

EVALUATION of STRONGSTART BC

School-based (Preschool) Family Drop-in Centres



Human Early
Learning Partnership
(HELP)



Ministry of Education, Province of British Columbia

StrongStartBC

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Acknowledgments

Greetings from HELP (Human Early Learning Partnership)

I want to express my appreciation for the work of the ECE and school professionals who have clearly put so much effort into creating this new and innovative program in BC schools. HELP is pleased to be assisting in the documentation and evaluation process for StrongStart BC. Young children and families in our province will benefit from the many different efforts that are being made to support them. Congratulations on your promising work; we look forward to being a continuing part of it.

Clyde Hertzman
Director, HELP

The Research Team wishes to acknowledge and thank:

- The Advisory Committee for its time and wisdom;
- The school districts and their communities for the warm welcome and cooperation in preparation for and during the visits; and
- The Ministry of Education for being a cooperative partner throughout the evaluation process.

Janet N. Mort
Team Leader, StrongStart Evaluation
HELP (Human Early Learning Partnership)

Section 1

WHAT IS STRONGSTART BC?

StrongStart BC is a school-based centre for families or caregivers and their preschool children, at no cost to families. The centres are designed to fill a community need and be located near other services for families of young children such as childcare or parent-resource centres in school-based hubs. StrongStart centres are intended to fill an early learning niche for preschool children who are not in childcare. Parents or caregivers who are responsible for children under age five during the day are able to attend a StrongStart centre in their local school. It is proposed that both children and caregivers will benefit from the activities at the StrongStart centre.

The Ministry of Education and school districts now have an opportunity to increase early learning programs available to families and their preschool children. Along with the Ministry of Children and Family Development and their community agencies, schools can play a greater role in realizing the vision for early learning: a greater proportion of children will enter school with optimal health and development, ready to be successful in kindergarten. (Ministry of Education Contribution Agreement, 2006)

The Objectives of StrongStart BC Centres

- To promote language and the physical and social/emotional development of young children
- To provide opportunities for parents/caregivers to observe and practise effective strategies to encourage early learning; ideally have an outreach component for the hard-to-serve families
- To be established in schools offering kindergarten
- To be staffed with at least one certified Early Childhood educator, trained to work with young children
- To be inclusive environments that welcome all preschool children in the

neighbourhood five mornings per week, together with their parents/caregivers (emphasis is on 3 to 5 year olds) for regular activities

- To be designed in collaboration with the community to meet the needs of the neighbourhood
- To be linked to services offered by health authorities, community agencies and other social service providers (e.g., early screening, libraries, parent resource centres, childcare resource and referral services, referrals for children who may have developmental or other special needs)
- To provide opportunities for service providers to connect with parents/caregivers and children and provide them with information and services; e.g., public health, libraries, ESL, literacy
- To be family-friendly environments where parents/caregivers can make connections
- To be free of charge for parents/caregivers attending with their preschool children

“StrongStart BC is different. We are coming together as partners over the safety, well-being, education and health of our children.” (Surrey, Staff)

Activities at StrongStart Centres

- Organized activities such as story time, music, singing
- Access to books, art and crafts materials, and puzzles
- Play areas that promote creativity, exploratory individual and group play (water, sand, clay)
- Movement and large-muscle activities
- Snack time, with food that models healthy eating
- Possible outings in the community, e.g., to the beach, the park, the swimming pool, the library

(Ministry of Education Contribution Agreement, 2006).

Section 2

BACKGROUND OF STRONGSTART BC EVALUATION PROCESS

In the fall of 2006, the Ministry of Education BC announced the implementation of up to 16 StrongStart BC Pilot Sites in schools in British Columbia as drop-in centres for local parents and children. The Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) was asked to evaluate the sites that were to be opened between September 2006 and January 2007. After some consideration, it was decided that because the pilot sites were in twelve districts, it would be useful to begin the evaluation process with a documentation stage. The documentation stage was to consist of teams from HELP visiting the sites to document the environmental circumstances at each site, to be completed by September 2007. They would then determine which evaluation processes were most appropriate for Stage 2. Stage 2 would be implemented in 2008 and completed by September 2009.

Janet Mort PhD, a HELP staff member from the University of Victoria was selected to lead the team of expert researchers to design the process for documentation, and to lead team visits to the sites. Jane Bertrand of George Brown College was invited to be the expert Early Childhood Development (ECD) advisor.

The documentation process was guided by the expectations described in the contribution agreement between the Ministry of Education and school boards. The contribution agreement was in place before the opening of each StrongStart BC centre.

“Some parents tell us that they are getting things they never got as children. They are learning how to play themselves with new resources that they had never experienced before—particularly our refugee families.” (Surrey, Staff)

HELP StrongStart BC Advisory Committee

HELP struck an advisory committee consisting of staff from the University of Victoria and UBC to assist in the planning process for Stage 1. The advisory committee first met in April 2007, before the site visits, to advise the team leader on how to proceed with the documentation process. Subsequently, the advisory committee was to provide guidance for Stage 2 when presented with the report Stage 1: Documentation.

“We found four young children who never left their apartment so we invited mom to bring them. They are regular attendees now and all of them are thriving. The older one is quiet and withdrawn but the other three are coming out of their shell.” (Burnaby, Staff)

The advisory committee met again in July 2007 to consider the report on Stage 1 and suggest how to proceed with Stage 2: Evaluation. At the close of the advisory committee meeting on July 5th 2007, a formal decision was made to proceed with Stage 2 of the evaluation under the guidance of HELP and the primary investigator, Dr. Clyde Hertzman. The StrongStart BC advisory committee was asked to continue in an advisory capacity. Janet Mort was again designated as the team leader; Jane Bertrand, Judith Evans and Jane Beach (research team members) were invited to continue with the evaluation process.



StrongStart BC advisory committee membership:

Jane Bertrand - ECD Expert, George Brown College, Toronto

Lily Dyson - Professor, UBC

Laurie Ford - Associate Professor, UBC

Hillel Goelman - Senior Scholar, UBC

Clyde Hertzman - Director of HELP, UBC

Cathy Matthews - CECD, BC Council for ECD

Janet Mort - Team Leader, UVictoria

Alison Preece - Associate Professor, UVictoria

Kimberly Schonert-Reichl - Associate Professor, UBC

Jacqueline Smit Alex - Managing Director, HELP, UBC

Anat Zaidman-Zait - Post-doctorate Fellow, UBC

The research team and guests from the Ministry of Education attended the meetings.

program because it was drop-in and offered for a short time per day. The team was asked to examine the numbers and frequency of parents and children attending the program to establish which evaluation strategies would be most useful.

"The biggest benefit to me is seeing my children involved in better behaviours. In the refugee camp, it was just wild—every person looking out for themselves."
(Burnaby, Parent)

Staff, School and School District Circumstances

The advisory committee asked the team to examine the environment in which each program took place. In particular, the team was asked to note the job description of the facilitator at each site and the qualifications of the facilitator. They were to investigate the relationship between the facilitator, school staff and other community agencies. Leadership issues were to be explored, particularly the line of authority between the facilitator, the school and the school district. The team was to ask how the school district decided where to locate each StrongStart BC site. StrongStart BC site.

"What has changed for my child? She is now speaking in full sentences at age three. She used to cling to me but now she doesn't care where I am in the room; there is no separation anxiety. She is too busy with the other children."
(Surrey, Parent)



Committee:

Stage 1—Documentation

General

The advisory committee requested that the research teams identify the nature of the sites, looking for differences in quality, findings of variability and varying degrees of success. In addition, the research team was advised to examine implementation issues, any early warning signs of problematic issues, the way that different sites deal with issues, the scope of the budget, and whether the budget is adequate to open a centre.

Program

The research team was asked to examine the type of program offered at each site. There was some concern that the Ministry's expectations were lacking in sufficient detail to provide a consistently high quality program throughout the province. The advisory committee asked the research team to provide a description of the program at each site and be prepared to compare the programs. Of particular interest was the degree of exposure parents and children would have to the

Parents and Children

The advisory committee asked the team to examine the usage patterns, including the frequency of use, reasons why families did not use the program more frequently, and any barriers that might limit access for families. The advisory committee requested that the team meet with parents and children (where possible) to survey how they felt about the program, their experience at the site, and their views on the value of the experience for their family.

