

PLANNING AND RESPONSE FOR THE 2005 MAINE EARLY CHILDHOOD INITIATIVE FUTURE SEARCH

Dr. Richard Aronson (Richard.aronson@maine.gov)
Sheryl Peavey (Sheryl.peavey@maine.gov)

Planning early childhood systems change requires a deep and solid understanding of children and their development and a keen sense of business.ⁱ It demands the ability to use and apply current research linking local and national economicsⁱⁱ with early brain development,ⁱⁱⁱ recognize the importance of rich learning environments and opportunities for young children to develop meaningful relationships with care-giving adults^{iv}, and comprehend the value of connections among medical homes, educational homes, community homes and family homes for positive outcomes such as children's school readiness. It



The child of a participant provides a vision of his own

demands a broad based commitment to reducing disparities that occur as a result of class, gender, race, ethnicity, geographic status, and other factors. It demands the higher level of state-local, public-private collaboration as evidenced by the Community Access to Child Health (CATCH) Grant.

To help us broaden the public understanding of the Early Childhood Initiative and to strengthen the move toward system change, we took a bold step and included a Future Search Conference in the original Comprehensive Early Childhood Systems Grant in 2003. By the summer of 2004, we decided that we were ready, and went ahead to organize and hold a Future Search Conference not only to engage a larger spectrum of stakeholders but also to validate and build upon the work of the Task force on Early Childhood during the initial planning phase.

A Future Search Conference follows a task-focused two and a half day format, described by visionaries Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff.^v It enables a group of 60 – 80 stakeholders to explore their past, present, and future; tell their stories; confirm their mutual values; and commit to action for a common vision grounded in reality. Every person participates and shares leadership throughout the conference and beyond. Every participant is considered an expert, and there are no “guest speakers”.

We came to realize that planning for such a unique event is in itself a form of systems change due to the uniqueness of Future Search and the need for the planning group to understand and commit to it. Future Search follows a prescribed methodology to help ensure success, including identifying a location with natural light (not a hotel dungeon), selecting a diversity of stakeholder groups to assure that the whole system is in the room, sending invitations that clearly state the requirement to participate for all three days, and finalizing the participant list.

An unanticipated challenge for the Coordinator and the Planning Team was the incredibly overwhelming response from people throughout the state who had heard about the conference and wanted to be involved. We had the unpleasant task of culling the list of participants based on our stakeholder groupings and maximum conference size. However, we have also been able to capitalize on the interest in the Early Childhood Initiative that this highly visible event generated and have welcomed more people into the work of the Task Force.



Dr. Richard Aronson helps open the event

Our Future Search Conference goal was to discover our common ground for the future of Maine's children and to determine and initiate action for creating that future. For this Future Search, we built upon the work of the Task Force on Early Childhood, chaired by First Lady Karen Baldacci. Prior to the event, we shared the set of priorities recommended by the Task Force for our state plan to ensure that Maine

has humane and family-centered systems and policies to support all of our families and communities. Our work at the Future Search was not to duplicate the valuable activity that had gone on during the first phase of planning, but to instead use this work as a springboard for future actions and commitments.

From this Future Search, we sought to create and strengthen partnerships across departments, programs, systems and other boundaries; develop new strategies and forms of collaboration; create cross-cultural visions and develop and start action plans with dog-eared pages from actual use; and to obtain a long-term commitment to dignifying and humanizing the life of our statewide community. In planning for this event, we agreed that the participants would represent the following stakeholder groups:



- Parents/Guardians/Family Members.
- Children and Youth.
- State/Local/Federal Government (including Public Safety).
- Investors (Business, Philanthropy, Health Insurance).
- Education (Primary -Graduate).
- Early Childhood Education Providers and Support System.
- Health Care Providers from all Sectors.
- Community organizations, leaders, clergy, and advocates.

The facilitators we chose to guide the conference, Donna Singer and Cynthia Bryant Pitts, have extensive experience and a strong commitment to the Future Search process. Their role in the conference was to guide the stakeholder groups in mixed and homogenous work sessions through the Future Search methodology. We made every effort to support full stakeholder participation. The following summarizes the event.



