

Laying the Foundation for a Ready State:

The Early Childhood DataCONNECTIONS Project

*A Report on Successes &
Opportunities to Support Policy
Decisions with Data*

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Child Health and Development
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I. Introduction

Just as children need a strong, nurturing foundation to thrive, so the state must have a solid foundation upon which to base policy and programming decisions. The new framework for Connecticut’s early childhood policy work draws from the school readiness concept and spotlights the *Ready Child, Ready Family, Ready Community* and *Ready State*.

A cornerstone of the *Ready State* foundation – the newest focus of attention – is the state’s ability to generate, analyze and utilize data and research that is reliable, meaningful and informative. After all, without good information, it is virtually impossible to identify and meet the needs of children and families in Connecticut. Good information – timely, relevant and based on high quality data and sound research methods – is an extremely valuable tool for decision makers and an essential component of a *Ready State*.

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Bolstering this capacity for data and research has been the primary mission of the Early Childhood DataCONNECTIONS project since its inception in 2002. DataCONNECTIONS, a public-private partnership of the Connecticut Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut (CHDI), came about through a three-year grant (extended to a fourth year) from the Child Care Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Connecticut was one of six states (CT, MA, ME, OR, RI, WI) to receive federal “Child Care Data and Research Capacity” funding. This grant, along with matching funds from DSS, the Children’s Fund of Connecticut and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, has supported DataCONNECTIONS’ efforts to date. ¹

Since 2002 DataCONNECTIONS has made great strides in elevating the importance of data and research and underscoring how they can affect policy change. This report will highlight the project’s major accomplishments as well as the methods used to achieve these successes. It will also discuss needed future efforts around early childhood data and research capacity building in Connecticut. In doing so, this report will also establish the need to permanently sustain the functions served by the DataCONNECTIONS project.

¹ Current year operations continue with funding from DSS and the Children’s Fund, and additional grants from the Early Childhood Education Cabinet, the Departments of Public Health and Education and the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund.

II. Project Overview

Vision

Though DataCONNECTIONS emanated from the core funding of the Child Care Bureau grant, project leaders expanded its vision to embrace a *broader early childhood scope*, which encompassed a variety of factors influencing child development (e.g., quality early learning experiences, physical and mental health, family economic stability). This decision reflected an understanding of how the child care field is evolving toward an increasingly sophisticated view of its role in shaping young children's healthy development. The expanded vision also addressed a need to publicly articulate a holistic perspective of child development, and created an opportunity to develop interdisciplinary and interagency partnerships to tackle mutually beneficial policy and data work regarding Connecticut's young children.

Goals

While other grantee states concentrated most of their efforts on building hardware and software for their state child care programs or conducting new research, Connecticut took a different path. DataCONNECTIONS focused on building the state's data and research capacity through the following set of goals:

- Increase the understanding of the importance of information on young children
- Develop and promote implementation of an early childhood research agenda
- Facilitate enhancements to the state's data infrastructure

Strategies

Given the breadth of these goals, project leaders adopted a multi-faceted approach. The key strategies pursued by DataCONNECTIONS are discussed below and reflect an awareness of the practical and philosophical issues that the project needed to address in order to succeed. On a practical level, it was critical to demonstrate how data and research could be used to better inform early childhood policy, while simultaneously supporting such efforts through tools and technical assistance. On a philosophical level, elevating the importance of data and research among key stakeholders (e.g., state agencies, legislators, and early childhood community leaders) was vital.

Reports

In order to *demonstrate the potential of administrative data to answer key early childhood policy questions*, DataCONNECTIONS published a host of timely reports based on state data that had rarely been utilized or disseminated (see Section III for details). This valuable exercise of identifying critical information

gaps and then extracting and analyzing the relevant data to fill those gaps, has clearly illustrated the potential of administrative data. Additional reports by DataCONNECTIONS that outlined specific ways to enhance the utility and benefits of administrative databases for policy-relevant research have also underscored the same message of “untapped potential.” Disseminating these reports to the appropriate audiences through mailings and presentations has been a key component of this strategy.