Community

The advisory committee had particular questions about the reception of the StrongStart BC site in the community context (a) whether the program was integrated with other services already provided in the community; and (b) whether it was seen as redundant or competing with other agency services. The committee asked the research team to explore the degree to which the program was integrated with other services both in the school and outside the school, including other Early Child Development (ECD) services in the area.

“What do I like as a parent? Meeting the other parents and talking to them about our similar problems. We have our own preschool library. We are learning new activities every day that we can do at home with our children. Why didn’t this happen sooner?” (Surrey, Parent)

Documentation: Leading to Evaluation

It should be emphasized that the documentation process was to be a stage of inquiry. The advisory committee believed that once it had the answers to the research questions, it would be in a better position to advise on the evaluation process for Stage 2.

“They referred my child to speech therapy because he was having problems with his speech and was very shy and wouldn’t answer anyone. Now he is much more social and talks to people voluntarily. This makes me feel like I am a good mom. Some days I feel like super mom. I am not stuck at home. I meet friends, I practise my English and I am learning to discover why my child needs to learn to work with things that I don’t have at home. I am learning to use things like egg cartons to sort items at home. We sing songs that we learned together at school. She teaches me the words. At first, she just played but now she is reading. At dinnertime, she knows how to eat because they taught her the rituals of eating. (Burnaby, Parent)”



Location of and Visits to the Sites

Twelve sites in 12 different school districts were chosen by the Ministry of Education for Stage 1 of the process.

School and District	Date of Visit (2007)
Edmonds Elementary, Burnaby	April 30th / May 1st
Spruceland Elementary, Prince George	May 7th / May 8th
Riverview and Roy Stibbs Elementary, Coquitlam	May 15th / May 16th
Okanagan Falls Elementary, Okanagan Falls	May 17th / May 18th
Win West Heights Elementary, Mission	May 22nd / May 23rd
Mountain View Elementary, Revelstoke	May 22nd / May 23rd
John Todd Elementary, Kamloops	May 24th / May 25th
Conrad Elementary, Prince Rupert	May 24th / May 25th
Riverview Elementary, Quesnel	May 28th / May 29th
Glacier View Elementary, Comox	June 4th / June 5th
Ucluelet Elementary, Alberni	June 6th / June 7th
Bridgeview Elementary, Surrey	June 11th / June 12th

What has changed at home for me? We read more often. My child picks out books himself, comes to me and wants me to read to him. He talks about the other children all the time. He sings the songs he has learned, around the house. I used to feel isolated but now I feel really comfortable and look forward to StrongStart. He used to look out of the window at the other kids but now he just says, "Mommy, I want to go to school." There are no other things in the community that I can afford. "We are free from everything when we come here." (Surrey, Parent)

Section 3

METHODOLOGY FOR DOCUMENTATION

Purpose and Timelines

Case study methodology was selected as that most closely matching the purpose of Stage 1—inquiring into and documenting the environmental circumstances of each site. It was anticipated that each site would have its own identity so it was decided to study the 12 sites individually in a non-cross-sectional way. Ethics approval from UBC was received on April 30th, 2007. The 12 StrongStart BC sites were visited between April 30th and June 12th. Each site was visited for two working days.

Methods

Before the visit, sites were sent a list of requested documentation. It was suggested that sites organize the documentation into binders under the following five headings:

1. Record of family and child attendance
2. Program and policy documentation
3. Human resources policies and procedures
4. Evidence of parent/caregiver communication
5. Community relations and linkages

Sites were invited to incorporate any other information that might be useful such as photos, scrapbooks, samples of student activities and schedules. Consent forms and interview questions (as approved by the ethics committee) were sent to the sites before the visit.

Questions Used in Interviews and Focus Groups

Questions for parents (or caregivers)

- How did you hear about the program?
- How frequently do you attend with your child? Would you like to attend more frequently?
- What makes it possible for you to attend?

What keeps you from attending?

- Have you and/or your child benefited from the program? If so, how?
- What are your (your child's) favourite activities?
- What is the most important skill you (and your child) have learned?
- Please describe any changes you have seen in your child developmentally—socially, emotionally, language-related, physically or others.
- Has attending the program changed how you are or what you do with your child at home? Explain.
- Has your view of the school changed? If so, how?
- What is your greatest criticism of the program?
- What is your highest praise for the program?
- If the program could be enhanced, what would you recommend?

I see huge changes in my child—her experience in group settings, a reduction in conflict, learning her letters, her ability to pay attention and sit for longer periods of time. (Kamloops, Parent)



Questions for school district staff

- Do you have a collection of documents for us? Will you review them with us?
- How was your school chosen?
- Describe the start-up issues you encountered.
- Describe what the program offers and how it works. Is there any integration with other programs?
- Are any interagency services co-located with StrongStart? Please describe.
- How have local ECE groups responded to the program? Have they been involved?
- How have you marketed the program to the community? Please share examples.
- Who attends the program? Please review your records of attendance with us.
- What benefits have accrued to children and families; to the school; to the community?
- Do you have any evidence of benefits?
- What have been the biggest roadblocks to a successful program?
- What have been the biggest successes? In your opinion is this a positive move over all? Why or why not?

- Can you describe what you think a successful StrongStart program would look like?
- What do you see as the challenges facing StrongStart?
- How well do you think your community supports young children and their families?
- What do you think are the most important abilities and skills for the StrongStart facilitator to have?

Site Visits: Interviews, Focus Groups, Observations

Representatives at each site were asked to schedule interviews, focus groups and observations in the program with the following types of representative groups:

*The facilitator stresses planting the seeds, learning to play and explore and figure things out and problem-solve—she is a teacher and a psychologist.
(Kamloops, Parent)*

- The site coordinator
- The school district contact(s)
- The ECD facilitator(s)
- The school principal(s)
- A district office administrator(s)
- Coalition and steering committee members
- Kindergarten teachers in the StrongStart BC sites schools
- The PAC president
- Volunteers
- Child Care Resource and Referral (CCRR) representatives
- Local ECE owners and/or operators
- Key interagency representatives

Questions for community members

- What is your involvement with the StrongStart program in your community?
- How does StrongStart in your community relate to other early childhood programs in the community?
- How do families with young children find out about StrongStart?
- Can you identify if, and how, StrongStart is meeting some of the needs of families with young children in your community?

The team typically engaged with two to fifteen parents in the focus groups. A general invitation was provided to parents and the team accepted all parents who attended the focus group. At times, the team received requests for interviews and accepted all requests even from those who had not been scheduled. When necessary, translators were provided to assist with interpretation at the interviews and focus group meetings. The documentation that had been collected before the visit was discussed with multiple respondents at each site to find explanations and any information that was necessary.

Daily Team Debrief

At the end of each day, the research team documented their impressions under the following headings:

1. The context particular to each site: the hours of operation, a description of the space, a description of the budget and equipment.
2. Human resources: the contractual arrangements with the facilitator, the remuneration, hours of operation, preparation time and career background.
3. Program: the schedule of the program; highlights in the schedule; and learning activities.
4. Highlights: anything about the site that was worthy of note.
5. Impact/benefits: the viewpoints of the parents, focus groups and other representatives of the school or community.
6. Issues/barriers: based on Hertzman's (2006) list of potential lists and barriers, an identification of the barriers that remain or efforts to eliminate barriers.
7. Lessons learned: any lessons that could be learned and applied to other sites.

8. Suggestions for the evaluation stage: In each interview, the research team asked staff members and parents about their ideas on what could be evaluated at their site.

*What has changed at home? We redesigned the playroom. We have grouped toys together, organized containers and labelled everything. We have incorporated activities from StrongStart into the playroom. We bought some of the same educational toys. We have learned the importance of structure. My husband and I take turns going. My husband notices things that the facilitator does and takes them seriously at home. We talk about it. It's awesome.
(Comox Valley, Parent)*



Section 4

FINDINGS FROM DATA AND DOCUMENTATION

The sites collected attendance records in various formats and using different information. While the team was able to review complete records of attendance over time, the type of information was inconsistent from site to site. For Stage 2, sites will be asked to collect consistent data in standard ways including attendance of children by age, frequency, cultural origin and attendance of adults by caregiver (e.g., mother, father, and grandparent), cultural origin and language spoken at home.

What do I see as the biggest benefit as a parent? Well, two things. There is no cost. We can't afford to pay for activities for our kids.

