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Communities for Kids

Evaluation Report



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Communities for Kids Evaluation Report
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Communities for Kids Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

This evaluation focuses on Communities for Kids (CFK), a coalition of three early childhood development (ECD) initiatives in the South Okanagan-Similkameen. These three initiatives, Children First, Understanding the Early Years (UEY) and Success By 6®, each foster and promote optimal health and development for children up to age six. This evaluation, together with the accompanying Regional Action Plan, is intended to reflect upon the experiences of CFK, especially over the past three years, and to project forward to future undertakings by the CFK coalition.

Following an examination of the program's history and development, this report provides an outline of CFK through a review of its accomplishments and challenges. The impact of the program is assessed based on its intended outcomes as stated in its Strategic Vision and Action Plan (the Logic Model) and its relative success in achieving its stated objectives.

The program is seen as largely effective by those most closely associated with it and is regarded favourably by most others who have some familiarity with it. Some challenges have been experienced over the course of the years but this is to be expected in a coalition as complex and as comprehensive as CFK. Some of these challenges are presented by the extended geographical scope of the coalition while others are inherent in the structure and ambitious undertakings of the organization.

Success of the coalition is confirmed from several sources including routine reports from four members of the Community Team, Steering Committee members and community participants. Participants describe Communities for Kids as highly effective and instrumental in enhancing their awareness of early childhood development events and funding opportunities. They are unanimous in their unqualified praise of the coalition and its leadership.

How effective is the coalition? Have early childhood development initiatives benefitted from its influence? This evaluation explores the answers to these and other questions related to the Communities for Kids coalition.

"In fact, the weight of solid professional opinion ... advocates providing young children with a rich and stimulating environment that is, at the same time, warm, loving, and supportive of the child's own learning priorities and pacing. It is within this supportive, nonpressured environment that infants and young children acquire a solid sense of security, positive self-esteem, and a long-term enthusiasm for learning." David Elkind

Introduction

This report on the evaluation of Communities for Kids is presented to the CFK Steering Committee. The evaluation work was carried out over the period September 2, 2008 – November 20, 2008.

Information used in this evaluation has been drawn from documents and materials provided by Communities for Kids and from a focus group session held on October 8, 2008, with additional input from telephone interviews with participants unable to attend that session. Additional material for a comparative analysis was provided by other similar initiatives in the Central Okanagan and the West Kootenays.

Materials reviewed include the *Communities for Kids Logic Model* (2006); the *Communities for Kids Steering Committee – Terms of Reference*; *CFK Advocacy Guidelines*; the *2005 Evaluation Report*; and numerous reports, minutes and other documents made available by CFK to inform this evaluation. In addition, a focus group was conducted including members of the Steering Committee, the Community Team and Community ECD Tables. Follow-up interviews were conducted with Community Table participants who had been unavailable for the Focus Group. Clarifying information was also provided by the CFK Steering Committee and Community Team following their October review of the first draft of this report. In addition, informal discussions were held with representatives from neighbouring ECD coalitions.

Throughout the process, all members of the Community Team, the Steering Committee and contacted members of Community Tables were generous with their time and candid and forthright with their comments and input. The work of Communities for Kids and the sincerity and dedication of those involved with that work have been quite remarkable. It would be most appropriate for the coalition to set aside a time for serious celebration of its many accomplishments to date.

The Logic Model is described as representing CFK's strategic vision and action plan with four Objectives describing the coalition's long-term goals. These goals are:

1. Promote community capacity and leadership for early child health and development initiatives;
2. Increase family awareness of, and support family access to, ECD resources and supports;
3. Facilitate community commitment to, and sustainability of, ECD initiatives; and
4. Build a foundation to support sustainability of ECD initiatives.

Each of these objectives is linked with several strategies which are in turn broken down into a number of activities with anticipated results or outcomes. In

total, associated with the four Objectives, there are twelve identified strategies, and seventy-four activities with as many targeted “outcomes”.

This evaluation assesses the fulfillment of the four Objectives in a general sense through an analysis of the degree to which activities were executed and anticipated results (outcomes) were achieved. As indicated in the Logic Model preamble, determinants of success are not only internal to CFK and its work, but also found externally as reflected in community willingness and capacity to engage with CFK in the achievement of its goals.

