

California Teachers Association Institute for Teaching P – 14 Early Childhood Education Alliance (ECEA)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The CTA IFT is in a unique position to convene a number of school-community stakeholders for the purpose of leveraging existing strengths within the P-14 educational system and collectively developing new initiatives aimed at creating a thriving learning environment for every child. Funded in part by The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the ECEA is a five-phased process. Each of these phases is designed to create a sustainable and replicable process that will build stakeholder capacity within the P-14 educational system, while maximizing existing resources and minimizing costs. The overall goal of the CTA IFT P-14 Early Childhood Education Alliance is to create ongoing strength-based initiatives around the state that will:

1. Increase communication and collaboration among and between all P – 14 school community stakeholders.
2. Increase the autonomy, value, and role of early childhood educators within all sectors of the community.
3. Identify new strategies for increasing and sustaining parent and family involvement in all aspects of their children's education.
4. Apply strength-based organizing strategies to school change.
5. Integrate child-centered practices, where appropriate, throughout the P – 14 system.
6. Provide information and updates on progress of the Early Childhood Education Alliance at CTA conferences including, but not limited to, the Good Teaching Conferences, Regional Conferences, and Rural and Urban Issues Conferences.

Overview and Theoretical Framing

Universal Voluntary Preschool is grounded in the belief that through early childhood education we will be able to resolve numerous problems facing our local school communities, particularly for many African American and Latino students and their parents. Often, preschool advocates have promoted early childhood education as a program or strategy for optimal opportunities for all students. While such views certainly reflect a generally accurate image of why preschool is advantageous for many students, the logic behind this thinking is based on a deficit model – a model that promotes preschool and early childhood education as a solution to a problem that needs to be fixed. However, as the achievement gap continues to grow for minority students and children of poverty, it is clear that a new mental model or *way of thinking* is required. Educators must act with a sense of purpose and direction if we are to regain the public's confidence in the education of our children. School and community stakeholders will need to evaluate their efforts to bring authentic innovation to the public schools by considering alternative planning and decision-making models. Beginning with early childhood education, changes need to be system-wide as stakeholders develop a shared vision articulating their deepest sense of values and purpose. Thus, rather than continuing with traditional, deficit-based, *fix-the-problem* approaches, we should explore frameworks and methodologies that focus on assets not deficits and commitment not compliance if we are going to create the great public schools we all desire. Through the ECEA, the CTA IFT will apply an alternative approach using strength-based methodologies for meeting the various challenges public education faces today. This approach is consistent with the goals of *teacher driven change* and will facilitate our discovering individually and collectively the great and wonderful things that are already taking place in early childhood school communities and using this information for encouraging cultural, structural, and procedural changes to create a successful learning environment for all students.

Strength-Based Approaches to Organizing

New strength-based methods for approaching and designing organizational change are gaining traction in both theory and practice. In the early 1980s, the seeds of strength-based organizational change began to take root with the development of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as both a philosophy and process for positive organizational change. AI calls for a shift from the traditional deficit-based theory of change to a positive, life-centric approach. In the classic work on AI by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), they argue that organizations are not "problems to be solved" but are centers of infinite human capacity--ultimately unpredictable and unknowable, a "mystery alive". They offer the hypothesis that human systems grow in the direction of what people study, thus leading a call for the search for the true, the good, the better and the possible in human systems.

Today the field of strength-based change has grown to include multiple methodologies such as positive deviance (Lapping K., et al, 2002), future search (Weisbord, et al 1992) and strengths finding (Buckingham and Clifton, 2001). These methods have been further catalyzed by the ground-breaking research of the positive psychology movement (Seligman, 1998, 2002; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) which is providing scientific evidence for the power of focusing on human strengths and individual potential to create positive change within individuals and across organizations.

A core idea within AI, future search and other strength-based organizational change processes is the idea of multiple-stakeholder engagement, or “whole system” engagement. By inviting the direct participation of all stakeholders in a system -- rather than just representative decision-makers-- these processes create successful and sustainable transformation at scales never-before imagined. This multi-stakeholder approach has been heralded in the recent book *Megacommunities* (Gerencser, M. et al, 2008), which reminds us that the problems and issues we face today require reaching across our social and sector divisions to create ‘megacommunities’ which work collaboratively toward a common goal (illustrated in Figure 1).

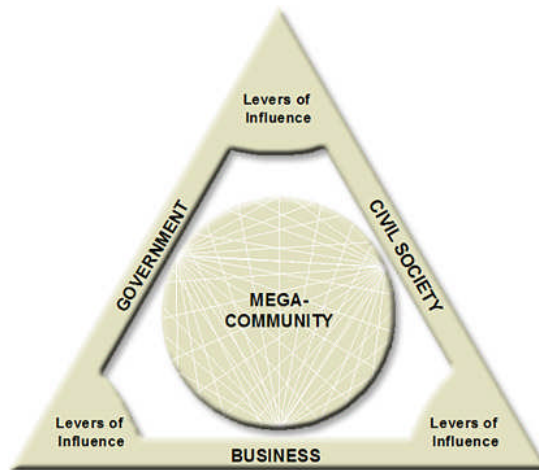


Figure 1: The Megacommunity Partnership (from www.megacommunities.com)

Informed by and applying these strength-based philosophies and approaches, as well as the idea of creating strong communities through multiple stakeholder engagement, the CTA IFT, in collaboration with a number of public and private organizations, will create the CTA IFT Early Childhood Education Alliance (ECEA). The intent of the ECEA is to establish a teacher-driven sustainable and far-reaching network. It will be supported through virtual and face to face connections where P – 14 school community stakeholders can work and learn together to create a culture of success for all students based on the premise that a highly balanced and diverse early childhood education learning environment is essential to the overall academic and social success for children.

