

# Chicago's Partnership for Quality Child Care 1994-2007



*When you walk into a great program for young children you can see and feel the quality. Body language speaks. The teacher reads a story; the children lean forward anticipating what's next or laugh out loud at the funny parts. They paint and sculpt, dance and build, sing, pretend, count, ask questions, and play. You can see the children are full of life and learning.*



# Chicago's Partnership for Quality Child Care 1994-2007

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This report examines the work of the Chicago Partnership for Quality Child Care and its predecessor project, the Chicago Metropolitan Association for the Education of Young Children (Chicago Metro AEYC) Accreditation Facilitation Project. The story of these projects, which together extended from 1994 through 2007, is the story of one of the country's most important attempts to use the accreditation process of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) – and to a lesser extent accreditation by the National Association for Family Child Care – to strengthen early care and education in a major urban setting. The two initiatives were among the first and largest projects to help programs earn accreditation, and they have been the only ones focused solely on low-income neighborhoods. Their history offers valuable lessons about how much can be accomplished through concerted organizational efforts to promote national accreditation of child care programs (efforts that are known in the early childhood field as accreditation facilitation projects or AFPs) and about some of the hard challenges that these kind of efforts involve.

Unfortunately, retrieving this history was more difficult than it might have been owing to a devastating May 2007 fire that consumed the Partnership's offices and virtually all of its records. Luckily, however, numerous managers, staff members, funders, board members and child care directors who were involved in various aspects of the Partnership and the Chicago Metro AEYC Project can offer vivid and cogent recollections of these organizations and their work. The following analysis of their history draws heavily on interviews with 30 individuals in these organizations, who generously made time to offer their observations on aspects of the accreditation facilitation process in Chicago over the past 20 plus years.

## The Context of the Chicago Efforts: National Accreditation and Accreditation Facilitation

### National Accreditation

Ever since 1985, NAEYC has operated a voluntary system that allows early care and education programs to measure themselves against a national set of standards, and when validated through reliable assessment procedures to earn NAEYC accreditation. The rigorous accreditation process involves an in-depth self-study and site visits from outside experts who assess compliance with the national standards, followed by an NAEYC decision about whether the program meets NAEYC standards.<sup>1</sup> The process of seeking accreditation typically takes a year or somewhat longer. Today, when accreditation is granted, it lasts for five years at which point a program must re-apply to maintain accreditation. During most of the period covered in this report, accreditation was granted for three years. Although NAEYC-accredited programs are a small minority of all early care and education programs in the country, they now number more than 10,000,<sup>2</sup> and there is widespread consensus in the field that NAEYC accreditation is the mark of quality in early childhood education.

In a number of respects, the NAFCC accreditation process for family child care providers, which was established in 1988 and revised in 1999, resembles the NAEYC system. To earn accreditation, providers move through a process that involves an application, a self-study, a site visit, and a decision from NAFCC. As was true of the NAEYC system through 2005, NAFCC accreditation lasts for three years.

### Accreditation Facilitation

Almost as soon as NAEYC accreditation was invented, it became clear that many programs would need support to move through the demanding process of earning the designation. This recognition led to the creation of accreditation facilitation projects (AFPs). In essence, the goal of these projects is to make NAEYC accreditation doable: They break the process down into manageable chunks, help programs construct road maps to guide their journeys, and assist them in working on the NAEYC self-study via regular meetings, consultations with mentors, progress reports, and other mechanisms designed to keep the process on track. AFPs usually offer funds to participating programs to help them pay for accreditation fees, and some projects also provide

financial support to help programs meet other expenses associated with the process of earning accreditation and trying to boost quality.

Demand for NAEYC accreditation and for facilitation efforts began to materialize in the early 1990s. One important source of the demand was the U.S. military, which under the 1989 Military Child Care Act required that by 1991 at least 50 military child development centers be accredited by a national accrediting body for early childhood programs. At about the same time, other large employers like IBM and Johnson & Johnson, seeking better quality child care for their employees, started to pay for the NAEYC accreditation fees of programs serving their employees. Later these companies and others like AT&T worked together through the American Business Collaborative staffed by Work/Family Directions to support community efforts to help programs become NAEYC-accredited. Like other programs in this early wave of initiatives, the Chicago Metro AEYC project helped to pioneer the facilitation approach.

### First Steps: Origins of the Chicago Metro AEYC Project

In 1991, the Chicago Tribune ran a Pulitzer-Prize-winning series on brain development by science writer Ron Kotulak, which stressed the importance of early experiences on children's subsequent growth and development. Later that year Irving Harris, longtime Chicago philanthropist and founder of the

Ounce of Prevention Fund, talked with the trustees of the Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation (MTF)<sup>3</sup> – which had been established in 1955 by Colonel Robert R. McCormick, editor and publisher of the Chicago Tribune – about the long-term benefits of investing in young children. Subsequently, the Trustees decided to shift the emphasis of the Foundation's education funding from higher education to early childhood.

In the fall of 1992, the MTF hired Denise Carter-Blank to head its Education Program and develop its new education-funding strategy. Carter-Blank came to the Foundation from the National Parent Teacher Association,

where she had been involved in explorations of preschool PTAs, and she knew something of the landscape of early care and education. A woman of action and quick study, she took less than the allotted year to create a new MTF education program called Focus on Quality.

Taking account of three recent developments – new brain-development research; the changing context of welfare reform in Illinois, with more mothers

... there is widespread consensus in the field that NAEYC accreditation is the mark of quality in early childhood education.

<sup>1</sup>NAEYC revised its entire set of standards and the steps to be taken in the accreditation process in 2005, following an intensive examination process known as NAEYC Reinvention. The new system took effect in September 2006. Following these changes, NAEYC's overall mission of using accreditation to improve the quality of programs remained unchanged.

<sup>2</sup>[www.naeyc.org/accreditation/](http://www.naeyc.org/accreditation/) Readers can also refer to this website for information on NAEYC accreditation.

<sup>3</sup>On May 8, 2008, the Foundation changed its name to the McCormick Foundation. Throughout this report, the Foundation is referred to as MTF reflecting its name during the period under discussion.

going to work and needing child care; and education reform initiatives in Chicago – Focus on Quality called on the MTF to concentrate its education grantmaking solely on promoting high-quality early care and education for children birth to age five in Chicago’s low-income communities. Launched in 1993 with a 10-year commitment of \$40 million, the program made grants in four priority areas: professional development, public awareness, public policy, and in the area that is the main focus of this analysis – accreditation.<sup>4</sup>

The MTF introduced accreditation facilitation to Chicago in 1993 primarily by making a five-year (1994-1998) \$2.2 million grant to Chicago Metro AEYC. Grants were also made to the Ecumenical Child Care Network, the Big Shoulders Fund of the Archdiocese of Chicago, and National-Louis University. The intent was for these four organizations to help different sectors of the early care and education field achieve accreditation. This report focuses on the work of Chicago Metro AEYC, because in contrast to the other three groups, it was more clearly the parent organization of the Chicago Partnership. One marker of that relationship is that, as will be discussed, the executive director of the Chicago Metro AEYC Project later assumed this position in the Partnership.

There was definitely room for the kind of change that the MTF was looking for: In 1993, just 19 out of over 600 early childhood programs in Chicago had been accredited by NAEYC and of those only 5 were in low-income neighborhoods. Originally, the Chicago Metro AEYC grant was intended to realize the goal of having 60 centers in low-income Chicago neighborhoods earn NAEYC accreditation within five years. In mid-1995, because the barriers to program improvement were turning out to be steeper than anticipated, the goal was scaled back from 60 to 40 centers.

In establishing its Accreditation Project, Chicago Metro AEYC showed that it was willing to take on the many challenges of guiding child care programs through the complex NAEYC accreditation process. Moreover, the Project proposed to do that by mentoring inner-city programs – programs that were grappling with problems like unsafe outdoor play areas and high levels of community violence that are almost never on the list of concerns of programs in more affluent localities. Clearly, to succeed, the Project would need to adapt facilitation work to the environment of urban low-income communities, where just delivering child care services, let alone holding them to the highest standards of quality, can be a struggle. And by focusing on low-income areas, the Project was committed to working not with the most elite or most prepared programs but with a broader cross-section of the world of early childhood services in Chicago.



