocates and develop local Voices for Children Chapters that advocate for the school readiness agenda at state and local levels. Selected electoral races in 2004 were targeted to assure that early care and education were important campaign issues.

Citizen engagement activities in the past 18 months include about 1,000 advocates attending a rally at the Voices for Children Day at the Capitol and visiting 75 legislators; Ready4K, Child Care Works, Congregations Concerned for Children and other allies holding over 14 community forums with legislators; over 15 advocacy trainings for parents involved with early childhood programs and for early childhood providers totaling over 600 people; the Action 4 Kids e-advocacy network bringing together over 35,000 voices to ensure that every Minnesota child has the best possible start in life; and Voices for Children chapters being established throughout Minnesota in cooperation with the Minnesota Initiative Foundations Early Childhood Initiative to advance the Ready4K policy agenda.

Business Engagement. Business engagement is by far the big success story of Minnesota Build in the past 18 months. The Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory Council (MSRBAC), chaired by Al Stroucken, CEO of the HB Fuller Company, and staffed by Chuck Slocum, an influential Republican, has over 90 business leaders from over 50 companies and business associations. Honorary members include Walter Mondale (former Vice President), Al Quie (former Governor), Susan Carlson (former Minnesota First Lady) and Bob Bruininks (President, University of Minnesota). MSRBAC is organized into three task forces: Awareness, Best Practices (for Business), and Public Policy.

Once MSRBAC started up in March 2004, it moved quickly to review the issues and to make policy recommendations that link child development and school readiness as absolutely essential to the future economic well-being of Minnesota. In addition, the Itasca Project (30 of the top CEOs in the Twin Cities, the Governor, the two mayors of St. Paul and Minneapolis, the President of the University and the President of the McKnight Foundation) decided that early childhood is one of their six key issues in the next two years. In December 2004, MSRBAC sponsored a policy symposium for business leaders, attended by over 200 participants. Governor Pawlenty and his commissioner of Education Alice Seagren addressed the symposium and expressed support for the idea of a

MELF public/private partnership. It remains to be seen whether that will translate in actual support for state dollars for the MELF this legislative session.

## **PUBLIC AWARENESS AND SUPPORT**

Ready4K's communications work, together with heightened visibility of the business community and participation of Art Rolnick from the Federal Reserve Bank, has resulted in numerous articles and stories appearing on a regular basis in newspapers and magazines throughout Minnesota, raising general public awareness on the value of early education. In addition, in partnership with the Minnesota Department of Education, R4K printed and distributed thousands of school readiness tip cards for parents, adding more visibility to the cause. That is not to say, however, that the general public is aware of the value of developing an early learning system or recognizes the role of government or Ready4K in developing that system. The public cares about education, but there is no evidence it cares about early learning system building.

Through a new partnership with Colle + McVoy advertising firm, Ready4K, the six MIF communications directors, the University of Minnesota communications department, and the McKnight Foundation communication staff, using a variety of public relations and marketing techniques, launched a statewide campaign on early childhood development and learning this September. The television, radio, and print media campaign is designed to raise awareness about early childhood issues and to generate support for the public policies that will be brought forward in the 2005 legislature to improve school readiness.

## **ALIGNMENT AND READINESS FOR A BIG LEAP FORWARD**

Minnesota is set to move from planning to implementation and has a better than even chance to get start-up money for the Minnesota Early Learning Fund (MELF).. The MELF would be a good start, a down payment on Minnesota's 5-year school readiness Road Map, but by no means of sufficient size and scope to impact children's development and school readiness in a way that can be felt and measured on a statewide basis. If the MELF public/private partnership is successful in raising the goal of \$30 million dollars over two years, the MELF will be in a good position to fund several early care and education demonstration projects targeted to low income families and their children under the age of six; fund system investments to improve the quality of care; and evaluate the cost-effectiveness of strategies for increasing children's school readiness.

## **STEPS AHEAD AND ROLE OF BUILD**

Challenges and Opportunities Over the Next Two Years. Ready4K has successfully framed early education as essential for school readiness and, in partnership with the Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory Council, has positioned child development and school readiness as absolutely essential to

the future economic well-being of Minnesota. Making the business case has become the norm for any new early education funding. The next challenges for Minnesota Build is to frame child care as early education, as much for children's development as for the employment needs of parents, and to incorporate informal family, friend and neighbor care within the formal system.