As requested by CFK, the respondent has also recommended a Regional Action Plan to help guide the coalition in the next stages of its important work to promote the healthy development of young children in the South Okanagan-Similkameen.

Background

Communities for Kids (CFK) was initially launched in 2002 and in 2003, it became one of five *Make Children First* learning sites in British Columbia funded through the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), part of what came to be known as *Children First Learning Initiatives*. Designed as a grass-roots coalition, CFK works at a regional and local level to build capacity within communities and families in the South Okanagan/Similkameen to promote and enhance the wellness of all children from conception to age six. More simply put, CFK promotes optimal health and development of all children, from conception to age 6, in the South Okanagan-Similkameen. The coalition now includes two other early childhood development initiatives, Success By 6® (SB6) and Understanding the Early Years (UEY). In this province, SB6 is driven by a partnership of the United Ways of BC, the credit union movement and the Ministry of Children and Family Development. UEY is a national initiative under Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC). The three initiatives are complementary but distinct.

Communities in the catchment area include Summerland, Penticton, Penticton Indian Band, Oonakane Friendship Centre (representing urban aboriginals), Naramata, Kaleden, Okanagan Falls, Oliver, Osoyoos Indian Band, Osoyoos, Keremeos/Cawston, Lower Similkameen Indian Band, Hedley, Upper Similkameen Indian Band and Princeton.

In 2005, the Steering Committee initiated an evaluation of CFK which led to a refinement of an earlier Logic Model and some changes to the organizational structure. These improvements have been of considerable benefit to the coalition. The current evaluation reflects on the Logic Model objectives as revised in the 2005 evaluation.

Reviewing the Objectives and the Logic Model

An Outcome-Focused Work Plan

The 2005 evaluation recommended the development of an outcome-focused work plan. This is a good thing. *Outcomes* are generally regarded as the benefits or changes for those who participate in our programs or receive our services. They are often confused with *outputs* which, while often easier to measure, have little inherent value in themselves. *Outputs* influence *outcomes* but they are more measures of work than they are true indicators of any real impact on our clients. While the two may be related, the nature of that relationship is often difficult to clearly describe.

Many human service agencies regularly monitor and report on how much money they receive, how many staff and volunteers they have, and what they do in their programs¹. They know how many individuals participate in their programs, how many hours are spent serving them, and how many brochures or classes or counselling sessions have been produced. In other words, they document program *inputs, activities, and outputs*.

In a hypothetical Effective Parenting program, parents are invited to participate in four, two-hour group sessions held every Tuesday evening. The program is designed to share parenting techniques and skills intended to foster the child's self-esteem and improve parent-child relationships.

Inputs would include the agency resources dedicated to or consumed by the program. Examples are money, staff and staff time, volunteers and volunteer time, facilities, equipment, and supplies. Inputs for this parenting program would include the hours of staff time spent in designing as well as in delivering the program in addition to the cost of meeting space, materials and the cost of child care if provided.

Activities are what the program does with the inputs to fulfill its mission. Activities in this instance would include the strategies, techniques, and types of services that comprise the program's service methodology. In our parent training classes the preparation for, and actual conduct of, the classes, are relevant activities which would help the ECD program fulfill its mission. So the inputs describe **what** goes into the program and the activities describe **how** those inputs are applied.

Outputs are the direct products of program activities and usually are measured in terms of the volume of work accomplished - for example, the numbers of classes taught, counselling sessions conducted, educational materials distributed, and participants served. In the case of the parenting program, eight hours of classes with ten parent participants might record

¹ With thanks to the United Way of America.

eighty collective hours of parent education (8 hours X 10 parents). Outputs have little inherent value in themselves unless they ultimately have the desired effect of achieving the anticipated **outcome**. They are important because they are intended to lead to a desired benefit for participants or target populations and they may be an indicator of outcomes.

Given enough resources, we can control output levels. In the parent education class, for example, the number of classes held and the number of parents served are outputs. With enough staff and supplies, the program could double its output of classes and participants by including more parents or by increasing the number of class-time hours. But would eight sessions be twice as effective as four? Would three-hour sessions be 50% more effective than the two-hour sessions? We don't know unless we measure outcomes.