**Jamilah R. Jor'Dan**  
*Director, Chicago Accreditation Project  
President, Partnership for Quality Child Care*

## The Architecture of the Chicago Metro AEYC Project

At that time Chicago Metro AEYC began its Accreditation Facilitation Project, it was a regional membership organization primarily run by volunteers with only one full-time paid staff person. The scope of the new grant led to the expansion of the organization and to the creation of new Chicago Metro AEYC organizational arrangements. Reflecting the interests of both the MTF and Chicago Metro AEYC, these arrangements were signs of the commitment of these groups to running a well defined and carefully structured facilitation project.

The MTF called for the creation of a Project Management Committee to guide the accreditation work.<sup>5</sup> Besides the Chicago Metro AEYC executive director and director of the Accreditation Project, the Committee consisted of Chicago Metro AEYC members – three required to be Chicago Metro AEYC board members and all appointed by the organization’s president, who also appointed the Committee chair. (Blakely Bundy was the Committee’s first and only chair.) The Committee, in turn, hired Accreditation Project staff and selected the programs that the Project would work with. With the Project offering

additional funds to defray some of the expenses that programs would incur in trying to reach NAEYC standards, the Committee also was given the responsibility of initially approving the programs’ proposed budgets for meeting these needs.

During its early years the Project had three full-time staff members – the director, a site coordinator, and a project assistant – augmented with a dozen or so part-time consultants. Jamilah R. Jor’Dan, a long-time Chicago Metro AEYC member who had worked with Carter-Blank at the National PTA, was chosen to develop and direct the Accreditation Project. Jor’Dan, who is African-American, was a respected early childhood educa-

tor with close ties to Chicago neighborhoods and a reputation as an inspiring and persistent leader. As one board member of the successor Partnership organization, which Jor’Dan later directed, observed:

**Jamilah has the same passion for children as she does for improving the quality of child care. She really does know the ins and outs of best practice and is truly skilled.**

Over the five years that the Project operated, the MTF Education Program staff members were deeply engaged in its operations, reviewing and approving all early child care and education programs that were selected for facilitation

<sup>4</sup>For more information on the Foundation’s education program and its continuing commitment to early childhood, see: <http://www.mccormickfoundation.org/education/educationsupport.aspx>

<sup>5</sup>Another MTF requirement for the project was that Chicago Metro AEYC add three non-educators to its board of directors. This was intended to broaden the project’s leadership beyond the world of education, and especially to ensure that the perspective of business leaders was taken into account in the planning for and oversight of the Project.

and giving final approvals to the budgets for each program's accreditation expenses. The Project director submitted monthly written reports to the MTF and met monthly with the foundation's program officer.

In one other facet of the Project planning, the MTF commissioned a group of researchers at Loyola University Chicago to conduct an in-depth three-year evaluation of the work of the Chicago Metro AEYC's work.

The major investment that the MTF had decided to make in facilitation of NAEYC accreditation was naturally of interest in Chicago. The decision was also noteworthy to NAEYC itself. An NAEYC staff member says that she recalls vividly when "Sue Bredekamp [then director of NAEYC's National Academy of Early Childhood Programs] came out in the hall from her office and announced that the McCormick Tribune Foundation had awarded over \$2 million to our affiliate in Chicago for the Chicago Accreditation Project. We cheered!"

## Chicago Metro AEYC's Work under the Five-Year Grant

Chicago Metro AEYC's Accreditation Facilitation Project (AFP) had three major elements: program support, professional development, and public education. Work on the first element, supporting programs to become accredited, was inevitably the most time-consuming aspect of the Project. But Project staff recognized that promoting the professional development of teachers and directors was also an essential element of program improvement. The third facet of the project, public education, was intended to raise awareness of the benefits of quality care and education.

### Program Support

The Project began its program-support efforts in late 1994 by working to publicize both the concept of NAEYC accreditation and the Project's own offer to

help local programs move through it. The Project contacted a list of 120 programs provided by the Cook County Child Care Resource and Referral organization (CCR&R). In response, the Project received 50 letters of interest and chose eight programs in diverse low-income areas to work with. Eight more centers were added later in the first year, and 10 more were chosen in each successive year for a total of 46.

The first three groups of programs that the Project worked with varied in size from one program serving just 12 infants to one enrolling over 300 children, infants through school-age. Nearly all of the programs were embedded in larger agencies in their communities.<sup>6</sup> Significantly, in contrast to the typical clientele of programs seeking NAEYC accreditation at that time, most families served by mentored programs were African-American, followed by Latino and Asian families. While there is no data on the backgrounds of providers involved in the Project, it appears that consistent with the demographics of the families, many were African-American – a group that, in Chicago, had thus far had relatively little contact with the national accreditation system.

By 1998, 37 of the programs working with the Accreditation Project had achieved NAEYC accreditation – a record that essentially met the original goal of facilitating accreditation of 40 projects over five years.

Following is a description of how the Project carried out two major tasks associated with helping those programs pursue accreditation – 1.) developing a style or culture of mentoring that would appeal to the mentored programs and 2.) creating workable systems for guiding programs through the accreditation experience.

### Mentoring Style and Culture

When the Project started, both NAEYC accreditation and the world of facilitation initiatives were barely out of their infancies. Thus, rather than having dozens of other facilitation efforts to use as models, the Chicago Metro AEYC Project largely had to invent its style of working with individual programs by drawing on the wisdom and know-how of its staff and consultants. Collectively, they had many years of professional experience in early care and education programs, a significant level of educational qualifications (master's degrees in early childhood education and child development), and a good working knowledge of the basics of adult education.

McCormick Tribune Foundation awards over \$2 million for the Chicago Accreditation Project. We cheered!"



<sup>6</sup> This information comes from the Loyola University Chicago three-year evaluation report; comparable data for the later years of the Project are not available.



This combination of attributes gave staff what looked like an almost instinctive understanding of how to mentor: To start, staff were prepared to *invest significant amounts of time in building relationships* with directors and staff of the programs they worked with. Those relationships were grounded in active and genuine *respect for the programs as partners*. The Project was committed to *collaboration with the programs* and aimed for its leadership activities and its relationships with programs to be hands-on, on-site, and responsive.

Another facet of the Project's overall approach to facilitation was *consistent mentoring*, or as one board member described it "nurturing while teaching." "We didn't just give them a piece of paper and say this is how to do it," recalled this board member. "You sat side by side and coached. You asked, 'Have you tried this?' 'What about that?' It's hands-on, proactive, nonjudgmental – true mentoring."

Efforts were also made to have programs feel *continuously supported*. Project facilitators – "facilitators" being the name given to staff members who were assigned to be the primary partners/mentors of particular sites – were accessible by phone. "If we were not on site, they could call us anytime – at the office or at home," said one facilitator. A program director made virtually the same observation from a different perspective: "I could pick up the phone if I was uncomfortable with anything. We could always talk to them — that made a big difference."

Program directors were given opportunities to provide *peer support* to one another. The Project's quarterly director's meetings, discussed in more detail in the following section on Professional Development, were an important venue for directors giving their peers advice, guidance, and encouragement as they sought to improve the quality of their programs.

In assessing the programs and developing plans for how to improve them, staff led with *program strengths*. In keeping with this principle, staff members seldom referred to a program's areas of weakness; instead, they talked about "areas to be strengthened." "The goal," as one staff member put it, "was to identify what is there to build on."

### Creating Systems for Working with the Sites

Compared to the Project's relative ease in creating a user-friendly mentoring style, its systems-building efforts were more labor-intensive. The challenges in this area were considerable. For example, decisions had to be made about how to market the Project to programs throughout Chicago while maintaining a focus on certain low-income neighborhoods and about how to build on

NAEYC's own basic eligibility criteria by adding criteria that would help the Project make good decisions about which programs to mentor. As noted, the Project was determined to avoid creaming only the strongest programs; at the same time there was a need to establish that the programs that were selected would have a basic level of readiness that would allow them to move ahead on the demanding tasks of accreditation. The Project also had to map out exactly how it would organize the mentoring it would give to programs.