Day One of Maine's Early Childhood Initiative Future Search, January 2005

Focus on the Past

Participants constructed life-size time lines of key events in the world, their own lives, and in the history of children's issues in Maine. Small groups reflected and told stories about each time line and the implications of their stories for the work they have come to do. During that time, the larger group discovered that only one third of the participants are "native Mainers."



Participants construct timelines of their personal histories



Dialogue and reflection on our global history

All of the participants agreed that they were "committed people with a wealth of life experience, open minded, diverse, willing to take risks, open to change, have a common thread of courage, honesty and willingness to leave past behind and move forward with new ideas."^{vi}



Summarizing the Focus on the Past

Focus on Present, External Trends

The whole group made a "mind map" of trends affecting them now and identified those trends most important for the concept of the conference, Building a Future for the Children of Maine.

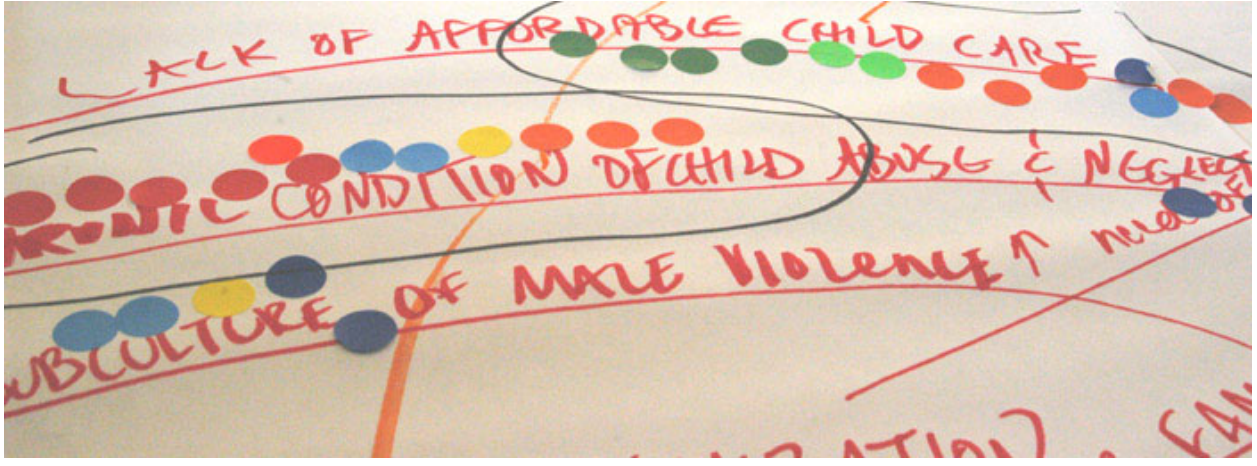
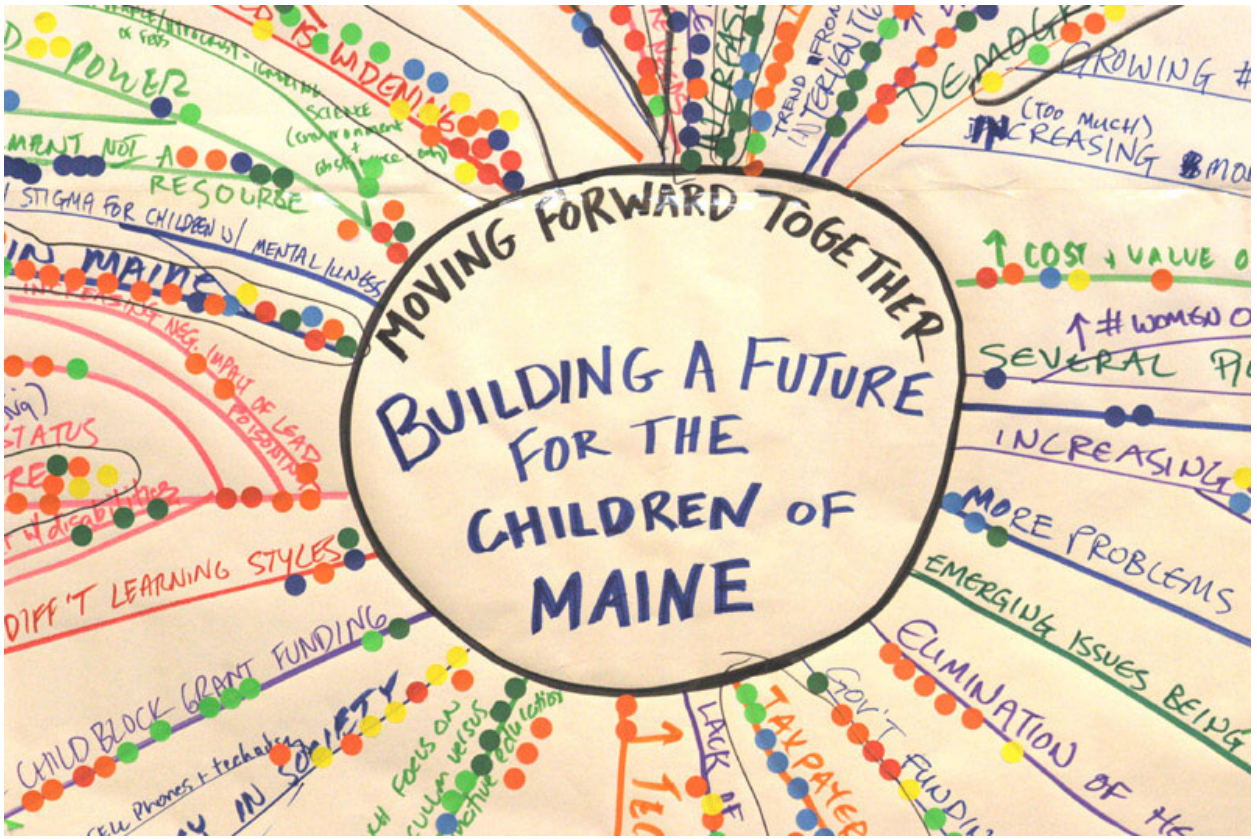