Outcomes are the benefits or changes for individuals or populations during or after participating in program activities. They are influenced by a program's outputs. Outcomes may relate to behaviour, skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, condition, or other attributes. They are what participants know, think, or can do; or how they behave; or what their condition is, that is different following the program.

For our parenting program participants, we would hope that the desired outcomes are achieved – enhanced self-esteem for the participants' children and improved parent-child relationships. It is often difficult to measure changes of this nature without valid and reliable measures and some intrusion into the lives of the families involved. Even when we can measure the changes, it is frequently difficult to definitively establish a causal relationship between the program and its intended outcomes.

Many of the *outcomes* identified in the CFK Logic Model are in fact *outputs* which are easily controlled and measured. "Information provided" and "website developed" are valid outputs of the staff time and other resources provided to achieve them, but they tell us little about the impact on the children or families we are attempting to serve.

Tracking *inputs* and *outputs* is important as they help to determine program efficiency. But measuring *outcomes* helps us to measure program effectiveness and determine whether our efforts are actually producing benefits.

This apparent confusion between *outputs* and *outcomes* may be the source of some of the frustration in achieving CFK program goals. A lot of time is spent in tracking, reporting and reviewing outputs in quite a bit of detail while we are still left wondering about the possible benefits we are producing for those we serve. In addition, a great deal of time is spent pursuing activities to achieve outputs which may be secondary to the actual *outcomes* being achieved. For example, community facilitators may invest a lot of time trying to recruit and select

Community Table participants when the intended outcomes could possibly be achieved more easily through other means.

Given these challenges with respect to inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes, how is CFK doing?

Objective 1

Promote community capacity and leadership for early child health and development initiatives.

CFK's work in this area has been very impressive. The establishment of Community Tables, while not without its challenges, has instilled at the local level, a sense of ownership of, and commitment to, the coalition's overarching mandate. Stakeholders, including a wide range of community partners, have been brought together, they've been well informed and they've achieved tangible successes through their own work and through the application of funds accessed through CFK. The sustainability of these accomplishments will probably vary from community to community, but it is apparent that much has been accomplished in this area. The appreciation level for CFK's work is very much in evidence. This was indicated in the Focus Group and most certainly in the follow-up calls with those who had been unable to attend.

The work of CFK has strengthened relationships and communications within the region and within the communities in the catchment area, especially where there are active Community Tables. The sharing of general ECD information and research findings specific to the region has enhanced the knowledge level of all participants including parents, ECD workers and others involved in the field, especially educators and health care professionals.

Every effort has been made to encourage active participation in all communities and amongst Aboriginal communities and groups. With respect to fostering Aboriginal engagement, SB6 funding opportunities have provided some degree of success. Thanks to SB6 funding for example, the region's four First Nations bands and the Ooknakane Friendship Centre participated in the "Ullus Naqsilt" program to address the nutritional and physical health of children and families.

With respect to informing planning and other work at the community level, Communities for Kids shared its regional ECD plan with local communities. CFK also acted as an important conduit for ECD materials and information from national (UEY and the Council on ECD), provincial (Human Early Learning Partnership, Children First and Success By 6) and the regional (Interior Network) and local levels. This generous sharing of information empowered stakeholders at the local level to assume more responsibility for ECD activities in their own communities.

EDI surveys have been completed; parent interviews and direct assessments have been conducted. A very detailed Community Mapping Report has been

created including an inventory by community of facilities, services and supports for young children and their families; results of the EDI surveys of two school years; and a detailed assessment of economic and social risk factors.

Objective 2

Increase family awareness of, and support family access to, ECD resources and supports.

CFK has achieved a rather remarkable standard in communication within its catchment area through its website, newsletters, the networks established and maintained by the Community Facilitators and through a wide variety of promotional and information materials². In addition, a very accessible and affordable parenting conference is held each year on a rotational basis throughout the region.

Community Tables, where they have been established, are effective in identifying local needs and barriers to service. Transportation challenges in Oliver, for example, have been identified and addressed.