Collaborations

Another primary strategy of DataCONNECTIONS has been to *convene interagency groups*. These groups have collaboratively considered how to generate information for decision making that presents a more complete picture of young children, their families and the systems that are supposed to serve them. The DataCONNECTIONS’ State Steering Committee, for example, was composed of representatives of eight state agencies that have responsibilities related to young children. The conversations among data staff and program and policy staff were new experiences that built valuable relationships and spawned other collaborative work. This approach carried over to work groups, including the team of state and community experts who advised the development of a set of early childhood indicators. It was also used effectively with the Accountability Committee of the Early Childhood Finance Project, which considered what information is needed by various stakeholders, from parents to policymakers, and made strong recommendations about the role of data in early childhood policymaking. These groups reinforced the concept of public-private partnerships.

In addition to “setting tables” to foster collaboration, DataCONNECTIONS has made it a point to *sit at many tables*. With a determination to be connected to important policy discussions, project staff have been active participants in the many collaborative early childhood and early care and education initiatives in Connecticut, the New England region, and nationally. This strategy of finding the places where policy was being developed and offering help – providing data and policy information, drafting and reviewing documents, seeding projects, and bringing in experts – has imprinted data issues into the minds of many key players. As a result, the leaders in these efforts have continually conferred with DataCONNECTIONS staff and have been quick to include data and research needs in their plans.

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DataCONNECTIONS has also *stayed responsive to the policy environment* and has positioned itself to be prepared to contribute substantively to evolving initiatives. Although the concrete products of the project were developed in anticipation of planning and policy needs, the ability of staff to quickly respond and provide expertise as new needs surfaced has solidified DataCONNECTIONS’ position as a valuable and appreciated partner.

III. Accomplishments

As outlined above, DataCONNECTIONS has employed a variety of strategies to pursue its mission of improving the research capabilities of state agencies in order to enhance decision making on early childhood policies and programs. The various strategies DataCONNECTIONS has pursued over the years have yielded a collection of quality products and a positive shift toward valuing data and research. Major accomplishments of the project to date are highlighted below.

Scanning the Data Landscape

DataCONNECTIONS began by inventorying the large array of administrative databases that contained data relevant to early childhood. That initial scan of more than 80 databases, updated and expanded later in the project, demonstrated how much data is collected, but not analyzed, and how narrowly focused the data are on reporting or operational functions. The untapped potential of integrating and applying these data to policy and programming functions was very clear. The findings of the scan were invaluable in informing the project's efforts to strengthen the state's data infrastructure.

Sharing Information through Conferences and Meetings

DataCONNECTIONS convened several meetings and conferences throughout the course of the federal grant period. Although the goals of these events varied, there was a consistent underlying objective to promote interagency collaboration and policy-research partnerships. For each event, this focus was reflected in the invitee list as well as the program content, which was designed to engage various stakeholders.

- ***Early Childhood Research Roundtable, June 2003***

This all-day meeting held at Trinity College in Hartford brought together state agency staff, researchers and other stakeholders. Significant progress was made toward 1) fostering relationships between state agencies and researchers; 2) linking agency research needs with researchers' interests and capabilities; and 3) exploring opportunities for researchers to use state administrative data. Roundtable proceedings are available at www.chdi.org.

- ***Strength in Numbers Conference, September 2004***

This well-attended event featured the release of DataCONNECTIONS' factbook on school readiness indicators and presentations from national experts that spotlighted the importance of data in shaping early childhood policy. Audience participants included mayors, superintendents and other state and community leaders.

- ***Mining an Untapped Resource Conference, May 2005***
This day-long event featured a good mix of professionals with data and/or policy expertise. Attendees not only received a “tour” of DataCONNECTIONS’ new toolkit on enhancing state administrative databases (see below), but also learned about promising efforts in the area of data enhancement at both the state and national levels.

Disseminating Knowledge through Publications

DataCONNECTIONS’ engaging and timely publications have provided valuable information relevant to the early childhood field, while simultaneously illustrating the policy value of collecting, analyzing and effectively presenting data. The publications have become well-used reference documents and are cited frequently in state and community reports. All publications listed below are available at www.chdi.org.