### Selecting Programs

Basic NAEYC eligibility criteria for a program seeking accreditation were that the program had to have been in operation for at least one year, had to be licensed (or legally exempt), and had to serve at least 10 children. Chicago Metro AEYC added its own criteria to the list: The program had to be a nonprofit, its director should have been employed in the program for at least one year, and at least 50 percent of the families served by the program were to be low-income. This last criterion helped advance the Project's goal of reaching programs in low-income neighborhoods.

Along with developing eligibility criteria to guide the selection process, staff created useful tools and systems for assessing the readiness of programs to seek accreditation. In responding to letters of interest from programs, the Project not only sent out an application packet that asked for documents on and descriptions of the program's administration, curriculum, staffing, and enrollment, but the director was asked to complete a Director's Program Readiness Survey and to write a letter of commitment discussing how the program would benefit from pursuing accreditation. The director was also asked to submit three letters of support indicating commitment from three different entities – the program's board or other governing body, a community representative, and a parent group.

After reviewing these materials, Accreditation Project staff visited each program and completed a Site Visitor's Program Readiness Survey. (Note that this site visit was completely separate from any official site visit from NAEYC, which for those programs that were selected for facilitation, would take place many months later.)

All of the information from the application and site visit was used to complete the Accreditation Project Readiness Profile (19 questions with a total score of 100 points) and to assign a Readiness Index to each program. Only programs scoring above 50 points were considered as candidates for facilitation. Notably, the Project was the first AFP to develop this kind of Readiness Index.



Over the years, Chicago Metro AEYC found that not only was the Index useful for predicting which programs were most ready to apply for accreditation but that it could also predict how long programs at various stages of readiness would take to become accredited. Thus, programs with a high Readiness Index were likely to reach accreditation within one year, those with medium Readiness Index would do so within two years, and those with a low Readiness Index would likely take between two and three years.

## Establishing a Step-by-Step Process for Mentoring

Once selected, all the programs were invited to the Chicago Metro AEYC office for an orientation that covered accreditation and the Accreditation Project. This experience helped both to establish a group spirit and to efficiently deliver information so that, as one staff member put it, “Everyone knew what to expect and there’d be no surprises.” At the orientation each program was given its own box of NAEYC self-study materials – and in one sign of the attention to detail that was a hallmark of the Chicago Metro AEYC Project, the boxes were elegantly gift-wrapped.

Each program was assigned to a facilitator who, as noted, was the primary contact for and partner with the program. (Early on the facilitator was either Jor’Dan or the site coordinator; later more facilitators were added to the pool.) As indicated by the observation of one program director, the process of assigning facilitators to programs was deliberate, not haphazard. “They were very smart,” the director reported, “about picking who worked with a program.” Besides the facilitator, the program might also get assistance provided by the Accreditation Project from one or more consultants on specific areas such as curriculum development or fiscal management.

The facilitator helped the director introduce accreditation to the staff (at a regular staff meeting), conduct an assessment of the program’s strengths and needs (classroom by classroom), and develop a timeline of tasks needed to complete the self-study phase of the accreditation process. The assessment and task-timeline informed the preparation of a budget for needed improvements in the program. Budgets typically included items related to staff development, classroom materials, indoor and outdoor equipment, and in some cases minor renovations. Directors had considerable discretion about what kinds of funding to request. As one director in a large agency recalled:

**You could do renovation, supplies, whatever you needed. They came to us and said, “Here’s what we feel you need. What are you willing to put in? What’s in your budget?” And they would do the rest, so funding was a partnership.**

One very helpful use of the budget funds was the purchase of equipment for outdoor play areas, which was often able to raise safety levels on the play-

grounds. Using another strategy to improve the playgrounds, the Project encouraged programs to enlist neighborhood youth in efforts to build and maintain the areas, giving these young people a stake in keeping the playgrounds in good shape for the younger children.

Once a plan for a program’s self-study had been completed, the facilitator guided the program partners through the self-study process, including the procedures involved with fielding and analyzing family and staff surveys, and the organization of documentation. The facilitator continued to mentor the program as it developed an improvement plan that reflected the self-study findings. The facilitator also helped the directors and staff review their program descriptions before submitting them to NAEYC, and the facilitator conducted a practice site visit in advance of the official visit from the NAEYC-assigned “validator,” in the NAEYC terminology of the time.<sup>7</sup>

## Professional Development

A key element of the Accreditation Project’s approach to staff development was its emphasis on empowering directors and staff of mentored programs to see themselves as professionals. The Project used a number of strategies to further this goal: For example, each program received a membership in NAEYC and the Chicago Metro chapter. And starting in 1994, the Project supported directors to attend the NAEYC annual conference – an event that was the first national professional experience for almost all of the directors involved in the Project. Directors were also supported to make presentations at these conferences, which was also a first for the majority.

The Project worked hard to make the conferences meaningful professional development experiences for the directors. Jor’Dan introduced them to national leaders and made sure they took time to reflect on what they were learning and how they would put it into practice. A national leader recalls observing Jor’Dan with “her flock.” She was impressed “with how Jor’Dan modeled professionalism.” She recalls one experience:

**Jamilah took her group into an available room for a debriefing. There were no chairs in the room and some of the directors started to sit on the floor. Jamilah said “No, we are professionals. We sit at tables and chairs.” And she took them to another room. She’s a professional with a strong sense of decorum – she’s both steely and quiet about it.**

A manager of an accreditation facilitation project outside of Illinois also praised how Jor’Dan handled the conferences:

**Jamilah Jor’Dan was a visionary mentor to the directors ... The professional and personal connection among the Chicago**

<sup>7</sup>Validators are now known as “assessors.”



group [that came to NAEYC national conferences] was visible, tangible. Some of them might have been intimidated by the process at first, but they were certain the Project was going to be there for them. They were confident. In the large public comment sessions on changes to accreditation procedures, the Chicago directors would get up and say, “This is what I need from the system.” They were invested in the system and they were eloquent.

Along with the national conferences, another form of professional development was the Project quarterly directors meetings that were mentioned earlier. The diverse list of topics covered at the meetings ranged from leading change, to diversity in the workplace, to cultural awareness in the classroom, to the mundane but very important topic of hand washing. To find issues of common interest to directors that should be included in the quarterly sessions, Jor’Dan scanned reports from facilitators and consultants. However, many of the topics came from the directors themselves, who were queried about what they wanted the meetings to cover.

Jor’Dan and other planners made sure that some of the sessions covered curriculum-related topics – for example, children’s literature and science, as well as comprehensive curricula such as Creative Curriculum and High/Scope. The focus on curriculum was validated three years into the project when the Loyola University Chicago evaluation found that a strong curriculum was

... a strong curriculum was highly correlated with a program’s success in earning accreditation.

highly correlated with a program’s success in earning accreditation. In general, helping staff reflect on curriculum – and in fact, the whole enterprise of staff development – was an important way of furthering the Project’s goal of meeting the particular needs of their clientele.

The quarterly meetings were generally held at one of the program sites, the reason being that besides acquiring new information at the sessions, directors could benefit from observing other programs. Each year, one meeting was held at the MTF office. This venue served to showcase the Project and introduce the directors to the MTF. The funders also welcomed the opportunity to extend gracious hospitality to a group of program directors whose hard work on behalf of children and families was often under-appreciated.

Formal education was another important facet of the Project’s professional development efforts. The Project helped pay for staff to attend local colleges and to complete associates and bachelor degrees.

Yet another professional development strategy was celebration. Starting with the first kick-off celebration in January 1995 at the Chicago Metro AEYC conference, the Accreditation Project held an annual accreditation reception for programs, their staff, and parents. The event, which continued through 2006, featured a master of ceremonies, stylish decorations, and good food. Plaques were presented to each program that had become accredited over the preced-

ing year, and an inspirational speaker added substance to the celebration. Besides bringing together many members of Chicago's early child care community, the celebration, with its capacity to draw attention to the concept of high quality child care, was one of the strategies that the Project used to pursue its public education role. Other Project strategies for putting child care quality and accreditation on the public agenda are discussed next.