Second, I am learning so much. The facilitator sings her welcome song in many different languages. I feel so good when I hear her sing "welcome" in Punjabi. (Quesnel, Parent)



SS StrongStart BC

SES Socio-economic Status

EDI Early Development Instrument

Location	Context
Burnaby, Edmonds Elementary School	Cultural identity: high immigrant population - 15 languages are represented, resulting in some difficulties in communication SES: low EDI vulnerability: highest in the school district Other: the district hosts eight family centres as well as the SS Centre
Courtenay, Glacier View Elementary School	Cultural identity: mixed SES: low EDI vulnerability: high Other: many new services including SS because of EDI
Coquitlam, Riverview and Roy Stibbs Elementary Schools	Cultural identity: Riverview - affluent immigrant population; Roy Stibbs - mixed SES: Riverview - high; Roy Stibbs - low EDI vulnerability: Riverview - high; Roy Stibbs - low Other: Riverview hosts a child-care centre on site
Kamloops, John Todd Elementary School	Cultural identity: mixed - 50% Aboriginal SES: low SES and highly transient population EDI vulnerability: high Other: co-located with preschool; gymnasium use every day
Okanagan, OK Falls Elementary School	Cultural identity: homogeneous Caucasian SES: low EDI vulnerability: moderate Unique: co-located with licensed childcare program; shared gymnasium with Parks and Recreation

Mission, Win West Heights School	Cultural identity: mixed - 26% Indo-Canadian, 16% Aboriginal SES: low EDI vulnerability: high Unique: the recently built school is a HUB with a variety of services and programs	Alberni, Ucluelet Elementary School	Cultural identity: 30% Aboriginal SES: low EDI vulnerability: high Unique: preschool on the reserve but so far little Aboriginal connection - staff are working on it. The facilitator was a high school teaching assistant and has taken a leave from the union to serve as facilitator
Prince George, Spruceland Elementary School	Cultural identity: high Aboriginal and immigrant populations SES: low; highly transient population EDI vulnerability: high Unique: attendees come from across the city		
Prince Rupert, Conrad Elemen- tary School	Cultural identity: 77% Aboriginal SES: low EDI vulnerability: high Unique: full-day kindergarten for all		
Quesnel, Riverview Elementary School	Cultural identity: 40% Aboriginal SES: low EDI vulnerability: highest in district Unique: new facility; slow, cautious start		<p><i>What do I like about StrongStart as a parent? I like the structure and the routine that everybody has down pat. We all tidy up together. It is our place and we share it. Our kids feel like part of the community and part of the school. We stick our noses into kindergarten and we can feel that it is a nice school. We are invited to all school events. There is no anxiety about coming here any more. I can also come with the different ages of my children and we are all welcome. We work out the age differences together. We have to watch out not to step on the babies! (Quesnel, Parent)</i></p>
Revelstoke, Mountain View E l e m e n t a r y School	Cultural identity: mixed SES: moderate EDI vulnerability: moderate Unique: additional programs - co-located Babysteps and preschool underway		
Surrey, Bridgeview Elementary School	Cultural identity: high immigrant population SES: low EDI vulnerability: high Unique: school contracted with City of Surrey, Parks and Recreation Department to provide instructor and program; enthusiasm of principal a factor in choice of school; working on an intense community-development process		

Samples of Linkages and interconnectedness

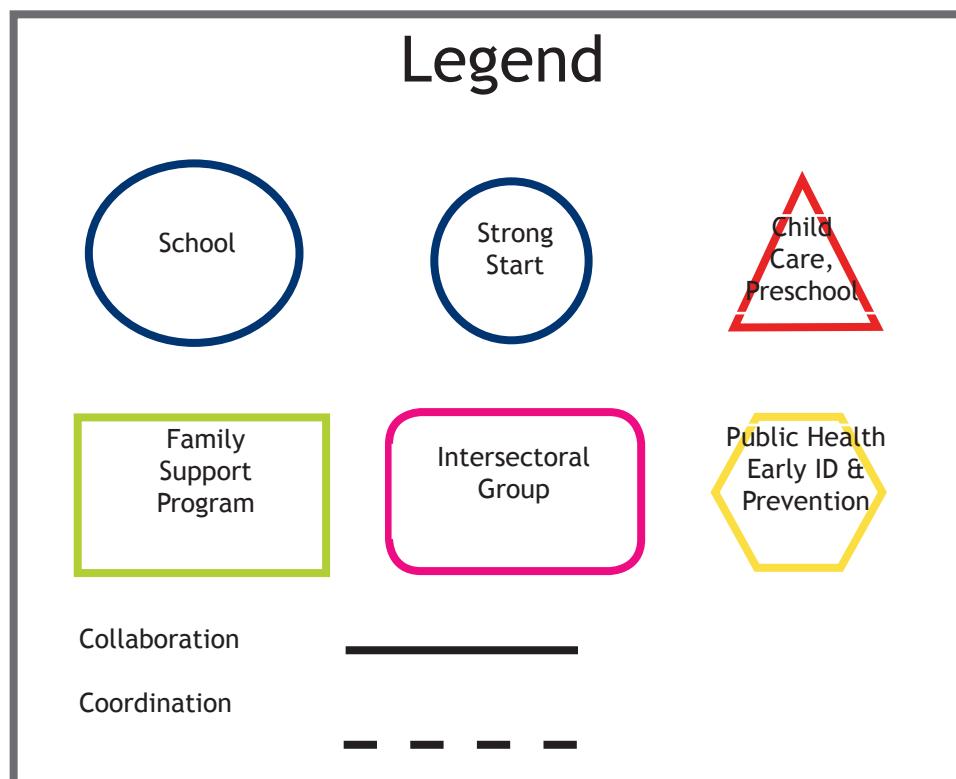
Research studies have been clear that when services to young children and their families are integrated, they are more effective. The Ministry of Education had asked districts to co-locate other services with their sites and connect with community agencies where possible. It was important, therefore, that the team examine the interconnectedness of StrongStart BC centres between other services (a) in school-district-related programs; and (b) other services in the community. The research team interviewed many people at each site, including members of local intersectoral coalitions, in order to establish an understanding of these interconnections. (*Intersectoral coalitions are groups of interagency teams that meet to enhance coordinated services in communities.*)

The following charts provide examples of developing and well-established interconnections in communities. Most centres had only been established in the previous six months so some centres were just beginning to establish connections whereas others had established close ties with schools and the community. The following legend and diagrams provide examples of the types of interconnectedness noted by the research team that will be examined in Stage 2.

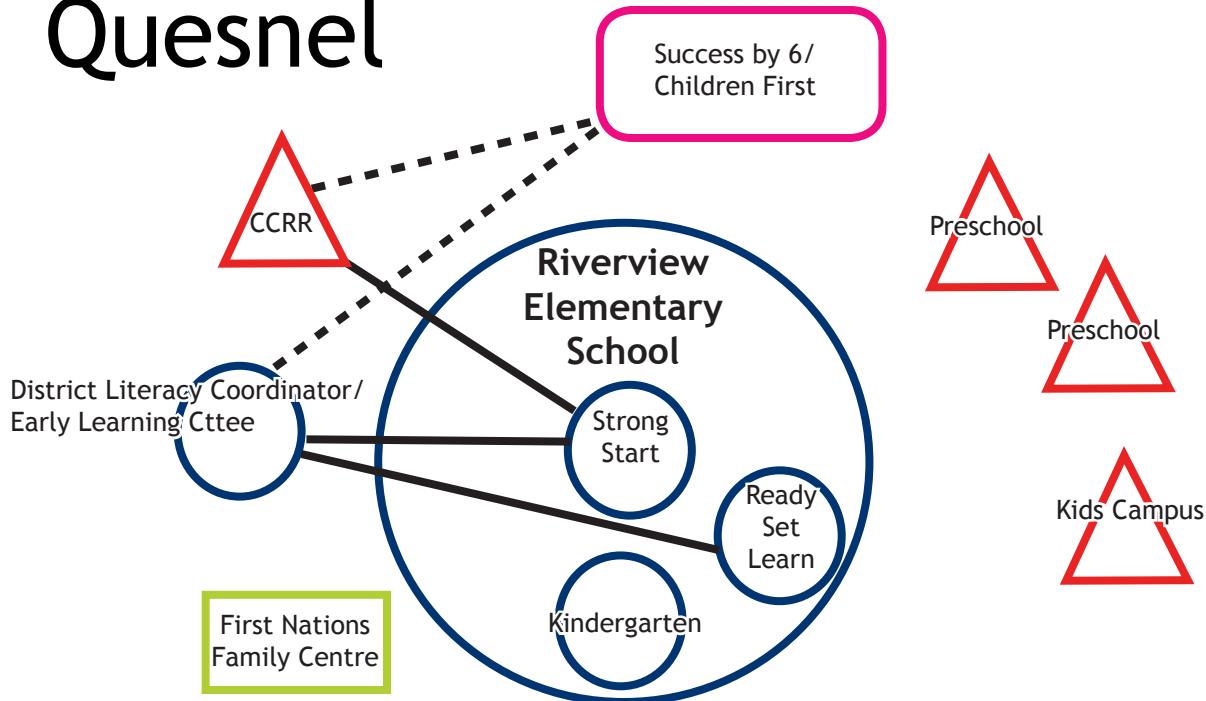
Legend for charts

The dotted line signifies that connections are beginning to develop; service providers are beginning to communicate and plan together. Some of these interconnections were in place before StrongStart BC while others have evolved because of SS implementation.