- ***A Research Perspective on the Child Care Workforce in Connecticut, June 2003***
This report was the first attempt in Connecticut to display and analyze all available information on the early care and education workforce. It summarized data from numerous state and national sources on the child care workforce. It also raised awareness of workforce data and research gaps. Two companion reports analyzed state Head Start and child care provider data sets exclusively.
- ***Reshaping Administrative Databases into Tools for Policy-Relevant Research, July 2003***
The findings and recommendations presented in this report were based on the inventory and analysis of the numerous state databases on early childhood in Connecticut. This report laid the groundwork for DataCONNECTIONS’ toolkit on improving administrative databases (see below).
- ***Keeping Children on the Path to School Success, September 2004***
DataCONNECTIONS published this factbook as the culmination of its multi-year School Readiness Indicators effort. This publication drew heavily on state administrative data and showcased the value of that data for policy work. The development of this document brought together a strong team of state agency staff and community advocates and fostered collaboration that has extended beyond the life of the initiative. It has become a major reference document for state and community planners and leaders.

- ***Shaping Young Lives: A Profile of Connecticut's Early Care and Education Workforce, November 2005***

In collaboration with the Career Ladder Advisory Committee and other key partners, DataCONNECTIONS managed a definitive study on the early care and education workforce in Connecticut. This report presented the findings of that study, which spanned key provider issues such as education, experience, wages, benefits and turnover. The data provided in this report not only serve as indicators of problem areas, but also benchmarks for measuring progress.

Supplying New Tools

DataCONNECTIONS developed a number of tools to assist in data collection and analysis efforts. In some instances, the project initiated new collection of data to address identified gaps.

- ***Online Community Data Profiles on Young Children, September 2004***

In response to community interest in local data on young children, DataCONNECTIONS developed individual profiles for each of Connecticut's 169 cities and towns, by importing data from the indicators factbook, *Keeping Children on the Path to School Success*, (see above). Profiles can be accessed at www.chdi.org. These profiles are presently being expanded and updated.

- ***Putting Administrative Data to Work: A Toolkit, April 2005***

This toolkit was designed to help state agencies transform administrative data into a powerful tool for decision makers. Through guidelines, tips and examples from across the country, the toolkit helps instruct users on how to pursue various enhancement strategies. A short, colorful brochure was developed as a companion piece to this publication, to help engage and inform legislators and executive branch leaders about the potential of administrative data to support sound policymaking. Both pieces are available at www.chdi.org.

- ***Early Care and Education Provider Supply Dataset, 2004***

DataCONNECTIONS drew a dataset from the Child Care Infoline provider database and worked with the University of Connecticut Center for Survey Research and Analysis to produce extensive analysis of early care and education data on provider supply and quality. The information was used in the DataCONNECTIONS indicator factbook, *Keeping Children on the Path to School Success*, (see above) and in UConn's study of the economic impact of early care and education in Connecticut.

Providing Valued Technical Assistance

By taking the lead in championing efforts around data and research capacity building in the state, and backing up those efforts with the dissemination of quality products and information, DataCONNECTIONS has become a trusted source for consultation and technical assistance around these issues. DataCONNECTIONS' staff have been invited to participate, either directly or in an informal advisory capacity, in the development of several significant policy efforts², including the new Early Childhood Education Cabinet, the Career Ladder Advisory Committee, the Early Childhood Partners initiative, the New England Workforce (NEW) Partners initiative, the Early Childhood Alliance and Finance Project, the Results-Based Accountability effort and the Governor's new Early Childhood Research and Policy Council. In addition, DataCONNECTIONS' staff has been invited on numerous occasions to share their expertise and lessons learned at local, state and national meetings.

Shifting Attitudes Towards Data and Research

In collaboration with many partners, DataCONNECTIONS has helped to create a new decision-making environment which calls for collecting and reporting on early childhood data. This shift is evident on many levels - from the state capitol to any number of Connecticut's 169 localities. For example, the Connecticut General Assembly has recently given considerable attention to the concept of "Results-Based Accountability" (RBA), which is rooted in the use of data to track and assess progress over time. The state's Appropriation Committee chose early childhood as one of only two pilot issues upon which to test the RBA model. In addition, local collaboratives have stepped beyond early care and education and are culling a wide range of early childhood data to develop their local plans.