The established network and partnerships with Interior Health Authority (IHA), the School Districts and other community partners have enhanced the early identification of, and response to, child health and development issues. With CFK as a common gathering place, otherwise disparate service providers and concerned professionals have become more aware of the total impact of their combined efforts and, as a result of their association at the CFK table, more efficient in applying them.

Objective 3

Facilitate community commitment to, and sustainability of, ECD initiatives.

The close relationship with Interior Health, the School Districts and other community partners has facilitated cooperation and collaboration in a highly effective manner. Anyone inclined to underestimate the value of this association should consult with other organizations which do not enjoy this degree of affinity with well resourced organizations. The involvement of IHA, the School Districts and the local organizations which provide services to young children and their families underscores the significance and importance of work in ECD.

Sustainability is a common attribute expected of many initiatives today. The momentum established through the efforts of CFK and its participants has done much to enhance the sustainability of its accomplishments. The combined impact of the three distinct initiatives within the coalition has been highly synergistic with each contributing to the achievements of the others.

² The CFK Milestones Summary lists seventeen such items ranging from "A to V" (Appreciation Certificates to Videos).

Understanding the Early Years received a running start through its affiliation with the previously established Children First and SB6 initiatives.

Objective 4

Build a foundation to support sustainability of ECD initiatives.

CFK has done considerable work in pursuit of the fulfilment of this objective through its established relationships with government representatives, IHA, school districts and other stakeholders in the region and in the communities it supports. The website, newsletters and regional meetings provide a framework for collaboration, cooperation and the ready exchange of information and ideas.

CFK also acted as an important conduit for ECD materials and information from national (UEY and the Council on ECD), provincial (Human Early Learning Partnership, Children First and Success By 6) and the regional (Interior Network) and local levels. This generous sharing of information empowered stakeholders at the local level to assume more responsibility for ECD activities in their own communities.

There may be some unexplored funding resources and possibly some opportunities to pursue new revenue from social enterprise undertakings such as the publication of a magazine or the conduct of professional learning opportunities including conferences, seminars or workshops.

Work in Other Regions

In order to provide a basis for comparison of successes and challenges, input was solicited from similar initiatives in two other regions. Community Action Toward Children's Health (CATCH), in the Central Okanagan and the Early Years Initiatives of West Kootenay/Boundary each provided information about their operations. CATCH is more urban than its West Kootenay and CFK counterparts with most of its population base located in Kelowna. The West Kootenay initiative has similar geographic challenges to those experienced in the South Okanagan-Similkameen where a handful of smaller communities are spread out over a significant area. Needs and issues vary significantly from one community to another and regional meetings are difficult to hold on a regular basis. These two other initiatives enjoy participation and support from IHA, their respective school districts, MCFD and local United Ways. In the Central Okanagan, SB6 maintains a more distinct presence whereas it is clustered with UEY and Children First in the West Kootenay as it is here.

The initiatives developed in slightly different ways. CATCH had its early start in 1999, some three years before it became one of BC's first Children First communities. Communities for Kids started a little later but in much the same manner, as a community-based initiative without a funding impetus. The West

Kootenay initiative started in 2004 with some incentive provided by the availability of SB6 funding. When Children First funding arrived in the following year, it was associated with SB6 but with a distinct reporting mechanism. The UEY contract followed shortly thereafter and the already established ECD coalition was the logical focal point for this last initiative.

The issues and challenges faced by families in all regions are quite similar. Demand for more ECD information is quite universal as is the despair over the lack of child care space especially for infants and toddlers. Access to available services is also a shared concern although perhaps less so in Kelowna where services are more concentrated and public transportation is generally more available. All three initiatives have had some success in attracting partners to the table but all have challenges in maintaining consistent parental involvement. CATCH has had good success in drawing the Aboriginal communities to the table through the Kelowna Friendship Centre, the Westbank First Nation and the Okanagan Métis Children and Family Services Society. This association is aided by the presence of a regional coordinator for CATCH's Aboriginal ECD Action Team. Although there is no Aboriginal band or friendship centre in the West Kootenay, early mapping identified more Aboriginal families than had been expected. An Early Childhood Aboriginal Council is in the very early stages of development there.