The solid line signifies where services are collaborating, sharing resources, planning together and interdependent. The research team expects to see further collaboration in charts developed after Stage 2 as the relationships mature.



Quesnel



Quesnel Interconnections

Note: Quesnel was one of the last districts to implement the StrongStart BC program. They decided to begin cautiously to avoid overcrowding and ensure systematic success. Interconnections are, for the most part, in the early stages.

My child is learning to get along with others, respect rules and instructions, be more curious and independent, learning self-control—how to sit and listen in a group, how to be compassionate when others have feelings. She's listening and using English in response, learning imaginative play and how to communicate her needs. She can print her name now.
(Quesnel, Parent)

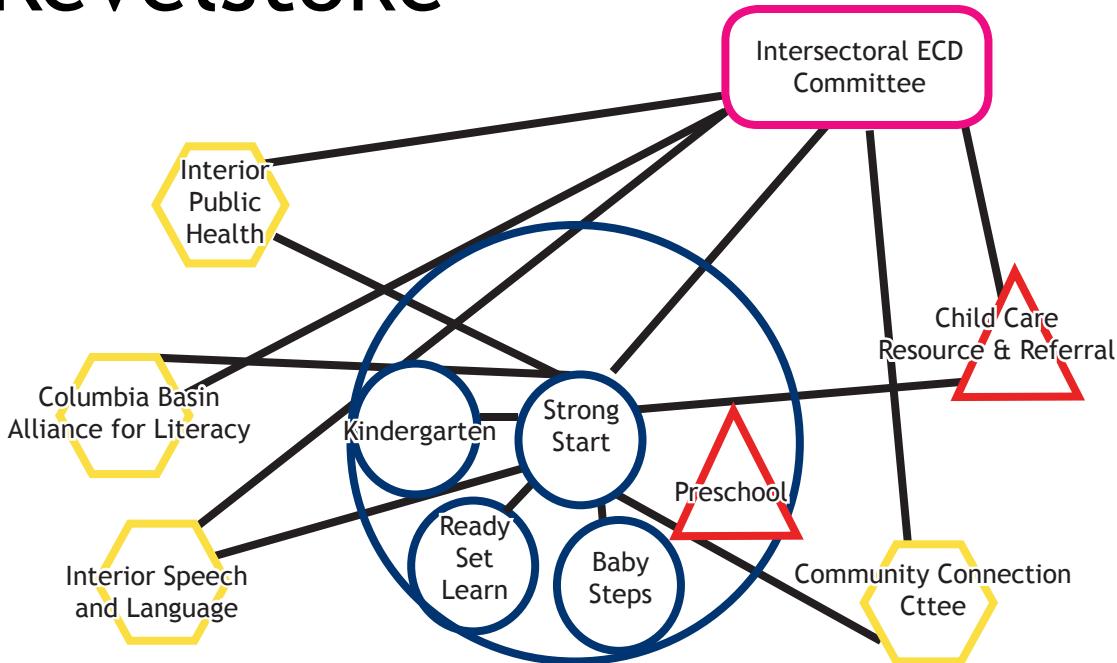


What benefits have I seen in my child? The interaction with the other children, the ability to get up in the morning and get ready for school; helping with other children, especially young children. It opens up the quiet kids. My child's vocabulary has really jumped. I have met other parents and children that we see outside the school now, developing a sense of community. We are learning, playing and enjoying each other but also thinking of the future. (Quesnel, Parent)

Mission Interconnections

Note: The Mission site has evolved as a “hub” where numerous services are offered in a school facility. This type of structure is considered ideal by many; the team found that other groups, sometimes because of lack of space, had designed equally effective means to link the school services to external agencies.

Revelstoke



Revelstoke Interconnections

Note: Revelstoke had begun intensive work with its intersectoral coalition several years before the introduction of StrongStart but connections have now been enhanced. For example:

- The public health nurse visits the program regularly to meet informally with potential clients;
- The CCRR provides staff to assist Strong Start when necessary, including a substitute teacher when the facilitator is away;
- The school board asked the intersectoral committee to advise how the special grant from the Ministry could be used the community for young children, and subsequently approved all recommendations including additional childcare spaces, preschool experiences, the salary of the CCRR (Child Resource and Referral) and extending StrongStart hours.

The team was impressed by the degree of interconnectedness in most districts. While numerous connections had been established by the previous work of the intersectoral coalitions, it was apparent that StrongStart BC had reinforced many connections. It had facilitated new ways of collaborating, and stimulated creative ways to mobilize community development.

What is the impact on family? Families are making connections. They feel as though the school is supporting them. It is having an impact on their own practice with children. They have access to resources and they are socializing in their community more by meeting new friends. It is changing the dynamics between caregivers and children. (Surrey, Staff)

Examples of New Connections at Many Sites

- Various services in the communities refer families to each other, including StrongStart (through shared pamphlets); in preschools and childcare centres.

- In over 50% of the sites, family-owned daycares bring groups of students to SS.
- Where preschools are co-located, parents drop off their preschooler and then attend StrongStart with the younger child.
- One off-site preschool is moving into the school next year to collaborate with StrongStart.
- More than 50% of the StrongStart sites reported that they have made a number of referrals to other agencies regarding children's speech and hearing issues as well as suspected autism and FAS (Fetal Alcohol Syndrome).
- A CCRR (Childcare and Resource Referral) centre shares its toy library with StrongStart.
- CCRR staff have picked up families and delivered them to StrongStart.
- Every site is engaged in an intersectoral coalition committee in some way. In 90% of the sites, the committees helped in the implementation of StrongStart. In 40 % of the communities, the allocation of funding is decided at the coalition table.
- About 50% of the StrongStart sites are being used for other intersectoral activities in the afternoon.
- Public health nurses are frequent attendees at StrongStart sites, informally acquainting themselves with families.
- Community programs and StrongStart are collaborating on opening and closing times as well as days of operation, in order not to clash.

Start-up Issues

1. Selection of school sites

The reason for the selection of the site varied from district to district. In most districts the site was either in a low socio-economic area of the community, an area with a large immigration population, or an area enrolling a high percentage of Aboriginal students. In one school district, however, lack of available space at the preferred school site precluded the school from participating. In another school district, the enthusiasm of the school administrator and the school staff as well as the needs of the families informed the decision about where to place the program.

2. Presence of a steering committee

All sites were connected to a steering committee or an intersectoral coalition committee. In one case, a steering committee had been established but was only starting to hold meetings. In other communities, the intersectoral coalition was identified as the main committee to guide the implementation of StrongStart. In several communities, early childhood development committees, previously established, assumed the role of steering committee for the project. It was important to note that in every case efforts had been made to link the StrongStart BC program with a management or advisory committee that was involved in other early childhood initiatives. This was one of the key factors influencing how the StrongStart BC program connected with other services and agencies, both inside and outside the school.

