
"Discovery Communities" Show Off Plans For Early Childhood

BY **Jessica Ciparelli** | JUL 27, 2010 11:02 AM
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Dr. Joan Lombardi, Deputy Assistant Secretary and Interdepartmental Liaison for Early Childhood Development, U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, speaks with Elaine Zimmerman, Executive Director of the CT Commission on Children, at the "Healthy Safe and Ready to Learn" forum on July 19 at CCSU.

Jessica Ciparelli of the CT Early Childhood Alliance sent in this write-up of a recent forum on early childhood development:

Dr. Joan Lombardi, Deputy Assistant Secretary, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, joined 120 community leaders, child care providers and teachers, legislators, school superintendents, child advocates, parents, philanthropic leaders and concerned citizens at Central CT State University on July 19 to discuss early childhood at a forum entitled "Healthy, Safe and Ready to Learn."

Three Discovery communities – Torrington, New Haven and New Britain – showcased their completed early childhood blueprints. Discovery, an initiative of the Graustein Memorial Fund, aims to effect community change and policy reform that will create an early childhood system ensuring early learning success for all children. Discovery communities are creating comprehensive birth-to-8 local action plans. These plans enable communities to focus and measure their progress toward school success for every child. These communities, in which nearly half the state's children between the ages of birth to 17 live, are among those identified by the CT Department of Education as priority districts or other districts qualifying for school readiness funding.

While the city faces its challenges, the New Haven presenter noted the community's many blessings. Jennifer Heath, who serves as the vice president for community leadership for the United Way of Greater New Haven and co-chair of the New Haven Early Childhood Council, spoke of the successes in the city, such as receiving grant monies to add 41 new spaces for infant and toddler care and education – a huge need in New Haven, but often inaccessible; the Child FIRST replication process to expand mental health services for children and a line item in the city budget they held onto in a tough budget year.

"We were really pleased...we were able to hold that line item," said Heath.

Heath credits the relationship that has been formed with the city and the credibility the early childhood council has gained as two of the reasons. The early childhood council, she said, has authority over how those dollars are spent within that budget line item.

Lombardi applauded the communities for helping turn the tide for the state's youngest citizens.

"What happens in the early years [affects] health and learning," said Lombardi.

Lombardi expressed the importance of creating common standards across programs, learning standards and data collection. She also noted the move toward a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) for quality assurance and making sure school systems are ready for children.

"We're witnessing a movement to create an early education system," she said, adding, "What you're doing is really important."

Lombardi's presentation was followed by a panel discussion, moderated by Elaine Zimmerman, Executive Director of the Commission on Children. Georgia Goldburn of Hope for New Haven, Inc., Marlo Greponne, Director of Planning and Programs, Human Resources Agency of New Britain; Richard Sussman, Director of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving's Brighter Futures Initiative and Rep. John Geragosian (D-New Britain) the co-chair of the Appropriations Committee of the General Assembly, each discussed some of the challenges they face including different funding streams, complicated reporting requirements, inadequate levels of funding for certain programs and in Rep. Geragosian's case, a daunting deficit projected for this upcoming fiscal year.