With respect to staffing patterns, CATCH has its staff team concentrated in one location. That is not unusual given the relative compactness of the region. Perhaps somewhat more surprising, however, is that West Kootenay staff are also all quartered in the regional office (Nelson). Some efficiencies are realized this way but constant effort is required to ensure that all communities feel they are being treated equitably. Particular sensitivity is required in the distribution of SB6 funds which are allocated to meet regional, not necessarily local, priorities.

With respect to planning and needs identification, both of these initiatives have identified needs on a regional basis and are applying their collective efforts toward meeting them. CATCH's ECD plan targets child care, family centres, recreation, civic planning, support for vulnerable families and community awareness about ECD. West Kootenay has identified the need for more information for parents, support for literacy, support for "have not" families and access to local training.

West Kootenay has generated some social entrepreneurial success through the publication of its magazine and its regional conference. The magazine is supported substantially through advertising revenue and sponsorships. The most recent conference in the region ran from a Thursday evening through Saturday attracting three hundred participants and a net profit of nearly \$15,000. Workshops offerings included special sessions for physicians and teachers. Sponsorships and in-kind support supplemented the \$61,000 in registration revenue (300 @ \$205).

Another successful venture in West Kootenay is the SB6/Credit Union Books for Kids campaign. Each year local Credit Unions and their members collect good quality used children's books in receptacles at each branch. The books are distributed in various ways to families throughout the region. This low/no cost program is a good way of getting the community aware of and involved in an easily promotable ECD program of significant benefit to many children and their families.

What Really Matters?

The singular impression created by CFK's efforts to fulfil its role as outlined in the Logic Model is that the task is somewhat overwhelming. While a lot of good work is being done and great results are being achieved in many areas, the sheer enormity of the undertaking is sometimes daunting.

The Focus Group input confirmed the many accomplishments of CFK and the follow-up calls reiterated the message. CFK has delivered in many respects – in bringing people together; sharing the message of the importance of healthy early childhood development; building community capacity through education, support and accessing funds for projects and other work; acting as the focal point for bringing people, agencies and organizations together for the sake of the children of our communities; and advocating effectively for ECD in the region.

The Steering Committee minutes, the monthly and then quarterly reports, some of the feedback from the Focus Group and the subsequent conversations with Community Table members all reflect two predominant themes:

- a. CFK aspires to be, but is not, a grassroots movement; and
- b. The coalition struggles to do too much and still seems to be searching for a more refined sense of purpose and focus.

There is an apparent sense of frustration in not being able to establish and maintain Community Tables. This frustration is compounded by the fact that even when those tables are formed, it is challenging to consistently attract and/or retain the "right" participants. This seems to be especially true when it comes to the parents of preschool children and representation from Aboriginal communities.

These challenges are not unique to CFK or to early childhood initiatives. It is a common theme in efforts at "inclusion" in the helping professions. Far too often the very ones we want to include are seemingly the most resistant to being involved. Those who stand to benefit the most from our efforts are the last ones to avail themselves of what we have to offer. Conversely, those who are most enthusiastic about our services and are most responsive to our invitations to get

involved, are sometimes those who least need what we have to offer. We frequently find ourselves “preaching to the converted”.

There are many good reasons why sincere and dedicated parents are difficult to engage in active participation. Time is certainly a big factor. Service providers, although volunteers, are encouraged by their employers to get involved at CFK tables and the Steering Committee and are supported in doing so. Parents are busy with everyday early childhood development (parenting their children) and may be lacking the child care support they would need to “come to the table”. And if they have child care, they may have other competing priorities for their time.

It is quite possible for CFK to pursue its community development approach without attempting to be a “grassroots” movement. Grassroots movements and government initiatives are somewhat contradictory terms. The tension and frustration associated with the efforts to be a grassroots movement are reflected in the apparent disappointment, or sense of failure in the challenges associated with striking community tables or effectively engaging preschool families or acquiring significant representation from the Aboriginal communities.

While it is important to actively engage broad sectors of the community, including parents, the goals of Children First, UEY and SB6 can all be accomplished by supporting grassroots efforts but without being a grassroots movement. Being community-based, community-focused or community-driven is commendable and is highly encouraged. Trying to be or become a grassroots movement can be very vexing if the fundamental elements are not there. All three initiatives in the coalition are essentially driven from the top down with the basic terms of reference, structure and accountability measures determined by their creators and funders.

