

Communities for Kids 2019 Focus Group Report

In September 2019, Communities for Kids (C4K) participants from across Nebraska met at a conference in Kearney. Representatives from the following communities were invited to participate in focus groups so the program team could learn more about their experience implementing the C4K initiative:

Albion/Boone County, Columbus, Garden County, Gothenburg, Grand Island, Keith County, Lexington, McCook, Nebraska City, Norfolk, North Platte, Pender, Red Cloud, Schuyler, Stuart, Wood River, York County

These participants had programs underway for at least a year. The participants were divided into two focus group discussions based on how far along they were in implementing C4K to discuss their experiences over the past year.

Focus groups followed a semi-structured format, with both groups getting the same core questions. The group that has been in C4K longer responded to questions about their experiences with additional planning and implementation activities. Due to the semi-structured nature of the questions and time constraints, there was some variation between groups on the exact topics discussed. Themes emerging from both group discussions are summarized below.

Program participants see benefits to their communities by being a part of the C4K initiative. Focus group participants felt that resources were the biggest benefit their community received as part of their participation, especially because these resources are particularly difficult for the smaller, rural communities to acquire. Others noted knowledge-related benefits, such as “knowledge and expertise” from others (including topics such as fundraising strategies), learning opportunities (e.g., conferences), and the support needed to implement newly learned information (e.g., “Having them walk with you and keep you moving, not just providing the resources and let you go.”). They appreciated that C4K worked with the unique needs and situations of each community. Some participants appreciated C4K’s assistance in connecting with local businesses, getting “information out to the community,” and getting information back from the community via surveys. Through these connections, they discovered “it’s not just us saying this is something we need.”

When asked about the benefits, one group focused on their hope that the initiative would raise awareness around the importance of childcare for the community. Specifically, they noted that childcare issues were a concern for businesses and community leaders, or rather, they would be if those businesses/leaders started “asking the right questions” to understand the problem. This group felt getting the community as a whole to change their mindset regarding childcare was needed. These communities hoped the C4K initiative would help everyone see the problem, so they could support the childcare providers and be engaged in the solution-finding process.

Challenges for the communities remain. One main challenge that communities reported was getting buy-in and support for the initiative. Lack of support was reported at all levels, from childcare providers, community leaders, and even those currently engaged in the program. Focus group respondents reported that few providers buy-in because a) it costs them in terms of time, resources, and financially, b) there are no incentives for their participation to offset those costs, and c) “They don’t need it! They

have waiting lists of children.” Moreover, participants reported that there is competition between providers and it is difficult to unite them because they are not focused on the same goals as C4K. And even if a community does get provider buy-in, continued participation is difficult because of the barriers noted above; “Educators are on board, but how can we get them to something like this conference? We cannot afford to lose 3-4 teachers to come to something like this.”

Community support is also less robust than what would be preferred. Both focus groups independently noted there was a need for community leaders; “They need that local champion who can really move them forward.” Right now, programs struggle to get community leaders “to hear the importance of this initiative” and shift their concepts of “daycare to a concept of Early Childhood Education.” Building and maintaining relationships with organizations like the school board and hospital boards is “a daunting task.” In addition, focus group respondents felt stakeholders did not always have a complete understanding of the issues families in the community faced, like poverty, insufficient support systems, and overly busy schedules. Other challenges included the difficulty in accommodating the diversity in the community (e.g., differences between cultures, generations, and language barriers). Lastly, finding fiscal support from the community has been difficult. One group noted that when they did get an organization on board, the fiscal agent misunderstood the responsibilities. The other group said that they “just cannot afford it. Once [we are] up and running, how do we keep it up and running?”

There was also the perception that some leadership has “lost sight of the mission” of the C4K initiative. One focus group respondent, newer to her leadership role asked a provider “if she remembered what had been accomplished with the plan last year and she said, ‘What plan?’” There were also reportedly individuals on the committee who did not know anything about the strategic plan. Changes in staff (e.g., the liaison person or the project coordinator) have caused some “hiccups” to the process as well. Some did note, however, that staff turnover could also bring positive changes, like new skillsets better tailored to the task, fresh energy, and renewed focus on their goals.