One of the biggest challenges in our community has been the lack of Early Child Development. We want to build on that capacity wherever we can and start building the capacity of the community with the support of partners, and now we have the infrastructure of the school district. (Surrey, Coalition Member)

3. Initial ECD (Early Child Development) conflict

When the StrongStart BC centres were first announced, tension was felt in communities about the possible threat to other services and agencies outside the school. This occurred because, congruent with the StrongStart announcement, Childcare and Referral Resource (CCRR) groups experienced funding cuts. The research team pursued this topic in interviews and focus groups and discovered that, in most cases, the tension had been resolved by (a) clarifying the purpose of StrongStart compared with other programs; and (b) having joint planning sessions in communities. In other cases, there was still some evidence of tension although the issue resolved itself as the program began and the perceived threats to other programs did not eventuate.

In some of the communities, fears were allayed by (a) cooperatively planning the timing of offerings; and (b) describing the services that would be offered by StrongStart BC centres. In fact, many representatives of other service agencies (including other ECD programs, preschool owners and operators, and Child Care Resource and Referral services) were enthusiastic about the additional services provided by StrongStart BC.

4. Pressure to start up quickly

The late announcement of the allocation of centres and the different nature of each district caused some sites to feel pressured by having such short notice. At least two sites solved the problem by contracting former childcare experts to work with the facilitator. They planned, purchased resources, designed the environment and provided support in the opening days. One district is extending a limited contract to continue that support through the school year. The research team was impressed by the results of this collaboration.

5. Renovations to facilities

Renovations involved cleaning, painting and restructuring the classroom for younger children

and a new purpose (e.g., some rooms had been used for storage). Smaller sinks, shelving and countertops more appropriate to the size of pre-school children were installed. Access to washrooms and an antiseptic diaper change area were major issues in most facilities. School staff was nervous about adult strangers being in the school washrooms with unsupervised children. Designating space for parents' parking and for baby strollers and parents' tote bags were unusual problems for schools to solve. In fact, all sites were creative and reported that the renovation budget was sufficient to cover the costs of the required changes, with the exception of a sink at one site. The team was impressed with the clean, bright spaces that welcomed families.

We have daycares in the community that come regularly every week. The daycare operators say that they feel so isolated in their daycare situation and they themselves are learning new skills being in the StrongStart centre. (Surrey, Staff)

6. Identification and purchase of appropriate equipment

Each site handled the purchase of equipment in a different way. At some, most of the equipment budget was spent at the beginning of the program for new furniture, toys, equipment and resources. Several sites took a cautious approach. Instead of purchasing large amounts in the beginning of the program, useable equipment that had been in storage or was surplus-to-needs was gathered from the school district. Staff decided to wait until the second stage of implementation to determine further expenditures. In all cases, the research team was told that the budget had been adequate for start-up.



Employment of Early Childhood Education Staff

Despite the fact that there is a shortage of Early Childhood Education (ECE) professionals in BC, most school districts reported a good response from qualified applicants to the advertised positions. While a few districts experienced difficulty locating specialized ECE staff, all those employed had the required ECE certificate and (as indicated by the following charts) most were experienced. Most facilitators were hired under an annual personal contract to the school district. In one case, the employee was a member of the CUPE union by agreement between the school district and CUPE. In another case, the employee was a member of the City staff, Parks and Recreation Department (the school district had contracted with the City to manage that employee's services).

In most cases, facilitators expressed concern about the future of their employment status. One-year contracts do not provide employees with the job stability most people want. Part-time employment requires having two jobs. Facilitators want to be seen as members of the school and school district staff. Some have concerns about working through personal contracts and not belonging to a unionized group connected to the school district that has accompanying benefits.

Most of the facilitators were paid at a gross rate of \$25.00 per hour for four hours a day, although there was some variance in the hours, benefits received and net pay.

*We see this program as the front door to the school. It sets the tone. It makes it a family place. People are starting to see it as the centre of the community. We used to be the “forgotten community.” Now it is a community development process. We had all the parents for dinner and asked them what they needed. This is “a happening thing.” Twenty-five per cent of our principals want ECD in their schools.
(Surrey, Staff)*

Staff qualifications

All classroom facilitators were ECE certified and most had considerable and impressive experience in the Early Child Development field. The experience of facilitators included:

- ECD support worker, Family Place supervisor and playroom supervisor
- Qualified teacher, Montessori preschool teacher
- Supervisor of pre-school and daycare, and special-needs educator
- ECE university instructor and supervisor of preschool/daycare
- Supervisor of preschool, daycare, toddler centre and after-school programs

What's best of all is that it's free. I can't afford \$10 here and \$10 there for the activities offered in this town, but I can come here every day with my children for nothing, and they get nutritional snacks too. (Okanagan Falls, Parent)

- Twenty-two years of experience in preschool and childcare; taught an ECE course through the school district
- Experience in private daycare, preschool, family daycare, administration and special needs
- Child-care centre employee, supervisor of child-care centre, assistant supervisor of Montessori preschool
- Child-care program and provider consultant, early education consultant - implemented an early years workshop series, preschool director
- Employee of Child Care Society (planning, enrolment, budget and licensing); supervisor and owner of daycare centre

Budget

The following sample budget provides an estimate of the items bought by StrongStart sites.



Sample Budget for StrongStart Site		
Income: 2006-2008	Start-up Initial payment: 2006-2007	\$50,000
	Additional payment: 2007-2008	\$30,000
	Final payment: 2007-2008	\$ 2,000
	Total income 2006-2008	\$90,000
Expenses: 2006-2007	Wages	\$20,000
	Equipment and resources	\$14,000
	Lending library	\$5000
	Travel costs	\$2500
	Food and snacks	\$2500
	Promotion costs	\$1500
	Honoraria	\$2000
	Utilities	\$500
	Maintenance/building alterations	\$1000
	Other	\$1000
Total expenses 2006-2007		\$42,000
Anticipated expenditure 2007-2008		\$40,000

Note: An additional \$8,000 from each site was allocated to the StrongStart BC Evaluation Process. All sites appreciated the size of the budget, apart from the need for more staff to document children's progress and help more families.

*I can't afford to buy fruit in the winter-time, but they get fruit here every day.
(Okanagan Falls, Parent)*

Start-Up Date and Attendance

Note: Districts collected data for their own purposes so it was not reported to the research team in a standardized way in Stage 1. The following chart provides a broad picture of the attendance patterns. Some numbers are approximate although data was reviewed by the research team in all cases. In Stage 2, data collection will be standardized.

*One of the things I love about coming here is that there is no work to be done. It is an opportunity for me to be away from home where every time I turn around there is something that needs to be cleaned, folded or ironed. I can unwind here and just bond with my child.
(Burnaby, Parent)*

Location	Start-up Date	Approximate Attendance: Age 0 - 5
Burnaby	November 27, 2006	Number of registrants: 159 children Average daily attendance: 10 to 20 (adults and children)
Courtenay	December 6, 2006	Number of registrants: 241 children Average daily attendance: 10 to 30

Coquitlam	January 2007 (Stibbs) January 2007 (Riverview)	Number of registrants: Riverview - 200 children; Roy Stibbs - 75 children Average daily attendance: Riverview -15 to 42; Roy Stibbs - 8 to 36
Kamloops	November 2007	Number of registrants: 361 children (55 age 0-2; 80 age 2-3; 153 age 3.5-4; 65 age 4.5-5; 6 over age 5) Average daily attendance: 15 to 45
Okanagan	January 2007	Number of registrants: 64 children Average daily attendance: 10 to 27 (some drive in from other towns.)
Mission	November 2006	Number of registrants: Over 100 Average daily attendance: 15 to 40
Prince George	December 2006	Number of registrants: Over 200 from all over the city Average daily attendance: 20 to 35
Prince Rupert	November 2007	Number of registrants: 77 children (34 Aboriginal) Average daily attendance: 8 to 15
Quesnel	February 2007	Number of registrants: 40 children Average daily attendance: 4 to 20
Revelstoke	October 2007	Number of registrants: 100 children Average daily attendance: 15 to 50
Surrey	January 2007	Number of registrants: 100 children Average daily attendance: 10 to 25
Ucluelet	January 2007	Number of registrants: 50 children Average daily attendance: 10 to 15

All sites kept records of attendance but, as mentioned previously, the record keeping was not consistent. The team was unable to gauge the frequency of attendance, for example. A cursory examination of records indicated that (a) many registrants attended a few times; (b) less than half the registrants attended 3 to 5 times a week; and (c) many registrants attended once or twice a week. The team asked the reasons for different attendance patterns but was unable to draw conclusions because interviews were most-

ly held with regular attendees. Some parents who attended most regularly used StrongStart as the major social and learning activity outside the home. Others who attended less often combined the StrongStart experience with preschool and other community recreation activities for a rounded learning experience.