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Routine operations and reporting at the state and community level also illustrate this shift in attitudes. Seemingly no policy meetings today convene without some discussion of data or the lack thereof. Likewise, one is hard put to find a strategic plan produced without a discussion of the need to build a data infrastructure. DataCONNECTIONS can be credited with giving voice to ideas that data analysis and research are necessary to inform sound decision making.

² Many of these initiatives are described in Section IV.

IV. Looking Toward the Future

Assessing the Current Early Childhood Landscape

In Connecticut, the field of early childhood is enjoying a groundswell of new attention due, in part, to Governor M. Jodi Rell's high prioritization of early childhood issues on her agenda. Governor Rell's commitment to young children has led to a flurry of activity, including the development of new state structures for early childhood policy development, specifically the Early Childhood Education Cabinet and the Early Childhood Research and Policy Council.

The Cabinet is a high level decision-making group on early childhood issues established through statute. It has successfully lifted these issues to new levels of visibility and importance. The Cabinet's specific charge is to develop a five-year strategic plan to ensure that every child in Connecticut enters school ready to learn. The Research and Policy Council, which was created by executive order to help support the Cabinet's efforts, also has great potential for promoting children's issues – particularly around data and research. The Council is currently working on an analysis of financing options for the expansion of preschool programming.

These activities have been informed and bolstered by other collaborative planning efforts taking place across the state. One such planning effort is the federally funded State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems initiative, dubbed Early Childhood Partners (ECP) in Connecticut. Led by the Connecticut Department of Public Health, this planning initiative has engaged state and local partners and seeks to improve the connections among early childhood systems. It includes a goal to build data infrastructure and is allocating some funds toward that end.

Another notable development on the early childhood landscape is the merger of the Connecticut Policy and Economic Council (CPEC) into the United Way of Connecticut. The Connecticut Policy and Economic Council has specialized in public policy research, program evaluation, and data collection and analysis. This move has strategically placed significant research capabilities within an agency that collects large amounts of early childhood administrative data.

Sustaining the Momentum Around Data & Research

With the new focus on early childhood in the state, the demand for reliable information on the systems that serve and protect children in their first few years of life is growing. Yet Connecticut must vastly improve its ability to produce policy-relevant research using administrative data if it is to address the information needs of policymakers, state administrators and other state and local leaders. This requires the development of a strong data and research infrastructure that will support decision-making and practice improvements and advance public accountability.

During its four years, DataCONNECTIONS has set the stage for this infrastructure. Now the State should develop a permanent interagency capacity to propose, conduct and communicate research and data analysis on early childhood issues. Such an enduring infrastructure for policy research and data analysis is proposed in the Early Childhood Partners Strategic Plan and in the Early Care and Education Data Development Plan.

Below is an outline of critical functions, some of which are currently being performed by DataCONNECTIONS, that must be preserved and expanded in order for progress to continue. A new level of investment in this data and research infrastructure is needed.

Embracing Critical Functions

The five functions outlined below are long-term and are based on the assumption that they would be carried out by a designated entity that would serve as a focal point for data and research capacity building efforts in Connecticut. A collaborative stakeholders group that includes early childhood program and policy expertise, could advise and provide oversight to such an entity. Alternatively, the functions could be organized as shared or distributed tasks, though that model runs the risk that the functions would be dissipated over time. These five functions include:

- 1. Developing and implementing an early childhood research agenda which includes new research and data analysis to support policy and program development.***

A long-term research and data analysis agenda with annual updates is needed to guide the production of policy relevant research. It should provide balanced non-partisan information on impacts of early childhood policies and practices to policymakers, administrators and the public and inform state and local policy and program development.

In order to craft the agenda, early childhood data needs must be continually and cooperatively assessed and pursued. Maintaining strong relationships with public and private partners, particularly those that are integrally involved with key policy initiatives, and active participation in relevant committees and work groups are essential to identify opportunities to integrate data and research into those efforts.

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There are specific research and data needs on the horizon that are likely to be included in the next agenda:

- Kindergarten assessment data
- A data measure for child health and wellness
- Developmental assessment data
- Early care and education workforce data
- Child-level tracking across systems
- Family support services for families with young children

With the increasing emphasis on results-based accountability, data needs on outcomes and performance will particularly surface.