Facilitator Donna Singer guides the group to Focus on the Present with our "mind map" entitled: Maine's Future Search—Building a Future for the Children of Maine

The non-partisan documenter noted at that time:
"The group is initially crowded at the wall, then they elect to spread out, back to their tables, but nearly everyone in the room, whether seated or standing, remains engaged in the group task. It is clear from the level of interest and participation that this group of people loves their state."^{vii}

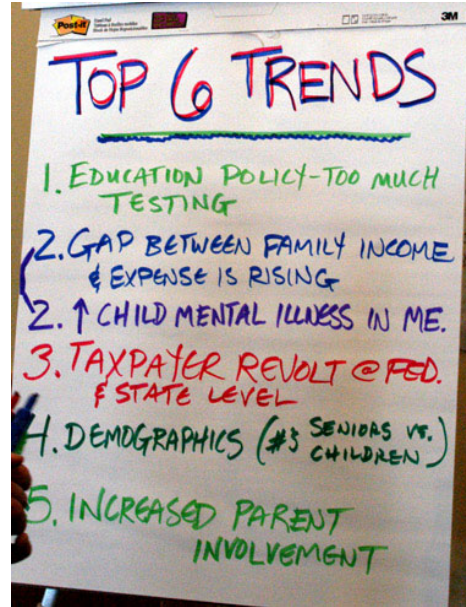


Working through the mind map exercise



The most prevalent trends in Maine affecting children as noted on the mind map were:

1. Education policy – too much testing
2. Gap between family income and cost of living
3. Increased child mental illness in Maine
4. Taxpayer revolt at federal and state levels
5. Demographics (seniors. vs. children)
6. Increased parent involvement



Focus on the Future:

“The combination of that frustration and the intensity of the stories I heard left me in tears and threw me off all afternoon. I was in despair about the fact that we as parents wanted so desperately to be heard but didn’t know how to coalesce our beliefs about what was really important to us. This is so telling of what parents face statewide. If in a small group of nine people we can’t figure it out, how can parents statewide find a common voice?”