Similarly, records of adults attending StrongStart were not consistent but the team witnessed unexpected patterns of attendance. Mothers outnum-

bered fathers by approximately 8 to 1 although some sites were rearranging program times to encourage fathers. In some neighbourhoods, grandparents were usually the caregivers, particularly in immigrant communities where both parents were working.

In some communities, local family-owned child-care centres attended regularly, bringing up to half-a-dozen children with them. At one site, parents objected because they believed this put more stress on the facilitator by raising the adult-to-child ratio, and reduced the quality of the experience. In other cases, mothers and fathers alternated, depending on which person had the day off work. In one case, a separated couple used the StrongStart site as a way to meet for a joint family play experience.

A major concern was the number of children and adults together at some sites where numbers exceeded 20 in a standard classroom. While safety was not an issue (because caregivers were expected to be working with their children), the facilitator's ability to coach and demonstrate learning activities for adults was diminished.

I love the crafts, cultural and intergenerational connections. I am becoming best friends with a couple of the grandmas and they provide excellent advice.
(Burnaby, Grandmother)

The team felt strongly that another adult would allow a better experience and permit the facilitator to document individual child development—almost impossible in a crowded room. Sites struggled with how to maintain fire safety regulations in these circumstances. While some sites simply closed the classroom to new arrivals, this was unpopular with parents who had packed up children and walked or bussed long distances to be there. Other sites experimented with recommending alternate days to parents. While this provided a solution, parents felt that this took away flexible attendance—a valued part of the program.

Publicity and Advertising for Families

Several sites developed brochures to distribute in communities. Many sites developed a cooperative plan with the local intersectoral coalition to distribute brochures and advertising. Most sites held a public opening with press coverage. This was an effective way of attracting parents to the site from all over the community.

Some sites were particularly inventive in finding new families. They reported knocking on the doors of apartment buildings and leaving flyers in the lobby. They approached families in parks and other public family areas with a flyer, and extended personal greetings. They proposed setting up tents at fairs, holding private meetings with Aboriginal groups to extend personal invitations, and making presentations at other events to describe the purpose of the program to dentists, doctors and those in private practice who might not have contact with public professionals.

Approximately half the sites made a great effort to reach hard-to-access families. All sites understood the importance of getting the word out but several sites were cautious and advertised locally at first, waiting until they were ready to handle larger numbers. Most sites said that word-of-mouth was the best way of attracting parents, and parents confirmed this, but it was not effective for the hard-to-access families. Plans had been made at several sites to implement new strategies in the following year to reach these parents.

Advertising? There are 30,000 children in our community under the age of six. We don't have to advertise. This has all happened by word of mouth and the school newsletter and the numbers have grown on their own. We may have to start monitoring it because the numbers are becoming too big.
(Surrey, Staff)

The problem with advertising through the media is that we are not reaching those who are not literate.
(Kamloops, Staff)

Efforts to reach hard-to-access families

Hertzman (2006) identified 10 barriers that often prevent families from accessing services for young children. These barriers typically include program availability, affordability, transportation issues, timing of the program, access for working and non-working parents, language issues, access for multi-ages of children, lack of information about the program, unfulfilled expectations, social distance and parental modelling. The team

Our facilitators walk the streets, visit the food banks, go to the parks, go to apartment buildings and knock on doors asking if anyone wants to come to Strong-Start BC. Other than that, it is strictly word-of-mouth. (Burnaby, Staff)

interviewed several staff members at each site to find out how they try to reach these families. This process will be followed up in Stage 2 of the evaluation to determine whether barriers

are lowered and more families have access to the program. The following chart describes the progress so far in nine districts. The other three sites will be examined in September before the evaluation begins.

The positives

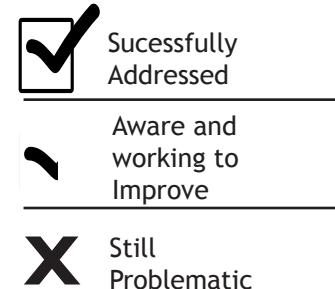
- The program was free (including snacks)
- It was available 3 hours/day (which most caregivers felt was enough)
- It provided access for multi-ages of children at the same time
- It met expectations

The negatives

- The program was not readily accessible to working parents (many wanted availability on weekends)
- Reaching Aboriginal families was problematic
- Reaching families most in need was difficult

The program was only six months old and many felt that this was part of the explanation. Most centres had plans in place for the next school year that may help to resolve these issues.

Potential barriers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Program available	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Affordable	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Transport available	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	X	✓	✓	X
Time offered	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Access for working/not working parents	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	X	X	✓	X	✓	✓	X
Language	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Multi-age access	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lack of information	X	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	X
Unfulfilled expectations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social distance	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	X	✓	X
Parental modeling	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	X	✓	X



Benefits to Children and Families

Information from Focus Groups and Interviews

In total, the research team interviewed approximately 120 parents at the 12 sites either in focus groups or individually. General invitations were given out and the team accepted all individuals who volunteered. In some cases, parents submitted paper responses. Translators were present where necessary. In addition, the team interviewed approximately 50 community members who were either part of intersectoral coalitions or owners/operators of local childcare groups or family initiatives. Their views are included in this section of the report.

The team was not able to access parents who had registered but not attended regularly. This will be part of Stage 2—Evaluation Process.

Access to Free Services

Most parents expressed great appreciation for the fact that the program was free of charge. Several parents described lists of services in the community that charge a nominal fee for access. They made the point that having several children five days a week made the cost of attending beyond their reach. Many indicated that providing free snacks was an attraction, because they could not afford the same quality of nutritious food at home.

Multi-age Accessibility

An equally popular response was that caregivers appreciated being able to bring a baby, a toddler and a preschooler at the same time. Few places in the community provide that service. Initially StrongStart sites expected the majority of attendees to be between 3 and 5 years old; however, the range has been from birth to age 5.

While advantages have been evident and most people expressed enthusiasm about the multi-aged aspect of attendance, it has caused additional preparation and organizational pressures for staff. Another worry is that the younger children may be hurt accidentally in crowded rooms.

At least one site is planning to provide separate space for the pre-toddler age group in a special afternoon session.

My biggest fear? What will happen if they take StrongStart away? We are so excited about it!

(Okanagan Falls, Parent)



The Facilitators' Role

Without exception, the facilitators received high praise for their offerings. Parents were appreciative of their broad ECD knowledge. Many parents commented on their organizational skills, their capacity to handle this complex environment with large numbers, multiple ages and cultures, the wide variety of resources they provided and their interpersonal skills. In particular, at every site, parents expressed gratitude for the welcoming, warm environment where they could bring their children and feel safe; the word “safe” was used many times. In some sites, strong bonds had developed between parents and the facilitator. The research team often noted the obvious sense of community in the room. Some facilitators were seen as a “lifeline” or someone parents knew would help them (or find help for them) if they needed it.

The Program

The play-oriented environment was highly valued. It was surprising to hear so many parents express their lack of knowledge about play and their delight at “learning how to play again.” Of particular interest were the educational toys, the crafts and simple experiences such as homemade

play dough. Take-home recipes and instructions were valued, as were newsletters that described ideas for home play, upcoming events and themes in the classroom.

While the multi-age environment was obviously challenging in terms of preparation and supervision for the facilitator, the team felt that in some classrooms, the creative aspect of play needed to be extended, and that a more elaborate provincial description of program expectations would provide better guidance. Some facilitators felt isolated and therefore unclear about program expectations. They would appreciate more guidance. Provincially, this would provide more equity in the experience for families.

Parents expressed appreciation for the access to messy materials (such as paint, sand and water play) as something they could not offer at home. Circle time was identified as a highlight of the daily experience. Parents appreciated the action songs, the discussions, the language development, and especially the stories. Snack time was the other highlight and has become a notable ritual in most sites. In one site, children chose their snack from a menu as in a restaurant setting; in another, songs were used to settle the children first. In all sites, the snacks were nutritious and interesting. Some parents organized their arrival and departure at circle and snack time.

The Ministry of Education identified field trips as a high priority in the contribution agreement, but the research team, while understanding their value, found that most sites felt the expectation was problematic. The drop-in nature of the program, unpredictable attendance and no way of communicating with all registrants—given the large number that attend sporadically—meant that field trips were difficult to organize.

