

# Smart Start strategies cited that improved child care quality



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## Summary of report

Twelve Smart Start partnerships that have made significant strides in improving child care quality are profiled in this study. The purpose was to understand *how* partnerships are accomplishing quality improvement.

Researchers interviewed 37 key participants who answered several questions about how their community had approached quality improvement. Important factors identified were leadership, support of the workforce, customized TA, and collaboration with community partners. These factors are discussed in the report with examples of how they were implemented.

Partnerships designed different approaches to meet unique community strengths and needs.

No single strategy can ensure success. A combination of efforts is necessary and strategies must change over time. The 12 partnerships examined here began their efforts from a range of starting points and in a variety of urban and rural communities, illustrating that quality improvement can indeed be accomplished.

Duration of participation in Smart Start varied widely across the partnerships with some beginning in 1993 and some as recently as 1998. This suggests that significant quality improvement can occur within a few years, although more time would likely yield even greater gains.

## Foundations and strategies to improve quality

Research provides little guidance as to what types of technical assistance strategies can best improve child care quality, yet several local Smart Start partnerships in NC have made remarkable progress in increasing the level of child care quality in their communities.

Key participants were interviewed in 12 of these partnerships to find out their keys to success. No single strategy stood out as essential to success, but several were mentioned repeatedly. The report documents these factors with examples and quotes from participants. A combination of the following strategies seems essential to quality improvement:

1. Ensure strong leadership through the partnership board and local providers; stay focused on quality and help develop a common definition of quality within the community.
2. Plan strategically to develop effective programs, using a multi-faceted approach based on research evidence.
3. Support education and professional development of the child care workforce and work with community colleges and universities to make it logistically and financially possible for teachers to obtain more education.
4. Provide financial rewards for improved quality and higher education through scholarship and bonus programs.
5. Provide on-site, customized technical assistance to providers based on a needs assessment; develop supportive relationships with providers and monitor progress closely.
6. Collaborate with a wide array of community partners who can each contribute to the overall quality improvement effort from a unique base of knowledge, skills and resources.

In the full report, each of the above strategies is broken down into as many as 10 specific action steps with extensive examples and quotes from participants to illustrate the specific approaches these partnerships have taken.

A main conclusion of the study is that methods to improve the quality of care must be individualized at the provider level and at the county level. No silver bullet exists. Quality enhancement requires clearly focused goals and multiple strategies that are built as a system of linked services. Quality has improved significantly in NC since the beginning of Smart Start and this report documents some of the reasons why.

This Snapshot is based on "Demonstrating Effective Child Care Quality Improvement," a report by the Smart Start Evaluation Team at the FPG Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The authors are Karen Taylor and Donna Bryant. The full report is on the web at <<http://www.fpg.unc.edu/smartstart/>>. Printed reports are \$5 each and for more information, call Karen Taylor at 919-966-2559.

## Selected comments from participants in study

*Our approach to quality enhancement has been more of a systems approach rather than just work in individual centers. First we enhanced the market rate and allowed providers to spend the extra dollars in one of six ways that research has proven work to improve quality. Then we put money into training to make additional technical assistance available. We held many workshops on ECERS and ITERS as well as mentoring projects. We even sent 16 individuals to Chapel Hill to have training on the rating scales. We secured a child care health consultant to provide even more support to providers in the areas of health and safety. Through the work of our partnership board, as well as the influence and leadership from a few key providers, we have nurtured a spirit of teamwork and gentle peer pressure. All of these pieces have helped to take away some of the fear of change and have given providers the courage to proceed....*

*We have had to adapt and change our program every year to keep up with the needs in our child care community. We don't have a program that is defined like x and y and it stays like that year after year. Each year we change the kind of program we offer to suit what we see as the needs. One year we may have a quality enhancement program that works intensely on classroom practices and in other years we may focus on education levels. When we started we visited every place that was providing care for children and that meant talking to community people to see where children spent their days. We first focused on helping to license as many child care programs as we could. From there we aimed for quality. We have offered some intensive TA and a variety of other programs, but now we see our focus shifting to helping child care providers work as professionals...*

*Convince teachers and directors that you are there for them. Convince parents that you need their involvement. Convince agencies and businesses to help out all year long. Help them all see that they are interconnected and make sure no one is uninformed. Talk with people one on one to build a spirit of camaraderie. Let people see that someone cares about them, applauds their successes and is there to help when they need it. Reinforce for everyone that all of your mutual efforts are to benefit children. Do what you can to sell your program and that means getting out of the office!*

### Keys to maintaining quality

- √ Funding is a critical factor in maintaining quality.
- √ Partnerships need the flexibility to work with all child care providers.
- √ Maintaining a professional, experienced, well-educated, and fairly compensated work force is crucial and will continue to be a challenge.
- √ Support from the higher education systems is critical.
- √ Continued public awareness activities are necessary to let parents and the community know about the importance of quality care.

### If you want to know more

Bryant, D., Bernier, K., Peisner-Feinberg, E., & Maxwell, K. (May, 2002). *Smart Start and Child Care in North Carolina: Effects on Quality and Changes over Time*. Chapel Hill, NC: FPG Child Development Institute (Report to NC Dept. of Health & Human Services).

Bryant, D., Maxwell, K., & Burchinal, M. (1999). Effects of a community initiative on the quality of child care. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 14, 449-464.

Maxwell, K., Bryant, D., & Miller-Johnson, S. (September, 1999). *A Six-County Study of the Effects of Smart Start Child Care on Kindergarten Entry Skills*. Chapel Hill, NC: FPG Child Development Institute (Report to NC Dept. of Health & Human Services).

Peisner-Feinberg, E. S., Burchinal, M. R., Clifford, R. M., Culkin, M., Howes, C., Kagan, S. L., & Yazejian, N. (2001). The relation of preschool child care quality to children's cognitive and social developmental trajectories through second grade. *Child Development*, 72 (5), 1534-1553.

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