## Public Education

To help educate the public about the value of accreditation, the Project staff, primarily Jor'Dan, made proactive efforts to communicate the group's message. Jor'Dan was interviewed for newspaper stories and radio shows. She spoke about accreditation to groups such as the Chicago Public Schools State Pre-Kindergarten programs and the Chicago Department of Human Services, and she presented at different events, including the General Services Administration Federal Child Care Programs Conference and National Easter Seal Society Leadership Conference. In addition, the Project hosted numerous guests who wanted to find out how accreditation facilitation worked – for example, staff of the Delaware Valley AEYC (Philadelphia), and even a representative of Iceland's Playschool Department.

Another public-education strategy was the Project's publication, starting in 1996, of a quarterly newsletter, which was called *News and Views* and which focused on accreditation and child care quality and often included interviews with program directors. (For several years the publication was funded by the Cook County Child Care Resource and Referral agency.) Over the first five years of the Project, the circulation of *News & Views* grew from 750 to over 2,500.

## Signs of Progress: A Reputation for Leadership and an Expanding Funding Base

In the years that Jor'Dan led her Project, she, along with her colleague, Deborah Flis of the Connecticut Accreditation Facilitation Project, at that point the country's only statewide, state-funded AFP,<sup>8</sup> came to be known as the "the birth mothers of the AFP movement." According to Flis, she and Jor'Dan frequently "called each other and talked about how you handle issues and challenges." One reason why is that their two projects were facing bigger challenges than many other AFPs. Flis recalls:

**We [both the Connecticut and Chicago projects] moved to large numbers rapidly. That changes what you do; it's a steep learning curve.**

As will be discussed in more detail later, both AFPs quickly became sources of mentoring for smaller programs.

<sup>8</sup> In 1999 Maine became the only other state with a statewide, state-funded accreditation facilitation project. The Hawaii Early Childhood Accreditation Project, begun in 2001, is also state-wide but privately funded.

As the Chicago Metro AEYC Project moved forward, it was able to add to the generous support of the MTF. In 1996, AT&T, Lucent Technologies and Work-Family Directions launched a joint project to support accreditation in select cities, one of which was Chicago. Through this funding, Chicago child care programs were eligible for assistance with accreditation fees if they enrolled at least one child of an employee of AT&T or Lucent.

## Two Lessons from the Five-Year Grant Period

### Continuous Mentoring

The Project's original plan had been to work with a group of programs until they were accredited, then select a new cohort and work next with that group. But it soon became clear the original mentored programs needed some form of continuous support, even if less intense, after accreditation.

In retrospect, this made sense: Accreditation is, after all, only a means to an end – and the end is having programs that *maintain* quality. Since NAEYC accreditation was at that point being granted for a three-year period, the Chicago Metro AEYC-mentored programs that had become accredited at a relatively early point found that after some two years of accreditation, it was time to begin working on re-accreditation – and once again, they wanted and needed support. Another reason to extend support to the original programs was that the three-year evaluation of the Project offered some evidence that the observed classroom quality of an accredited program tended to slip a bit within a year or so after accreditation was earned.



## In 1998, the Mayor and the McCormick Tribune Foundation announced the launch of a jointly funded \$16 million, five-year initiative called the Chicago Partnership for Accreditation.

Several activities did keep the accredited programs in the Chicago Metro AEYC Project's orbit. For example, the annual celebrations, which included directors and staff of accredited programs, helped programs feel part of a community of high-quality programs. Similarly, once programs were accredited, directors did not stop getting invitations to the directors' quarterly meetings. More generally, toward the end of its first five years, the Project designed an approach to helping programs with re-accreditation that was less intensive than the original work but still had considerable substance. For example, directors of accredited programs were included in directors meetings, could access technical assistance by phone and receive occasional on-site technical assistance visits. Simultaneously, the Project worked with the many multi-site programs that it had mentored to help them develop their own internal support systems to maintain quality.

### Research Confirmation

As its first five years ended, the Project was able to point to relatively new research that appeared to validate its approach to working with programs. An important early childhood study issued in the late 1990s tracked the progress of a sample of California programs pursuing accreditation with different levels of support.<sup>9</sup> The findings offered evidence of the effectiveness of Accreditation Facilitation Projects, especially those that, like the Chicago Metro AEYC Project, provided high levels of assistance to mentored programs. The study categorized programs seeking accreditation into three groups based on the level of support they received: 1) Intensive support included on-site technical assistance, customized training for staff and directors, facilitated support groups for administrators, and funds to cover needed improvements as well as accreditation fees; 2) Moderate support consisted of quarterly group meetings, some consultation, and funds to pay accreditation fees; and 3) Low support was simply the provision of funds to pay accreditation fees. Programs receiving intensive support were twice as likely to become NAEYC-accredited as those with moderate support and 10 times more likely than those with low support.

## The Next Five Years: A New Partnership with the City and a New Structure

As the MTF five-year funding commitment was nearing its end, the City of Chicago began to signal interest in working to strengthen the quality of its early

childhood programs. During the Week of the Young Child in 1998, Mayor Richard M. Daley announced that the City would undertake an early childhood initiative. The timing for the organizational shift that would likely result from this new development seemed propitious: The MTF Education Program staff had begun to discuss merging the four accreditation projects that it had been funding into one more efficient operation and creating a new organization to lead it.

In late 1998, the Mayor and the MTF board announced the launch of a jointly funded, \$16 million, five-year initiative to be called the Chicago Partnership for Accreditation. In explaining why the City had chosen to invest so heavily in accreditation, the Mayor observed that no one would go to a hospital that was not accredited – so in the same way, all of the City's preschools should be accredited.

The MTF funding commitment to the new Partnership was \$5 million over five years (1999-2004). The City was to contribute \$5 million, with another \$6 million to come from other funders to be identified. The original five-year goal in the MTF's grant summary was that 400 centers and 250 family child care homes would be accredited and/or re-accredited. The grant summary underscores the breadth of the commitment:

**This is an unprecedented attempt by a city to get all of its preschools for poor children accredited . . . With this grant, MTF can complete the mission it began – to ensure that Chicago's poor children, ages birth through five are offered the finest child care in the country.**

Several press conferences later, Mayor Daley's plan emerged in a February 2000 document called *Setting a Course for Early Care and Education in Chicago*. One of the four goals of the Mayor's plan was to "improve the quality of services provided to young children in early childhood settings and strengthen the transition from early child care to kindergarten." Among the 10 activities listed under this goal was to "expand the number of accredited Head Start and child care programs serving low-income families through the Chicago Accreditation Partnership." The expected two-year outcome was 160 accredited programs,<sup>10</sup> and in keeping with the original 1998 announcement, it was assumed that some of these programs would be family child care homes.

Although not quite as high as the original aim of 650 accredited programs over five years, the new goal remained lofty – and it was in line with those of other cities and states that were attempting ambitious facilitation projects during this period. For example, Connecticut aimed to have 125 programs a year accredited, while a project based in the Philadelphia area had a goal of accrediting 100 programs over five years.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Whitebook, 1996; Whitebook, et al., 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Pp. 6-7.

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell, Stoney & Dichter, 2001.

For Chicago Metro AEYC, a tenfold increase in the number of programs to be accredited (from 16 to 160 in two years) and the addition of responsibilities for working with family child care providers would have required dramatic expansion if the organization had intended to continue in its role of managing the facilitation work. Chicago Metro AEYC recognized – as did the other three organizations that had originally received MTF grants for facilitation – that this kind of growth was well beyond its capacity.

To a degree, the work of mentoring of individual programs had already taken Chicago Metro AEYC outside of the sphere of activities that were the best fit for the volunteers who continued to be the heart of the organization – for example, activities like organizing conferences and other professional development efforts that are demanding but not as labor-intensive as facilitation. In part for this reason, Chicago Metro AEYC leaders were clear that managing a far larger facilitation project was the wrong strategic direction for their organization to take.

Instead – and in keeping with some of the thinking of the MTF as the five-year grant period was ending – a different structure was designed: The new Partnership would manage all facilitation and associated public policy activities, and would hire some of its own staff directly to do facilitation work. Three of the four original MTF grantee organizations – all but Chicago Metro AEYC – would continue their facilitation of individual programs under contracts to the Partnership. Meanwhile, the arm of Chicago Metro AEYC that had been involved in facilitation was in effect transformed into the Partnership: Jamilah R. Jor'Dan became the president of the Partnership, and any accreditation-related activities that the Chicago Metro AEYC Project might have otherwise pursued on its own were carried out under Partnership auspices.