While play is the guiding principle in program design, incorporating pre-literacy skills such as the alphabet and number recognition through incidental play is highly desirable. Understandably, there is a fine line between instruction and incidental learning but some sites appeared not to have attempted this. Where the team members observed these resources and their incidental

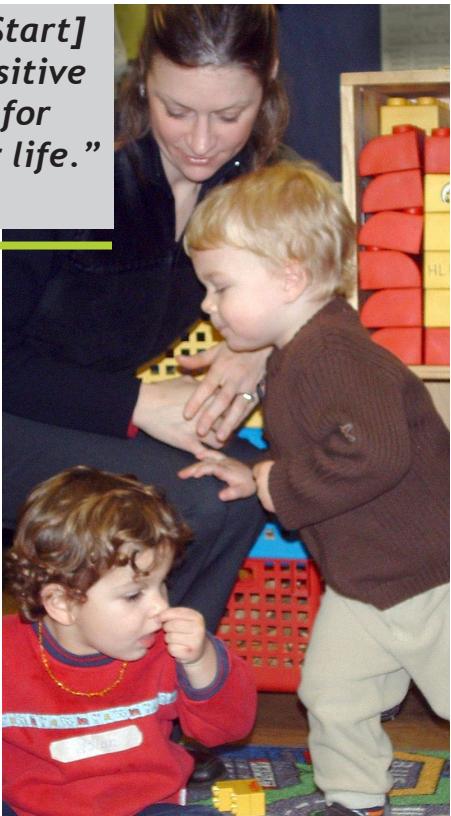
use, they were impressed. Parents expressed appreciation for support in learning how to achieve this with their own children. The team believes, however, that worksheets have no place in a play-oriented environment.

The concept of modelling for parents is one that is not necessarily included in ECE training and it is a difficult concept to implement spontaneously and informally, especially in a classroom with large numbers of people. As stated previously, a second staff member and professional development on this topic would be useful for facilitators.

The advisory committee asked the team to investigate people's satisfaction with the timing and length of the program. Most parents were happy with the three or four hours allocated to the program. They liked the flexibility of being able to drop in on their own schedule and preferred

"This [StrongStart] will have a positive impact on her for the rest of her life."
(Parent)

the morning to the afternoon. (Some sites are adapting hours slightly to accommodate local needs.) They cited reasons such as naps in the afternoon, other commitments that needed to be fulfilled, the short attention span of young children and morning being the high-energy time of day for both caregiver and child. The aspects of the program that could be changed were weekend and holiday openings to accommodate working parents, particularly fathers. Most parents attend for two of the three hours, usually organized around circle time and snacks.



Social Benefits

1. Reduction in isolation and enhanced services to marginalized women

Social issues were predominant in discussions. Immigrant mothers were grateful to be able to go to a safe place where they were welcome and could join a social network that is culturally appropriate. It was culturally appropriate. Many immigrants described StrongStart as the best place they had found in the community to learn English—for both parent and child. One mother described how her husband still lived in China and could visit once every two months. She had a toddler and felt StrongStart was the only place she could go for companionship. She had neither the money nor confidence to leave the neighbourhood. Her daughter was learning English. Now the mother's English is so good she is translating for newly arrived Chinese mothers.

Grandmothers, as daily caregivers, were grateful to have the range of toys and activities they could not provide at home. They were also glad to have other children to engage with their grandchildren. Most mothers expressed gratitude at being able to attend with their children and focus solely on them, leaving competing household duties behind. Many reported making new friendships that extended beyond the program and into other community activities. Teen mothers and single mothers expressed relief at having the centre to support them and facilitators to provide advice.

2. Social issues related to children

The socialization of young children was frequently mentioned as a major benefit. Mothers described how children who previously had been fearful about separation became more comfortable in the StrongStart environment. The team observed several situations where bullying or other inappropriate behaviour of bigger children was managed skilfully by the facilitator. Parents expressed gratitude for being able to learn how to deal with difficult social behaviour more effectively. Many parents described the StrongStart environment as one that provided an ideal trans-

sition between home and preschool, home and childcare, or home and kindergarten—the transition between an environment with an accompanying adult to an environment with a teacher, many children and no parent. Many of their children were isolated in condominiums and had not played with others at all. One grandmother commented that it was not safe to make friends in parks any more. Now the children had friends they continued to see out of school along with their caregiver.

3. Effect on parenting skills and the home environment

The Ministry's stated goals were to provide modelling for parents and to improve their home experience with their children. The advisory committee had asked the research team to determine whether this was possible and whether child development could be attributed specifically to the StrongStart program. For some parents the influence has been beyond expectations. Most parents in the focus groups noted a strong influence. They specified the developments occurring because of the StrongStart BC program and could distinguish that from other early childhood programs their children had attended.

There was much discussion and laughter about how the clean-up song was applied successfully to toy clean-up at home. Most parents spoke of the change in their children. They described their ability to sit quietly and focus for longer periods. This development was credited to circle and snack time. Many reported their child's increased interest and abilities. They loved reading stories, identifying or reciting the alphabet and numbers, singing new songs, and using new tools such as scissors, glue, coloured pens, paint and blocks. A couple reported re-designing the playroom at home because of their experiences at StrongStart.

Several parents reported that eating habits and table manners had improved. Children accepted different food and were interested in nutritious snacks. They copied the manners taught during snack time. One father commented that he was learning new skills as his child learned them, in-

cluding the importance of cleaning up after himself. Others echoed this view, explaining that they were learning how to establish routines themselves. Another parent described a reduction in television viewing in the home now that the family had learned about alternatives.

4. The parental relationship with the school

Parents saw the location of the site in a school as being useful. It reduced their traditional fear of school as a controlling environment and gave them an opportunity to observe the positive learning environment schools provide—significantly different, in most cases, from schools of decades ago and schools of other cultures. The team observed distinct differences between schools. Those that had made an effort to integrate the StrongStart site as an integral part of the school were building a community, whereas those schools that had not yet achieved integration lacked the benefits. Parents in highly integrated sites expressed a feeling of belonging, not just to the site but also to the school. They were included in assemblies, welcomed in the office and greeted in hallways by other staff. Their children were greeted and helped by older children. In some cases, the principal knew their name. In one case, the school staff, led by the secretary, designed a special jungle reading room for preschoolers and their parents. In another, older children in a leadership group attended as daily helpers and/or tutors.

Some of the parents who were not from the school catchment area wanted to enrol in the school for the long-term. One school, with a history of declining enrolment, believed its unexpectedly large kindergarten registration was due, in part, to the attractiveness of the StrongStart program. It was obvious that where sites lacked this internal connectedness, parents' view of the school was limited to the program itself. The variables affecting the internal connectedness in the school appeared to be:

- How the site was selected and introduced to the school by district staff
- The degree of leadership by the principal
- Commitment to the program
- Staff attitudes towards the program

- The physical location
- The degree to which the facilitator was welcomed as an integral part of the school staff

It is understandable that a program with a tentative one-year funding commitment may be difficult to integrate. If StrongStart remains a part of the school system, it is important that the degree of school integration should be seen as a vital issue.

"Schools used to be in such a bubble; but now they realize that investing in preschoolers and their families might be really important to school success." (Coalition Member)

5. Connection to other community agencies

Many sites reported that they had referred children with possible social, hearing, speech and language, and sight challenges to other agencies. This was most evident in the sites where there was a high degree of interconnectedness between community services and schools. Parents expressed gratitude at being able to meet other service representatives in a neutral site. Some sites have offered special presentations by other services as workshops out of hours or they have scheduled presentations in drop-in hours. This has been greatly appreciated. While there was considerable tension between childcare services and community groups before StrongStart was implemented, it appears to have dissipated in almost all communities. In some communities, there was acceptance that StrongStart was not a competitive program. In other communities active collaboration was developing. The research



team will re-examine this issue in Stage 2. It is important for family services that the collaboration among services continues to evolve.

Benefits to Schools and Communities

Information from Interviews

The research team interviewed approximately seven staff at each site—including the kindergarten teacher, administrators at the school and district office, coordinators, counsellors, special education staff, co-located services, the StrongStart facilitator and any other staff that volunteered to be interviewed. All views are reflected in the following comments and many mirror the views of parents.