What does really matter then? What matters is that there is close alignment between the goals of CFK and the goals of those initiatives which drive it – Children First, UEY (currently) and SB6. It matters that CFK’s Mission be reflective of its Core Values and supportive of its Vision. It matters that the Goals which it sets for itself lead toward fulfillment of that Mission and that its Actions help accomplish those goals. And it matters that early childhood development is being enhanced as a result of it all. All of this is being accomplished quite effectively and the CFK participants and stakeholders should be justifiably proud of their many achievements.

Going Forward - a Regional Plan

With the imminent termination of UEY funding, CFK must address the reallocation of funding in a manner which will maximize the impact of its ongoing efforts. This will require some restructuring and a reassignment of workload, duties and responsibilities. This occasion may present an opportunity for a

reassessment of how staff time is allocated regionally and by community. Any consideration for change should be completed within the framework of an overall strategic planning exercise.

For the reasons cited above, and to help CFK build upon its many successes to date, it is recommended that the coalition revisit its strategic plan based on the Core Values upon which the coalition is based; within the context of the Vision which CFK has for the community; in fulfilment of its Mission which must be revisited and perhaps reframed; toward the identification of meaningful, outcome-focused Goals³ and the Actions necessary to accomplish them.

It is further recommended that the strategic planning document, a tool to help CFK move forward, be simpler and more concise than the current Logic Model which, while highly comprehensive, is somewhat overwhelming, contains areas of overlap and duplication, and is difficult to manage.

The strategic plan should address, at a minimum, the key issues identified during the Focus Group session: Funding and Communications with an emphasis on Public Awareness. The strategic plan will chart the path for ongoing ECD work within the region based on the priorities identified by the stakeholders and within the context of the Values to Action framework outlined above. It will also provide the basis for a strong case statement which should be developed as the basis for the coalition's communication and fund development plan if one is undertaken.

Some structural change is inevitable, possibly including more community representation at the Steering Committee table together with ongoing involvement at Community Tables. There would be some advantage in having community voices at the regional table and, if it can be achieved, some parental involvement on the Steering Committee. It may also be worthwhile to consider a regional staffing model such as that employed in the Central Okanagan and the West Kootenays

Success of the 2005 strategic plan (as reflected in the Logic Model), is predicated upon sustainable fundraising which should be extended beyond the scope of the current funding support for CFK. Concerted fundraising is a demanding task for which adequate resources are required. Some immediate effort should be extended to overcome this apparent *Catch 22* in order to provide the level of financial support needed to sustain even an appropriate level of activity throughout the region.

³ Goals should be stated in *SMART* fashion so as to be Specific, Measurable, Action-Oriented, Realistic and Time-Limited.

Summary and Conclusions

The principal participants in Communities for Kids can be justifiably proud of their work and many accomplishments since the inception of the coalition and particularly over the past three years. Appreciation for the coalition is widespread throughout the region and there is abundant evidence that through its efforts, early childhood development is being enhanced.

The coalition has brought key stakeholders to the Steering Committee table and this group has provided the leadership and strategic oversight required to advance the work of CFK in the region. Communities for Kids has successfully integrated the complementary mandates of Children First, Understanding the Early Years and Success By 6 for the benefit of young children and their families. It has actively supported the establishment of Community Tables and has provided those groups with assistance and resources in wide-ranging forms.

Over the past three years CFK, through SB6 and UEY, has provided funding support for projects and programs in all communities in the region and has conducted an affordable and accessible parenting conference each year. Through its website, newsletters and other communication/support efforts, the coalition has fostered the capacity of local groups and individuals to contribute positively toward the health and development of young children throughout the region.

There have been challenges and many lessons have been learned. With the imminent termination of Understanding the Early Years, there will be new challenges to face and some accommodation required to design and implement a modified structure. Facing these new challenges within the context of a comprehensive strategic plan will help to ensure that the good work of CFK is allowed to continue with optimal impact on the lives of children and families in the South Okanagan-Similkameen.

The best indicator of future performance is past performance. In this light, the future performance of Communities for Kids looks bright.