The MTF tapped Nancy Stevenson, a widely known and highly regarded civic leader, an original board member of Voices for Illinois Children, and friend of Mayor Daley, to lead the Partnership's board, and Stevenson, in turn, reached out to other civic leaders to recruit board members.<sup>12</sup>

The Partnership acquired its tax-exempt status in 2000 and was incorporated as the Partnership for Child Care Accreditation – although it was generally known as the Chicago Accreditation Partnership. (In the interim before it officially gained nonprofit status, the Partnership's funds were managed by the well regarded Erikson Institute, a long-time MTF grantee.) In 2003 the group dropped the term "Accreditation" and added the term "Quality" to its title, changing its name to the Partnership for Quality Child Care. The new name was meant to clarify that the Partnership was not the grantor of accreditation

and at the same time to better reflect a mission that extended even beyond accreditation to embrace the still broader concept of promoting improvements in the quality of programs.

Overall, the Partnership was designed with a fairly intricate structure, one that reflected its efforts to mobilize a variety of Chicago institutions to promote accreditation. Its very name, Partnership, signified several different kinds of relationships. It was a nonprofit private entity that aimed to work collaboratively with the City. It was also a partner with the MTF and with its other major private funders. It was the lead partner of three other agencies that were working to facilitate accreditation. And perhaps most significantly, it aimed to be a partner to its mentee child care programs.

The program-support and professional-development goals that Chicago Metro AEYC had worked toward remained the same in the Partnership. However, as will be discussed, the group's public-education mission was somewhat changed.

## The Partnership in Operation, 2000-2004

### New Systems

The Partnership's mentoring style was familiar to anyone who had known the Chicago Metro AEYC Project. For example, there was the same collaborative, hands-on, respectful approach of meeting programs where they were and of being ready to work with programs that had hurdles to overcome before they reached the top tier of quality.

But the procedures of the Chicago Metro AEYC Project had to be adapted to fit the needs of a much larger-scale operation. For example, the approach of matching facilitators to programs had to be altered when programs were scattered among 67 of Chicago's 77 communities. The staff clustered programs in groups – north, south, central – to minimize transportation time so that a facilitator could easily visit two programs per day. A procedure was developed to assign

programs among the four partners considering the program type, e.g., faith-based programs were assigned to the Ecumenical Child Care Network.

Outreach also became more demanding since it had to be conducted with and through the City agencies that had jurisdiction over Head Start and child care programs. While the Mayor had endorsed the initiative, these agencies had many competing priorities and were not always prepared to focus on national accreditation.

The original process of selecting programs for mentoring had been quite labor-intensive, and based on Chicago Metro AEYC's experience, the Partnership was able to streamline it somewhat to accommodate the larger number of

New name, *Chicago's Partnership for Quality Child Care*, reflects broader mission of promoting improvements in the quality of programs.

<sup>12</sup> In the first few years, representatives from the organization's funders including MTF sat on the board along with one representative from the City. But within six months the City decided that was a conflict of interest and the City representative resigned from the board. MTF and most of the funders eventually did the same.



applicants. Under the new system, a provisional Readiness Index was assigned to each interested program based on its application materials and a facilitator was assigned to the program. Following the facilitator's first visit to the program, the Readiness Index was confirmed or more rarely revised.

While small, the staff of the Partnership was twice the size of the Chicago Metro AEYC Project staff in its early years. The expansion meant new hiring decisions. The same board member who had praised Jor'Dan's dedication discussed how she selected facilitation staffers:

**Most of the people she hired were former teachers and directors in low-income centers, people who are dedicated both to the field and to the neighborhood. She was looking for that quality of connectedness, good at relationships and not slick. We always talked about the relationships and the respect for people in the neighborhoods at every board meeting.**

In another new development, the offices that had been used by the Chicago Metro AEYC Project were replaced with larger and more professional office space. Its advantages to mentored programs included two conference rooms

with space where staff could work on their accreditation materials. There was also a resource center/library where programs could borrow books, videos, and other professional development materials to help them conduct their own training. In a lending-library arrangement, facilitators would also take materials from the resource room out to directors and staff who could not manage the travel to the downtown offices.

### **A Changing Profile of Mentee Programs**

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Chicago's low-income neighborhoods changed dramatically. Many public housing complexes were demolished and their former residents moved to different neighborhoods. As a result of these changes, a number of community child care centers went out business and some moved to other neighborhoods.

Partly owing to its inclusive philosophy, partly because of this change in the Chicago child care world and at the request of the Mayor's Office, the Partnership gradually began to work with a wider range of programs than the reasonably well established nonprofit community-based child care centers that had been the staple of the Chicago Metro AEYC Project's work – for example,

the sometimes overlapping categories of proprietary (for-profit) programs, so-called mom-and-pop operations, and very small programs that operated on a nonprofit basis. In comparison to the community-based nonprofit child care centers, many of these programs were isolated and had staff members who were less well-educated and therefore less attuned to child-development knowledge, and this made facilitation work increasingly difficult. One Partnership board member described the change:

**The money and time required to get programs accredited was greater than anyone expected. We first went for the low-hanging fruit, then the higher-hanging and really high fruit. And the fruit just kept moving up the tree.**

From a somewhat different but complementary perspective, another board member touched on how the difficulties of these new situations gave rise to opportunities:

**The programs we worked with were at the middle to the bottom of the spectrum in exposure to theory ... of early childhood education ... [and] ... understanding of learning and play and stimulation. Every time those leaders and teachers came in contact with the Partnership they got a window into a world that was new to them. The Partnership was an inspiration and we can be very proud of that.**

Aftermath of welfare reform ... nearly doubles number of children in publicly subsidized child care programs.

Like the disappearance of many large housing projects, another phenomenon of the 1990s – the aftermath of welfare reform – brought changes to Chicago's publicly subsidized child-care sector and had implications for the Partnership. In the later years of the decade, with more mothers going to work as a result of new welfare legislation, the number of children in publicly subsidized child care programs nearly doubled. Funding from the state to meet that need did increase substantially, but until 2005, the rates paid to providers stagnated.<sup>13</sup> In part because public dollars can stretch further when care is family-based, more than half of the state's funding now supports this form of care. For the Partnership, the result was that efforts to accredit family-based providers became even more important than anticipated. These efforts are discussed next.

## Work with Family Child Care Providers

Starting in 2001, after a careful study funded by the Polk Bros. and MacArthur Foundations, the Partnership helped family child care homes become accredited by the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC). In the initial stages of the Partnership's work on family care, the NAFCC operated with a primarily volunteer force with a half-time paid coordinator. This meant delays in NAFCC making site visits and reviewing materials, complicating the Partnership's efforts to help a significant number of family providers earn accreditation. (As will be discussed, delays were also a problem for NAEYC accreditation.) Gradually, however,

NAFCC expanded its capacity, and gradually, too, the Partnership was able to guide more family providers through the accreditation process.

The Partnership organized family providers into cohorts that functioned in some ways like the groups of program directors that met quarterly under the auspices of the Chicago Metro AEYC Project (and who continued to do so under the Partnership). A facilitator was assigned to each cohort of family providers, and as in the directors' meetings, the groups functioned in part as a forum for peer support and advice.

One family child care provider who was accredited in 2007 is typical of others in attributing her success to the Partnership, and particularly to the support she received in cohort meetings. In discussing her experience she compared two kinds of help that had been made available to her – the Partnership's input, and suggestions from the CDA (Child Development

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell, 2005.



Associate) advisor at the local CCR&R.. (CDA is a national credentialing program for individuals that is administered by the Council for Early Childhood Professional Recognition.) According to this provider:

**You can get the CDA Advisor to give you tips and tell you what classes to take. But the help the Partnership gave was more useful. [They gave me] suggestions and gave me the reasons for it: Move the water table away from the computer – not just because water could hurt the computer but why kids need to keep active and [why] quiet things are different. I wrote in my diary the day Dr. Jor'Dan came out to my place. I wrote, "We rolled out the red carpet. I've got somebody who really cares about what I'm doing."**

Although all but one member of this provider's cohort has now earned accreditation, the group continues to meet periodically, to support not only the one caregiver who is still seeking accreditation but other group members in their efforts to maintain a high level of quality in their work.