As kindergarten readiness assessments become more standard, critics of high stakes testing, child advocates concerned about labeling children, and program advocates concerned about linking assessment of children's progress to how and when programs receive funds are emerging as challenges to the central accountability measure demanded by political and business leaders.

Another challenge to be resolved centers on defining a governance model that provides state financing, quality assurance, and accountability for results while at the same time affords opportunities for local variations without local bureaucratic encumbrances. The 36 communities implementing the Minnesota Initiative Foundations' Early Childhood Initiative provide a good proving ground for looking at different models for local involvement, and will also provide good information as Minnesota Build continues to examine an effective early care and education governance model.

Early childhood programs in Minnesota endured large funding cuts in the 2003-04 biennium and hope that the recent elections will bring more allies to the legislature to stave off further cuts due to yet another year of expected budget deficits. In this climate, a unified early education voice and policy agenda are critical, yet perceptions persist that the early childhood community is still fragmented and only concerned with their own agendas. The hope is that the allied programs of Head Start, child care, and ECFE see themselves fitting within and benefiting from the R4K policy agenda. Time will tell if the tenuous truce over turf holds up in the 2005 legislative session under pressures to set funding priorities in another tight budget cycle.

Over the longer term, Minnesota Build faces the challenge of achieving its intermediate outcome goals that are necessary to improve children's development and school readiness. These goals are: enabling parents to make better school readiness decisions; increasing access to and the supply of high-quality early care and education; engendering greater accountability; and improving system performance, coordination and governance. A related challenge is to upgrade the quality of early care and education without pricing it out of the reach of even more parents and thereby further limiting parent choices.

Value of Outside Technical Assistance, Presence of a Learning Community, and Recognition by National Funders in Moving a State Early Learning System Forward. Build technical assistance has added significant value to the development of key elements of Minnesota's planning and implementation

strategies, including national experts and leaders with expertise in visioning, business engagement, brain research, finance strategies, and professional development. For example, Anne Mitchell facilitated the two-day retreat that developed the first draft of the policy road map; Charlie Bruner helped with financing strategies and to produce the ELLO report; and Nina Sazer O'Donnell offered business engagement strategies. Build technical assistance continues to support the work of the Minnesota Early Childhood Professional Development Council in developing a comprehensive professional development system.

The National Build meetings and topic specific meetings (e.g., finance, governance, FFN caregivers) have provided valuable information, resources, and contacts as Ready4K has begun to develop elements of an early childhood system. For example, as Minnesota develops a quality rating system, it has learned from other states about the importance of developing content standards, program standards, and outcome standards that are simple yet comprehensive, easy to implement and maintain, and not cumbersome.

Lastly, being one of the four initial states chosen to participate in the National Build Initiative brought distinction to Minnesota, which R4K has used for convincing new champions to be involved, from business leaders, legislators and funders. For example, the national Build funding, in part, has been leveraged to obtain additional local funding of \$360,000, including \$250,000 for the Public Awareness Campaign from the trustees of the Robins, Kaplan, Miller and Ciresi LLP Foundation for Education, Public Health and Social Justice; \$90,000 from the McKnight Foundation for Partnership Agreements with organizations willing to build grassroots advocacy for policies to increase state funding for early childhood education and child care programs; and \$20,000 from General Mills to convene focus groups to identify and define culturally responsive early childhood parenting practices in the Native American, African and African American, Hmong, and Latino cultural communities.

Incorporating evaluation into the team planning process. Ready4K has been working with Wilder Research Center to evaluate progress toward the overall mission of “ensuring that all Minnesota’s children arrive at kindergarten ready to succeed” in the context of four key outcome areas: mobilize support for school readiness, enhance quality choices for parents, secure public and private funding, and strengthen accountability. All Ready4K staff and key consultants track their activities on a monthly basis and meet with the Build evaluator on a quarterly basis to review progress. Incorporating evaluation into the team planning process has kept the planning process outcome focused and the documentation up to date.

The Wilder evaluation team member also helped R4K think through how Build sub-committees interfaced with the R4K policy committee and its grassroots organizing work, which led to reorganizing staff and committees for clarity, consistency, and efficiency.