Focus group respondents also reported some barriers they have faced. Time was a big struggle, as many of them are volunteers with full time jobs. For some, the C4K-related “paperwork is off the charts” and “unreal,” creating an extra burden for leadership.

Communities have identified some strategies that help them enhance early childhood programming.

The first of the strategies noted was participation in C4K. The initiative has offered resources for things like a part-time coordinator and an architect, and they recognize the potential for it to provide resources for things “we have not identified yet.” Having C4K staff sharing information with the providers, coaching (specifically, when they “educate us how to educate others”), and keeping the community abreast of what is going on during each step of the process were noted as particularly helpful learning opportunities. Community partners also appreciated the opportunity “to just come and tell our story.”

Connecting with other programs and content experts was also a key strategy. Communities noted that having C4K staff support was helpful and reported that they were “always helpful and available.” Having one staff member in particular sit in on meetings was helpful because she had the connections the community needed in order to accomplish their tasks. For example, they found she could email “that very important person,” and emails from her prompted an immediate reply. If she did not already have the connections she needed to leverage on behalf of the program, “she looks and finds” them. But other early childhood networking, connections made via word of mouth and “just connecting with

others,” were also helpful. Some found that “reaching out to others and following their path/suggestions” was one way to make these connections and bolster their own programs.

Programs also reported that participation in additional learning opportunities, such as Policy Leadership Academy, National League of Cities, Ready Rosie, or First Five Nebraska’s Workforce development/Business Engagement/Dividends, was “absolutely recommended and so helpful.”

Communities who participated in the survey process with C4K found it helpful. Overall, participants appreciated the survey process, reporting that it gave their community an opportunity to come together and focus on what they wanted to do for the community. Communities reported having “great conversations” around what to include in the survey and one community reported that the survey helped community members realize that childcare issue “affects all of us. It was another layer of awareness.” The surveys also encouraged community engagement in C4K. For example, one organization who would not contribute financially to the initiative got involved in the survey process, offering to translate the survey and provide space for meetings. Other community organizations were helpful in conducting the survey and compiling results. Lastly, one community reported that 35 people came out to an orientation about C4K.

Communities appreciated the ability to customize their surveys. One created different pathways in Survey Monkey to tailor the survey to various respondent types (e.g., families, providers, or businesses) and another included QR codes, which respondents found novel and enjoyed. One community reported they did broad outreach, which included surveying those in rural areas, reaching out to mom groups and asking providers to distribute to parents, and offering the survey at community locations like the food bank and elementary schools. Offering the survey at community events was a successful way to increase response rates, with one community saying they collected over 100 surveys at a local Block Party event. Another offered entry into a raffle as a thank you for completing the survey.

Focus group participants had recommendations for future community surveys. One community noted that they missed some of their populations of interest because they did not offer enough face-to-face opportunities to complete the survey and recommended intentional efforts to reach a more diverse set of respondents next time. Another recommended that future surveys include the question, “Do you see yourself doing this work in five years?” because “it is surprising for people in the community to learn how many folks will no longer be serving children.” Lastly, one focus group respondent recommended that communities act on the data right away, as old data would not be useful in program planning.

Data collection processes around implementation plans have not gone well. Most focus group respondents indicated negative experiences around how they collected the data necessary to make decisions about their implementation plans. One community realized mid-process that they had not completed a needs assessment and had to get support from NCFE to complete that, then re-write their plan to incorporate the new information. Other groups reported that data collection can be threatening for providers, with those who are not doing Step Up to Quality indicating they have “no interest in C4K and are refusing to be a part of it.” In one community, unannounced visits from the Superintendent were not well received by the providers and made them not want to participate in C4K.

A potential solution to this problem was the idea to move the focus away from the *quality* of childcare, which can be off-putting to providers, and instead focus on the *availability* of childcare. As one person noted, “Quality is hugely important. But in the survey, we just need to know, are there truly slots and if

we help support [expansion of childcare opportunities], will you use it?" This kind of question may garner buy-in from the childcare providers and open the door to addressing the quality of childcare in the future.