While the NAFCC accreditation system does not require providers to hold or earn specific professional qualifications, the Partnership paid close attention to the professional-development needs of family providers, and with very good results. One provider who was mentored by the Partnership remarked on how the experience had nurtured her own professional growth and that of colleagues in her cohort:

**We went from taking the CDA classes and being accredited to getting degrees! I am working on my AA in early childhood and doing my practicum right now. I'm also working on my BA. Only two classes in math and I will have my BA.**

### Efforts to Change Public Policy

As noted, the Partnership's policy agenda was somewhat different than that of its predecessor Chicago Metro AEYC Project. Its major new commitment was to urge policymakers to create state and city policies to financially reward programs that earned accreditation. The Partnership attempted to do the advocacy work needed to further this goal by participating in an existing coalition of advocates – the statewide Quality Alliance – a group that included many members who were also funded by MTF through its Focus on Quality grantmaking program, discussed earlier.

Early in its history, the Partnership hired a staff person to conduct its policy work, which was primarily defined as promoting accreditation within the Quality Alliance agenda. But the Alliance expected the director of a member organization, not a staff person, to participate in its meetings. After a year or a bit more, the Partnership no longer funded this position.

Over time the Partnership concentrated its energies on mentoring, on tending its many collaborative relationships, and on efforts to promote accreditation to the field (discussed shortly). The group paid less attention to efforts to change public policies through advocacy. In reality it is difficult for an organization the size of the Partnership – 6 to 10 staff members – to cultivate both the policy skills that allow it to sit at the advocacy table and the ability to work well with community-based programs. Organizations that successfully blend direct service and advocacy are generally much larger than the Partnership, with staff numbering at least in the dozens and often more. Thus, in some respects it made sense for the Partnership to leave advocacy work to other, larger member agencies of The Quality Alliance and to its leaders.

In fact, the Alliance has made significant progress in realizing some of the Partnership's public policy goals. For example, accreditation is firmly embedded in Illinois' new Quality Counts initiative, and that initiative includes a so-called *tiered reimbursement* system – a system for providing financial incentives to programs that achieve certain defined levels of quality.

### Public Education and Communication

More so than advocacy to change public opinion, efforts to educate local providers about child care quality was a central element of the Partnership's overall program. In a new undertaking, the Partnership invested roughly \$250,000 in the development of a campaign to promote both NAEYC and NAFCC accreditation to providers. Launched in 2002, Early Stars, Brighter Futures through Quality Child Care functioned mainly via its website [www.earlystars.org](http://www.earlystars.org), with complementary strategies of disseminating brochures and other items with the Early Stars logo. The leader of an AFP in a state where accreditation was more visible than it was in Illinois during this period gave a rationale for Early Stars:

**We don't have to sell accreditation here because it's in state policy so much and so widely known [that] even if it weren't required, centers would pursue it. In Chicago, they had to sell – marketing materials, beautiful newsletters, etc. That's what Early Stars is.**

In another facet of the Partnership's efforts to make accreditation appealing to providers, and in this case, to also market accreditation and quality to the public, the annual celebration events that had been initiated by Chicago Metro AEYC continued. However, some observers thought that in later years, when the events were moved from a downtown Hilton Hotel to community locations, they lost some of their public-relations power. In an effort to generate more media interest in the events, starting in 2004, they featured an Early Stars Award for

Partnership joins statewide Quality Alliance to urge policymakers to financially reward programs that earn accreditation.

Distinguished service to a Chicago early childhood leader. The honorees were purposefully chosen: U.S. Congressman Danny K. Davis in 2004; Barbara Bowman, Chief Officer for Early Childhood Education in the Chicago Public Schools and former president of the Erikson Institute, in 2005; and Arne Duncan, head of the Chicago Public Schools, in 2006.

Despite the Partnership's ongoing efforts to make the annual celebration a vehicle for communicating with the public at large about accreditation and quality, the main focus of its education efforts was providers, not policymakers. And in fact, some of the Partnership's funders had counseled the group to put less stress on marketing accreditation to the general public until a critical mass of Chicago programs – perhaps 100 – had earned the national designation.

But significantly, Early Stars ran on parallel tracks with a much larger Chicago effort that did educate the public at large about quality – an initiative that complemented, but was not integrated with, the Partnership's work: From 2000 to 2003, a public education campaign, "Start Early: Learning Begins at Birth," that was managed by Voices for Illinois Children worked to build public support for investing in quality early childhood education. The Start Early campaign was supported by a multi-million dollar grant from the MTF (again, as part of its Focus on Quality program) and it used paid ads, earned media strategies such as editorials, and local spokespeople, including kindergarten teachers, to deliver its message. The TV and radio ads are still available (see <http://www.voices4kids.org/library/tvandradioads.html>).

An evaluation of Start Early showed that it did indeed change public opinion on the need for qualified teachers for young children – and the ultimate test of its effectiveness was that in its wake, Illinois invested a great deal more money in services for young children than had previously been the case: The state's Preschool for All (PFA)<sup>14</sup> program ramped up \$30 million per year between 2004 and 2006. Funding for child care was also expanded and rate increases for publicly subsidized child care providers began in 2005.

Interestingly, in connection with the subject of marketing, several observers have noted that the Partnership promoted quality and accreditation – but did not promote itself. In retrospect this seems to have been a fateful decision: When, as discussed later, the Partnership was exploring the possibility of moving to a fee-for-service model, it was discovered that not many program directors knew the organization's name or much about its work. As one Partnership board member put it:

**I'm not sure the Partnership ever became essential to anyone, so they'd say, "We have to have this." [The Partnership] might have survived**

<sup>14</sup> Governor Blagojevich in 2004 appointed a state Early Learning Council and charged them to deliver a plan for universal preschool for three- and four-year-olds by 2005. Preschool For All or PFA started in 2006-07 and builds on the state Early Childhood Block Grant which included an "at-risk" prekindergarten program begun in 1985.

<sup>15</sup> As noted, they are now called "assessors." Also note that as of May 2008, the reinvented NAEYC system is conducting 100% of the on-site assessment visits within six months of a program's application date, a dramatic improvement.

**if it met felt needs ... [if we had] marketed its niche better.**

A Chicago leader made the same point even more emphatically:

**The Chicago community missed the opportunity to notice that we had a gem in our midst that was getting lots of centers accredited.**

The theme of why the Partnership was unable to perpetuate itself beyond 2007 is explored shortly. First, this discussion considers one more aspect of the Partnership's work during this period – its influence on NAEYC.

## A Two-Way Street: The Partnership and the NAEYC

In one sense, the Partnership, like all projects facilitating NAEYC accreditation, was a vehicle for conveying NAEYC's approaches and values to local programs. But along with other large and urban accreditation facilitation projects, the Partnership also created a path of influence that went in the opposite direction – back to NAEYC.

"Start Early. Learning Begins at Birth" campaign builds public support for investing in quality early childhood education.

Some of the feedback focused on procedural matters. One of the flaws in the NAEYC accreditation system until its revision, or reinvention, midway through this decade was its inability to deliver timely accreditation decisions. Programs submitted their materials and then waited sometimes over a year for the site visit – known as the "validation visit." This was because visits were conducted by volunteers, with each one visiting only a few programs a year. Obviously this slowdown affected the Partnership's ability to meet its

target number of accreditations (and like other large AFPs, the group was well aware that the problem was systemic, because it got feedback from the many programs it mentored). The Partnership and other large projects were persistent in bringing the problem to NAEYC's attention. Responding to these kinds of concerns, NAEYC shifted, in 2006, to a system of using paid full-time validators.<sup>15</sup>

The Partnership, in this instance working with its peer AFPs in other big cities, also influenced NAEYC in a substantive area – cultural competence and diversity. One of the programs that the Partnership mentored was deferred from accreditation because the NAEYC validator did not understand its Afro centric curriculum, with the decision arguably being a symptom of the scarcity of NAEYC validators of color during this period. In part in response to the incident, the Partnership helped NAEYC recruit new validators, who made the pool more diverse. Eventually the validator training was altered to adequately prepare validators for the urban environment.