1. Location of program

The choice of most sites was based on the Early Development Instrument (EDI) results with a focus on children with the greatest vulnerability. In some districts, space was not available in the preferred sites. In some districts, the decision was imposed. In others, the decision was collaborative. In at least one site, schools competed informally for the right to host the site. In low socio-economic areas, several sites had combined the StrongStart program with nutrition programs, counselling programs, parent education programs and partnerships with agencies such as Parks and Recreation for a coordinated intervention and support effort.

We need bridging people who can go out in the community and find the families that need their service. The facilitator has a limited number of hours a day and her focus is in the classroom.
(Burnaby, Staff)

2. Staff relationships

There were two types of relationships noted—staff relationships and reporting relationships. The strongest programs were evident in schools where there were close links between staff. This occurred when the kindergarten teacher and the StrongStart facilitator shared resources and a sense of mutual professional respect evolved. In some sites, the facilitator did not yet appear to be an integrated part of the school staff, which resulted in a sense of isolation. The ECD profes-

sionals were generally respected by school staff and considered to have unique early childhood expertise.

In several of the sites, regular meetings were held between the learning-assistance teacher, the kindergarten teacher and the facilitator so the children entering kindergarten the next year could more easily adapt. Younger children were discussed with a view to referring them to other services at the earliest possible age if needs were identified. When asked what their hope would be if StrongStart were successful, kindergarten teachers said:

- Earlier interventions
- Caring, cooperative, self-disciplined children
- The ability to converse and share lives peacefully with others

Several believed a successful program would save six months of socialization time in the kindergarten classroom.

3. Facilitators' issues

In some cases, the facilitator reported to someone outside the school. It is understandable in the short term because of the uniqueness of the program and related Ministry accountability. In the future, it will be necessary for the StrongStart facilitator to report to the principal in order to achieve the desired connection between the school and the community.

Many facilitators reported working unpaid overtime to prepare the wide variety of materials offered at the sessions. Some facilitators have a second job to cover their costs. Given the number of families attending and the broad age-range of children, the team believes the number of facilitator hours should be increased or an assistant should be hired. Several districts hired a retired ECE teacher to support the facilitator at start-up and during busy times of the year. This extra person enhanced the capacity to reach hard-to-access families, and increased the facilitator's planning and documentation time.

Securing substitutes was problematic in many sites. It was resolved in others by accessing retired ECE professionals and sharing substitutes with Childcare Resource and Referral (CCRR) groups. In most sites, evaluation of the facilitator was not yet a consideration. In one site, a retired and experienced ECE professional provided the service. The team regarded this as important because it will reduce the facilitator's sense of isolation and should result in improved performance and accountability.

4. The principal's role

The program was strongest in sites where the principal was actively involved. This is not surprising in that school leadership is known in the research to be important in school effectiveness and internal programs. The principal's leadership resulted in close connections among staff, shared resources, creative school programming and facility solutions and greater satisfaction. Some principals expressed concern that they had little experience in early child development and felt unable to provide strong leadership. Several principals were praised for their efforts on behalf of the program—dropping in every day to meet families, teaching music in the classroom, holding regular meetings with the facilitator to offer support, shopping for toys with the facilitator, and visiting the homes of new kindergarten registrants to encourage them to attend StrongStart first. It can be seen that school districts and the province should offer professional development for principals who could play a key role in implementing the program. Professional development for principals expected to undertake early learning programs would be welcome and is essential, in the opinion of the research team

5. Documentation

For school programs to be effective for the long term, it is essential to demonstrate their effect on child outcomes. It was generally agreed that the program is still too young to achieve that, but it will be necessary to begin effective documentation now so that studies in the future can improve program development. Documentation should include:

- Detailed attendance records
- Parent/caregiver levels of satisfaction
- The kindergarten teacher's view of the differences in children as they enter school
- Pre- and post- measures that indicate child development

As previously stated, the program may require additional staffing to achieve these goals.

6. Ownership of the program

The team gradually realized that the program must be "owned" by the school system for StrongStart to be integrated into the school and community. This view was strengthened as the visits took place and interviews with parents and staff were conducted. In the one site where services were contracted outside the school district, the key players felt great dissatisfaction with communication and reporting issues in spite of a positive relationship and sincere efforts by all. Facilitators, in particular, said they needed to be directly connected to the inner workings of the school and school district in a formal way.



7. Coalition or steering committee membership for schools

All sites took part in planning groups for broader community partnerships. It was apparent that this was an essential factor in building connections between StrongStart and the community. The team believed attendance by the principal at such meetings was highly desirable. Many suggested that if the school district sponsored professional development meetings for preschool instructors, the facilitator and kindergarten teachers it would encourage a coalition by building new relationships. Funding and facilitating the same individuals to visit and promote understanding between programs was also seen as highly desirable. In some sites, school trustees were active, informed participants in the planning process and this was highly valued.

StrongStart offers moms and children a place where they are safe and warm, that is a supportive social environment where they can learn new activities and the importance of play. We badly need another adult in the room who can focus on how the parents are feeling and what they need from a social perspective, not just learning how to be with their children. Many of these parents have social and emotional needs. (Burnaby, Staff)

- Fire safety compliance
- Installation of lower sinks, shelves and toilets
- Scheduling of access to school facilities such as the gymnasium, typically over scheduled already

The research team was impressed that the 12 sites had established such popular programs and family relationships in a six-month period. They are all to be commended.



8. Facility issues

Schools struggled with facility issues that they had never confronted before. These included:

- The placement of a bathroom for the program
- Safety issues about “adult strangers” in the school
- The installation of a proper, sanitized diaper change table
- Space for strollers



Section 5

STAGE 2: FORMATIVE EVALUATION

School Year 2007/2008

The HELP advisory committee met in July 2007 to consider the research team's report. The committee decided to continue with Stage 2 of the evaluation. The Committee proposed that in Stage 2 the evaluation would be framed, designed and implemented as a formative program evaluation rather than formal research. The design of the evaluation will be tailored, therefore, to the nature of the StrongStartBC (SSBC) pilot program, unique to British Columbia. The purpose of the evaluation will be to encourage the SSBC program to reach its full potential by creating a thoughtful, innovative design to encourage the implementation of the program in the public education system. This process will link the research on early child development to the Ministry of Education's goals for the program and the most promising practices evolving in StrongStart.

Stage 2 Objectives

The major objectives of Stage 2 of the evaluation will be to:

- Document the implementation of SSBC in 14 pilot sites in the second year of its implementation
- Capture and use the self-reported views, experiences, benefits and/or concerns of parents, caregivers, community intersectoral groups and staff
- Collect data based on the information from Stage 1 but design the Stage 2 processes so that future use of the data is maximized
- Compare program progress from Stage 1 through Stage 2 to identify areas of growth and/or problematic issues
- Meet with district staff to provide them

with current perceptions so that changes can be implemented in a timely fashion

- Communicate promising practices to all pilots and to the Ministry of Education so that the learning process is continuous throughout Stage 2 (the Ministry may choose to extend this communication process to all 85 sites through its own mechanisms)
- Encourage intersectoral knowledge transfer
- Raise awareness of the multiple needs of early learners and their families

Evaluation Strategies

Multiple strategies will be used and several researchers will be employed because of the different circumstances of each site and the need to gather as much corroborating evidence as possible. Strategies will build on those used in Stage 1 and will include:

- Pre- and post-surveys of parents
- Family self-reports through journaling
- Comprehensive and common attendance records
- Community connectedness charts
- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Structured classroom observations

Strategies will include a focus on:

- Enhanced and consistent attendance record-keeping across sites for purposes of research objectives
- Interconnectedness within the school and community

- Quality of program development consistent with the latest theories in ECD
- Views of caregivers who attend frequently, infrequently and drop-out
- The facilitator's capacity to model for parents
- Increased access to hard-to-reach families
- Increasing ability to document child development outcomes as self-reported by parents or otherwise
- Leadership at the school level

Final Report

The research for Stage 2 will be conducted during the 2007/2008 school year. The final report will be delivered to the Ministry of Education in September 2008.

Benefits? We all benefit. We get information about raising our kids, make new friends, see our children in action, learn new ways to play with our children, have quality time with them, can come late and go early, the music, I meet other Chinese women and I am not as lonely, I am learning how Canadians are - they treat the children equally, they follow their kids. I used to think children should follow me. (Parent)