Parent Stakeholder at Maine’s Future Search, January 2005.



Ideal Future Scenarios

Mixed groups of stakeholders put themselves into the future and described it as if it had already been accomplished. The creativity and levity of this activity helped forge many connections and a spirit of hope among the participants.



The now-famous Maine Future Search
"Hokey Pokey"



Identify Common Ground

Diverse groups posted themes they believe are common ground for everyone. Interestingly, only eight people in room are parents of a preschool child. That figure constitutes 10% of the future search participants; 6% of the people in Maine are parents of preschool children.



Confirm Common Ground and Action Planning

During this activity, the entire group dialogued to agree on common ground. The mood in the room during the reality dialogue was tense, as people expressed impatience and a desire to just get to action. Participants showed very different levels of comfort with the future search process and with the disagreement in the room. However, true to Future Search form, the group worked through the difficulties and found their way into action planning groups where they managed to create thorough and prolific plans for how to proceed.



Developing action plans to change the future



Setting the agenda to get the work done



Saturday morning the group went through all "four rooms"



Conferring with facilitators Cynthia Bryant-Pitts and Donna Singer during a moment of tense group dynamics

In the end, while there was frustration and confusion about duplicating work, there was also tremendous enthusiasm and commitment among non-traditional partners to effect viable systems change for Maine's children and families.

What Happened Next

In response, the Early Childhood Initiative developed a "pocket guide" to the Task Force immediately following the Future Search. It clarified the change initiative tool, including the shifts from the planning phase workgroups to include the focus categories from Future Search. Still, its overall approach remained very much the same:

- To unite, simplify, and humanize the systems and policies affecting children and families.
- To change funding streams so that they are most likely to have a positive effect on the health and safety of children and families.
- To develop simple, clear, non-bureaucratic, and common language that will strengthen the communication and message consistency that are vital to our system changes.

- To integrate oral, medical, social and emotional health, child care, and educational systems at the community and state levels.
- To change the culture so that our actions reflect a powerful commitment to prevention in the prenatal, infant, and early childhood stages of the life cycle as an essential social and economic investment in Maine's future.
- To strengthen quality child care so that it optimizes children's curiosity and readiness for school, the ability of families to work productively, and the capacity of the state to achieve its economic development goals.
- To involve families and communities from start to finish in such an effort.

The five SECCS core components have survived the various shifts and refinements to the direction of Maine's State Plan for Humane Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems. The matrix below looks more closely at the Task Force structure and the relationships of the post-Future Search action teams to the workgroups of our planning phase. Thinking in a child-centric ecological model, we have also noted the primary resources that will be affected by the changes recommended and implemented by each action team.

Action Team	Assisting Parents	Universal Access to Quality Health Care	Early Care and Education	Community-Based Resource Center	Invest in Young Children
Resource to the Child	Parent/ Family/ Caregivers	Health and Mental Health Providers	Early Care and Education Providers	Local Services Distribution System	Financial Support System & Marketing Benefits
Home(s)	Family	Medical	Educational	Local Community	Statewide Community

ⁱ Helburn, S.W. and Howes, C. (1996). Child Care Cost and Quality in *The Future of Children* (Summer/Fall 1996) Volume 6, No.2. p. 64.

ⁱⁱ Karoly, LA; Greenwood, PW; Everingham, SS; Hoube', J.; Kilburn, MR; Rydell, CP; Sanders, M.; & Chiesa, J. (1998). *Investing in Our Children: What We Know and Don't Know About the Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND. p. 98.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lally, J.R. (September 2003). Infant-Toddler Child Care in the United States: Where Has It Been? Where Is It Now? Where is it Going? *Zero To Three*, Volume 24, No. 1, p. 33.

^{iv} Shonkoff, J. P. and Phillips, D.A., Eds. (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhood: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, p. 223.

^v Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities", Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2000

^{vi} Participant comment as told to documenter Deborah McSmith, January 6, 2005, Maine.

^{vii} Personal observation of Deborah McSmith, Maine Future Search Documenter, Jan. 7, 2005.