As these and other data needs are proposed for the research agenda, priorities must be set and a work plan developed. Managing the agenda's projects can include a variety of tasks: bringing forward the research needs of the state and communities, designing research and data analysis projects, facilitating workable matches between these needs and university resources where appropriate, actually conducting research studies, developing grant proposals and presenting data and study results.

2. *Enhancing state data systems to better support policy-relevant research*

State agencies can play a pivotal role in increasing the pool of quality data and research on young children. Most state agencies collect a great deal of both qualitative and quantitative data within their administrative databases, yet these data are not put to use for research functions as often as their potential to answer policy questions would suggest. Before this potential can be realized, numerous issues must be addressed, including incompatible database structures, lack of quality data, limited data sharing, and state agencies' typically low prioritization of expanding data usage for research purposes.

DataCONNECTIONS has catalogued numerous recommendations in the Early Childhood Data Development Plan that can guide data system improvements. The most important early care and education databases that need enhancement are those that service:

- Child Care Infoline resource and referral (United Way of Connecticut),
- Child care licensing (Department of Public Health),
- School Readiness program (State Department of Education),
- State funded centers (Department of Social Services)
- School-based centers (State Department of Education) and
- Registry of individual teachers (Connecticut Charts-a-Course).

Enhancement of databases in other areas of early childhood, such as health, mental health and child development is also needed.

The State should invest in data integration technology to link data from multiple sources for standard and ad hoc analyses. This is considerably easier with a data

warehouse or similar technology that has done the linking into a subset or extract of information. A data warehouse is able to 1) provide timely and accurate responses to user queries, 2) query across database boundaries, and 3) provide access to data in a standard format that is compatible across databases. In addition, a data warehouse is an effective way to integrate data for an early care and education quality rating system and for the demands of results-based accountability.

3. *Improving data access for local communities*

Concerted effort is also needed to make state data more available to local policymakers, administrators and planners. This need was stressed in the Early Childhood Partners Strategic Plan and the report of the Early Care and Education Finance Project. It is also consistently articulated by the Early Childhood Discovery Community Initiative funded by the William C. Graustein Memorial Fund. The data should be collected and reported by local communities and geo-coded to allow linking databases for local analysis. It should be accessible in a variety of formats, such as published and online reports, as well as raw datasets that locally commissioned researchers can use.

4. *Building and nurturing research partnerships*

Research partnerships between state agencies and outside researchers yield many benefits for both parties. They enable researchers to develop specific content knowledge about services, which, combined with their academic and technical expertise, results in higher quality research with greater practical application. They also present an opportunity for researchers to help state agencies understand what barriers exist within their data and research infrastructures that impede the type of policy-relevant research that agencies and legislators are seeking. Thus, working to forge these partnerships can help increase the volume and value of research conducted with administrative data over time.

5. *Sharing expertise and best practices*

It is also important while supporting other organizations to do policy-relevant research, that the designated data entity be recognized as an accessible, clearly defined source in Connecticut for technical assistance around early childhood data collection and analysis, as well as other research capacity building issues. In order to effectively serve this function, however, it is critical that the initiative stays current with national efforts around capacity building and share innovative strategies and lessons learned with state and local audiences in a variety of formats (e.g., conferences, publications, web content).

V. Conclusion

DataCONNECTIONS has significantly improved data and research capacity in Connecticut. Not only has the project yielded tangible evidence of its success – such as frequently referenced publications and well-attended conferences – but intangible evidence as well. In its four-year lifespan, DataCONNECTIONS has brought about a noticeable shift in attitudes toward data and research, a phenomenon that is harder to quantify, but just as valuable. Still, despite these advances and the conclusion of the federal grant period, there is much to be done.

Thus, while one of the primary goals of this report was to acknowledge the project’s major achievements, perhaps the more pressing goal is to make a compelling case for carrying on the spirit and functions of this pivotal initiative. Given the new developments around early childhood in Connecticut, it is critical that a statewide entity continue championing the proliferation of quality data and sound research. Furthermore, establishing a **permanent** home or partnership for this work is paramount, as there is no end in sight to the need for reliable information that is responsive to new policy questions as they surface. DataCONNECTIONS’ efforts to date, though impressive, are merely “seed efforts” that require tending in order to flourish and move Connecticut closer to becoming a *Ready State*.

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This report is available at www.chdi.org.

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