At the same time, the Partnership was the catalyst for validators coming to view urban programs that served people of color in a new and more

favorable light. One validator recalled a Chicago visit:

**The program was in a neighborhood I would not ordinarily go to, in a not very impressive building. In sharp contrast with the look of neighborhood, inside was an amazingly good program that was an oasis for the children and their families in that community.**

As validators like this one shared positive reactions with their colleagues, attitudes began to change.

### The City's Commitment Wanes

The City's investment in the Partnership was big news when it was announced; the Partnership received calls from groups in other cities wanting to know how it had all happened. But renewing the City's commitment after 2004 proved to be impossible.

In the period preceding the City's decision not to refund after 2004, the Partnership did work hard to keep the momentum going. For example, one of its long-term funders, the F. B. Heron Foundation offered to arrange a meeting between the President of the foundation and the Mayor and his assistant for Education to plead the Partnership's case for continued public funding. In a further effort to build alliances that would advocate for maintaining public support for the Partnership, some of the organization's board and staff members met with early education leaders in the Chicago Public Schools and in the City Department of Children and Family Services. But according to at least one Board member, the Partnership did not have enough political clout to reverse its fortunes. "We needed," this person said, "as good relationships with City Hall as the ones we had with the communities." Staff turnover within the Mayor's Office complicated the situation.

A state leader also articulated a lesson from the experience:

**It was a bold move for a foundation to join with the City. The lesson is if a foundation is going to do this, the**

**commitments have to be more than handshakes and a paper agreement – they have to be deeper, policy and programmatic commitments [that can be]sustained over time.**

A Partnership board member speculated that the changed funding atmosphere had to do with considerations about how the City wanted to position quality improvement in the early childhood arena:

**Maybe the Mayor is trying to change the public side more directly [internally], rather than having a private group seem to be in charge of quality improvement.**

Meanwhile, whatever the reasons why public funding was evaporating, the level of private funding was not living up to the expectations. While the original plan had been to seek \$6 million in private funds to add to the City's contribution and the generous support of the MTF, only about \$2 million had been raised over several years by securing grants from additional foundations. These included the Irving Harris, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur,



F. B. Heron, Col. Stanley R. McNeil, Polk Bros., and Pritzker Cousins Foundations, and the United Way/Crusade of Mercy. Thus in 2004, the board and staff of the Partnership made a concerted effort, although ultimately one that had little success, to step up the organization's private fundraising, and they seriously began exploring using a fee-for-service system as a new option to keep the Partnership in business.

## The Partnership, 2005-2007: A Failed Struggle to Survive

Faced with the likely end of the City's commitment of support to the Partnership, the board focused more intensively on securing private dollars to continue. The Partnership's board had not been recruited as a fundraising board and this represented a shift in their focus. Three different fundraising consultants led a series of efforts to seek support from both philanthropic institutions and individual donors. But as noted, the new push was only moderately successful. The MTF remained a steadfast Partnership funder, but – as is often true for foundations that jump start major initiatives and eventually hope to leverage more diverse funding – grants were made on an annually

declining basis. Much of the rest of the private funding base that had been built during the preceding period began to erode, and while some new small grants from philanthropies other than the MTF were secured during this period, the amount of new resources was modest. One board member saw the difficulty against a backdrop of too much success:

**We had a strong balance sheet – so other funders said, “You don't need it, come back when you're out of money.”**

In fact, an examination of the Partnership's balance sheets for its years of operations through 2006 shows that the organization's expenditures exceeded its revenues. Two other board members expressed an awareness of this problem:

**Could we figure out a more efficient way to the same goal?**

**Maybe [we didn't] need such an elaborate office and board – people do need help and a helping hand, but maybe not so much as we provided.**

**Maybe the goal should have been to accomplish [the] mission at a reasonable price.**

But another observer had strong reservations about trying to minimize the kind of expenditures needed to secure quality care for young children (and perhaps by implication, the level of resources needed to mentor programs to help them build that kind of quality):

**We need to start telling the truth about what things really cost ...**

**It's not \$4,000 per child; it's the honest-to-God cost [of a program] with a BA teacher or an infant-toddler specialist; it's really \$15,000 per child [that we need].**

## Elusive Opportunities

The Partnership's vigorous efforts to find new funding options were complicated by flux in both the Illinois and Chicago early care and education systems during this period. Plans to create a separate City Department of Children and Youth Services, which would eventually consolidate management of the City's child care and Head Start programs, and changes in child care funding arrangements at the state level made it harder than it otherwise might have been for the Partnership to get the attention of public officials.

Meanwhile, as the Partnership sought new funding, the state's Preschool for All (PFA) program was expanding rapidly – and in theory the initiative had great potential for providing extra funds to help programs earn accreditation. But, as it turned out, the expansion was not particularly useful to the Partnership. One limitation was that the PFA legislation did not specifically allocate any resources to quality-improvement activities. Still, in areas of Illinois outside of Chicago, it



was (and still is) possible for a private organization like the Partnership to apply for PFA funds on behalf of a group of child care programs, and then to use most of the grant for the preschool services but to reserve some resources for guiding and supporting the programs' quality-improvement efforts.

In Chicago, however, the PFA managing agency, which is the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), does the program-support staff work in house, with its own staff. Absent a compelling argument that an outside group would have been much more efficient and knowledgeable than CPS itself, CPS had little reason to subcontract the PFA program-support function to the Partnership (or to any outside group, for that matter). In fact, despite some meetings with CPS, the Partnership had not built a relationship with the agency that was sufficiently strong to give it the kind of entrée needed for CPS to seriously consider the idea and CPS maintained it had no funding for such work.

During this period, the Partnership board and staff also explored the possibility that child care and other programs that were receiving infusions of PFA funds might be interested in paying the Partnership for program-support work on an individual basis – or that individual Head Start programs, which have some of their own resources for training, might be willing to make this arrangement. Following this lead, in 2006 the Partnership hired a marketing firm to field a survey to determine whether it would be feasible to adopt a fee-for-service model to support its work with programs.

The findings were sobering. While most of the programs that were surveyed had used consultants, two-thirds said that at the point when they answered the survey, they could not afford them. Moreover, only 25 percent of respondents were familiar with the Partnership.<sup>16</sup>

As the Partnership was exploring its further options, the state was designing a tiered reimbursement system for its subsidized programs – a system that calibrates subsidies based on programs reaching one of several levels, or tiers, of quality. At that point, it was not at all clear how the system, which did not begin operating until July 2007, would handle program-support functions. As it turns out, all technical assistance, training, and supports provided by the new Quality Counts initiative are offered through local child care resource and referral agencies (CCR&Rs) – for example, Action for Children in Chicago. The current design does not include financial support for other outside support organizations like the Partnership. Conceivably, that could change. According to one early childhood leader:

**Illinois is just now [2008] beginning to look at what kinds of assistance need to be available to support Quality Counts [beyond CCR&Rs].  
Bad timing. The Partnership might have adapted to that work.**

But for that option, or the PFA option, to have been viable for the Partnership during this period, the organization would have had to market itself as expert on quality improvement in general and on quality improvement as defined by Quality Counts and PFA, not only by NAEYC. This is especially so because for two reasons NAEYC accreditation was increasingly only one among several national measures of quality being used in Chicago: First, under the new state system for funding child care, Head Start programs that are in compliance with Head Start Performance Standards are treated equivalently to programs that are nationally accredited, reducing overall demand for NAEYC accreditation in the city. Second, while Quality Counts does recognize accreditation from NAEYC, it also accepts accreditation from two other national accrediting bodies for centers (those of NECPA, National Early Childhood Program Accreditation and NACCP, the National Association for Child Care Professionals).

### The Consequences of a Low Profile

As noted, the Partnership's marketing was not about itself; it was primarily about NAEYC accreditation (and quality improvement in general). That may have been sensible when NAEYC accreditation was the primary goal and measure of success for the Partnership. The approach was not as sensible when the environment changed.

Overall, the situation for child care programs in Chicago has brightened. As one center director describes it:

**When we first got accredited, we offered no benefits. Now we have paid personal days and vacation and health insurance. We did it all through subsidy rate increases, we now have a PFA classroom and we are partnering with Head Start. We always tried to do better but we needed the resources to do it.**

In other words, the new level of state investment in early education has been good for programs. But it has not been so good for the Partnership.