Communities felt supported by C4K staff. Support from C4K was "great," with programs reporting that their C4K staff members were always available when they were needed, supportive, flexible, and would "always follow through." Communities felt their face-to-face meetings were "just the right amount" and said C4K "responsiveness was just right." One group noted that C4K support depended on program need at the time; if they were not needed, they did not intrude, but if there was a need, they were available. The calendar was viewed as a useful tool.

One recommendation to enhance the communication and support included just doing more of it. One focus group participant lauded C4K leadership staff, but noted, "For the record, she could really use some help! Not because she is not fulfilling her duties, but because the program is growing. Clone [her] please!" A second suggestion was to have the staff be "more direct." The communities reported wanting more guidance and direction, especially around data collection. As one community noted, they wished they had more advance understanding that they "have to have data to do this work." Thirdly, program participants requested they be connected with other C4K participants so they can share information about what has worked for them or get ideas about other paths forward (e.g., "building a new center" is not the only option, smaller solutions to community childcare needs could be viable too). One last suggestion came from a participant who mentioned she would like to know why some providers do not participate in Step Up 2 Quality. This person would like to survey providers who choose not to participate to find out their barriers and identify what prevents a site from moving up the steps.

Some participants of the focus group made a point to note that the C4K website is not very informative. They reported that they tried to prepare before visits from C4K staff "by looking at the website and googling, but there was nothing out there. We went in blind and it was the best thing that ever was dropped on our lap."

Initiative participants have advice for communities starting the C4K process. This advice includes recognizing that it is an "organic process and ownership must come from the community, not from NCFE." Participants reiterated the need for local leadership and people who are dedicated to the process, their "champions." They noted the need to recognize that those champions cannot all be from the same sector and encouraged new programs to advocate for a paid coordinator. They would also encourage local leadership to discuss the initiative with their childcare providers before signing on to C4K, because provider participation and support "is critical." Similarly, they recommended connecting the economic pieces of the puzzle for the community (as one said, "We need to paint the picture for them").

Current C4K communities would remind new programs to have patience and let them know that this is not a short-term process. At times, it can be overwhelming and there is a lot of work behind it. Participants recommend new programs talk to existing programs, to help them know "they are not alone," but to remember that every community is different. They encouraged programs to establish connections and relationships with key community childcare players (one focus group participant said, "Trust builds trust. After you see [C4K staff] in action and you see that trust in action, it is easier" to understand). And they recommend that new communities "join C4K when they let you!"

Overall, communities appreciated their participation in the C4K initiative and have high aspirations for their programs. Comments such as, “I wish I had known about this sooner!” were offered throughout the focus group discussions and programs felt a sense of pride at what they already accomplished. “We have accomplished a lot since last year at this time. It’s good to look back and see where we started and where we are now.”

When asked about the 12 months ahead, programs identified both long and short term goals. Some included more concrete plans, such as showing the film “No Small Matter” to the chamber and/or a young professionals group, establishing a role for a part-time coordinator, and inviting program graduates back to teach newer initiative participants. Longer-term goals included trying to “activate the business community and engage them,” building a new childcare center, and establishing a sustainable program (e.g., “To be able to turn this over eventually” by phasing out NCF and their own leadership of the process).

Summary. Overall, C4K initiative participants saw benefits from their participation in the program, even though they still faced some challenges. Awareness of and support for the initiative are sometimes difficult to come by and programs noted a need for a strong local leader to champion the C4K cause. Leveraging connections, especially those the C4K staff offer, and taking advantage of learning opportunities were viewed as key strategies to help communities enhance early child programming. The survey process, for those who completed it, was an important way for programs to gather needed data, but several communities still struggle with the administrative side of data collection and how to use data for implementation planning purposes. C4K staff were highly regarded by initiative participants. Lessons learned and advice for new C4K communities included the need for a local advocate for the program, hard work, and patience for a difficult but rewarding process. Current C4K participants have high aspirations for their programs and have articulated both short- and long-term goals.