### A Fire Seals the End of the Partnership

Fire consumed the offices of the Partnership on Friday evening May 4, 2007. The event precipitated a decision that had been brewing for over a year: the Partnership stopped operations. With the help of a favorable settlement from its insurance company, the Partnership liquidated its remaining assets and distributed the assets to five Chicago organizations: Voices for Illinois Children, Chicago Commons Child Development Program, The Salvation Army Early Child Care Program, Children's Home and Aid Society and the Erikson Institute to establish an endowed scholarship, and then closed its books.

<sup>16</sup> Partnership for Quality Child Care, Market Analysis, November 2006.

## What Did the Partnership Accomplish?<sup>17</sup>

### In Chicago

There is widespread consensus that the Partnership realized its mission of getting many more Chicago programs accredited. The numbers tell the story: In its final report to the City, the Partnership cited 150 programs accredited or reaccredited, and said that in all it had been engaged with over 300 programs – the latter number being important because very likely a fair number of the programs that worked with the Partnership but did not go all the way to accreditation still learned a good deal about how to improve the quality of their services.

Numerous interviewees for this report cited other less quantifiable but significant Partnership accomplishments. Many spoke eloquently of the kind of collegial support the Partnership offered to programs. Interviewees praised the Partnership for mentoring a very diverse group of programs. They also noted the Partnership's particular focus on programs on low-income neighborhoods and on its willingness to work with smaller programs.

Several interviewees noted that the loss of the Partnership might have been a particular loss for smaller programs. It was noted that accredited programs that are part of large agencies can likely manage re-accreditation because they can draw on the agency's resources to carry out the process – and they can take advantage of the financial rewards, now available in Illinois, for accreditation through tiered reimbursement and Preschool for All. Without the Partnership, some interviewees suggested, the distance between these programs and their smaller peers may have widened.

### Beyond Chicago Illinois

Many observers credit the Partnership with helping to build momentum for the cause of ensuring the quality of early care and education in Illinois. As indicated by several state actions that have already been mentioned – the enactment of PFA, the new Quality Counts system for tiered reimbursement, the increase in subsidized reimbursement rates – in the 2000s, the climate surrounding early care and education in the state has clearly changed to more decisively favor quality. (Other signs of this shift are an expanded state professional development system for child care providers and new systems for quality improvement that are under development at the Illinois Early Learning Council.)

Of course, it is impossible to pinpoint the extent to which the Partnership, as compared to other institutions in the state's early care and education community, contributed to this new climate. At the same time, it would clearly be off the mark to overlook the value of the efforts that the Partnership made at a point when the state was not nearly as far along in promoting quality as it is

today. The observation of a state agency administrator touches on one kind of contribution that can be ascribed to the Partnership:

**I would credit the Partnership with promoting the value of accreditation when there was absolutely no reward except some recognition that you were making a better environment and better outcomes for children – no monetary reward. Work like that especially in the City of Chicago laid a lot of groundwork for what we are trying to do now in our Quality Rating System [through Quality Counts].**

### Other Accreditation Facilitation Projects

From the Partnership's earliest days, its leaders knew that their field was eager to learn more about accreditation facilitation: At the 1994 NAEYC conference, Jamilah Jor'Dan and Blakely Bundy attended the first-ever Accreditation Facilitators Networking Session. NAEYC planners expected a small group; in fact, the room was overflowing with more than 100 attendees. Besides signaling interest in facilitation, the meeting underscored the Chicago Metro AEYC Project's place in the AFP world. Bundy recalls looking around the room where the meeting was held and realizing, "We were the nation's biggest and most ambitious project, with the most funding. Amazing!"

In fact, the Partnership, with its broad scope and its groundbreaking work with big-city programs serving people of color, quickly developed expertise that was highly valued. NAEYC staff routinely referred people who wanted advice about how to operate their accreditation facilitation projects to Jor'Dan (and to Deborah Flis of the Connecticut Accreditation Project).

Through AFP networking sessions at NAEYC conferences and in direct conversations with programs, Jor'Dan mentored other AFPs, sharing information on practices like the Readiness Index that had been developed. Jor'Dan is also credited with advancing the discussion among AFPs on whether and how to support programs that have been deferred from accreditation.

The Partnership left a particularly strong mark on Seattle. After meeting Jor'Dan at an NAEYC conference, leaders of the City of Seattle's office of child development programs invited her to keynote a 2001 conference designed to explore the idea of promoting national accreditation in Seattle. Jor'Dan accepted, and her presentation gave local child care officials a clear and detailed picture of what kind of help providers needed to become accredited. Significantly, the event resulted in a financial commitment from the City and the Boeing Company to mount a pilot project modeled after the Partnership. According to one conference attendee, Jor'Dan inspired the group with the story

150 programs accredited  
or reaccredited ... over  
300 programs ... learned  
a good deal about how  
to improve the quality  
of their services.

<sup>17</sup> For the sake of simplicity, this concluding session usually refers to the "Partnership" in discussing not only its accomplishments but the accomplishments of its predecessor Chicago Metro AEYC Project.

of what had been done in Chicago and “invested us with the belief that we could do better.” Another participant said that Jor’Dan helped the group move away from the mindset that accreditation was not really a system for children of color:

**Jamilah helped us ... embrace the idea that NAEYC accreditation is the gold standard and every child deserves it.**

Once the pilot project was established, Jor’Dan continued to help it, offering it advice and developing materials tailored to its needs and interests. The pilot eventually grew into a citywide initiative with a \$1 million funding commitment from the United Way.

## Final Voices

For this report, which has drawn heavily on conversations with people who knew the Partnership, perhaps the best way to sum up its work is to offer readers the chance to hear a few more voices. Following are selected insights of board members, program director mentees, observers, and friends of the Partnership:

**The Partnership got lots of programs accredited – and showed it could be done.** – city leader

**First, the direct support of the centers and the activities, advice, counsel and resources it provided. It brought a level of professionalism and adequate resources to them, and recognition and support. Second, it raised the issues around early childhood development in low-income neighborhoods.** – Partnership board member

**[The Partnership] made a lot of us believe that we could be accredited.** – program director

**The Partnership never discriminated by size – no one was too small to help.** – program director

**[The Partnership] raised the visibility of the whole issue of accreditation and why families should look for the centers that have gone through the rigorous process of doing it.** – Partnership board member

**It was overwhelming how much change we could make – they [Partnership staff] were a blessing for us ... We got more support from them than anyone else we’ve ever worked with.** – program director

**The Partnership developed a base among African-American for-profit providers and engaged them in the early childhood education world that had been more traditionally the realm of the nonprofits. A lot of the programs the Partnership got accredited were new and that was very good.** – state early childhood education leader

**One of problems with child care [directors] is that we do what we do in a certain way and we are happy enough with it and we keep doing it that way. The idea of engaging in major program change – you think nothing’s wrong with us, we’re doing OK now, no need to change. So what [the Partnership] did was build a community of directors who supported each other in focusing on a new goal of program improvement.** – program director

**It’s not about the Partnership; it was a facilitator. It’s about the kids. National accreditation is a tough screen to pass in under-resourced and less-experienced centers. Improvements had to be quantum in those places. The centers were meeting those standards and became professional and improved their facilities – there is no question that children benefit.** – Partnership board member

**A final comment on the Partnership amplifies the theme of the last observation: Virtually all interviewees agreed that one of the Partnership’s important legacies is that it left many children better off than it found them, improving the chances that their early childhood experiences would contribute to their positive growth and development.**

– Partnership board member

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### Acknowledgements

*I was honored to be asked by the Board of Directors of the Partnership for Quality Child Care to write the story of the Partnership's work in Chicago and beyond. Sincere thanks are due to all of the individuals who graciously offered their time, perspectives and insights. This report benefited from expert editing by Susan Blank and effective design by Wayne Childers.*

— Anne Mitchell, August 2008

*The Partnership leaves many children better off than it found them – improving chances that their early childhood experiences will contribute to their positive growth and development.*



# Chicago's Partnership for Quality Child Care

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