The IFT will make every effort to work closely with the CTA State Council ECE Committee and local CTA Chapters on the development of the CTA IFT Early Childhood Education Alliance (ECEA) throughout the five phases of the project that are detailed below.

Phase I: Outreach & Engaging Others

Already underway is an ongoing outreach effort on the part of CTA IFT to identify and work closely with organizational leaders and primary stakeholders in early childhood education. Building on and extending these efforts, this phase will include:

- Creating a comprehensive outreach plan for contacting the following participating school-communities that include Fresno, Merced, San Diego, San Francisco, Sacramento, Santa Clara, Los Angeles, and San Mateo. The ECEA will be looking to include other school communities in the future for this partnership
- Working with CTA IFT partners (such as Preschool California) to insure that school-community stakeholders are fully committed to this project and are willing to help identify and create a “critical mass” of participants to engage in the process.
- Leveraging the overlapping work that iCohere is involved in with: NAEYC, ASCD, NSDC, America’s Promise Alliance, Phi Delta Kappa, WASC and other educational organizations with membership and leadership in California.
- Following the outreach plan created above, CTA IFT will seek to invite participants into the process and identify co-sponsors for the convening that will occur among these stakeholders

Outcomes of this phase include:

- Establishing official commitment from the target school-communities who will participate in this project, including: Fresno, Merced, San Diego, San Francisco, Sacramento, Santa Clara, Los Angeles, and San Mateo
- Creation of a database of contact information for the specific individuals within these school communities who will be participating in subsequent phases
- Creation of a webpage (linked to www.teacherdrivenchange.org) for the CTA IFT Early Childhood Education Alliance

Phase II: Training and Launching the Virtual Learning and Collaborative Action Network

Given the ongoing budget challenges that California schools and co-sponsoring organizations are facing in the wake of current economic realities, the CTA IFT realizes that using resources in new and creative ways is needed if change is going to occur. Therefore, through an entirely **online** process, this phase will launch the *Virtual Learning and Collaborative Action Network* in a way that dramatically reduces the costs (travel, time, etc.) associated with traditional face-to-face convening. This phase will include:

- Designing and creating a 90 minute “webinar” (with audio, webcast video and text) to provide participants with an overview of the goals behind the Early Childhood Education Alliance. Speakers during the webinar may include leadership from CTA and co-sponsoring organizations. (This event will be held ‘live’ online via the iCohere collaborative platform and also recorded for archival purposes and retrieval by participants on-demand within the iCohere site, as well as accessed via the www.teacherdrivenchange.org website)
- Conducting a series of online trainings for participants to become familiar with using the iCohere environment, the learning platform for the Virtual Learning and Collaborative Action Network. These trainings will involve conference calls where participants can be in front of their own computers and walk through the features of the learning space.
- Inviting participants to engage in some initial strength-based discovery inquiries and other activities designed to encourage commitment-building and ‘buy-in’ of participants to engage fully in Phases III, IV and beyond

Outcomes of this phase include:

- Creation and archival of a 90-minute webinar that overviews the goals of the Early Childhood Education Alliance which can be used by CTA IFT for future promotion of the project
- Participants mastery of the basic tools and features of the iCohere collaborative platform that they will be using for the Virtual Learning and Collaborative Action Network
- Initial data collection and dissemination (both within the Virtual Learning and Collaborative Action Network and beyond via the www.teacherdrivenchange.org website) of how strength-based school strategies are already being utilized in local school communities, schools, and classrooms as illustrations of ‘best

practices' we can learn from and leverage for future change projects

Phase III: Strengths-based Training & Capacity Building via the Virtual Learning and Collaborative Action Network

Training and Capacity-Building for School Community Participants:

To further build capacity and introduce new strength-based ideas and approaches for P – 14 education, participants will engage in a 4-week intensive online learning process. This process will provide an overview of various strength-based approaches (including Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search, Positive Deviance, Appreciative Coaching, and others), showcasing the potential of using such approaches in education through the use of illustrative cases and stories. This learning process will include:

- Weekly “Learning Lessons” which provide participants with reading, resources and illustrative cases on strength-based approaches and their application in schools (materials will be available ‘on-demand’ such that participants can access them at anytime)
- Weekly “Learning Activities” which invite participants to put into action the concepts they are learning about, from engaging in inquiries to identifying projects they want to launch in their own communities
- Weekly “Connection Calls” which invite all participants to come together for a live conference call to hear directly from someone who has successfully used strength-based approaches in their classroom/schools, to share their questions and learnings and to continue establishing connections among the Virtual Learning and Collaborative action Network (Note: These will be recorded for archival purposes and available on-demand for review)

Training and Capacity-Building for school-Community Stakeholders:

In addition to participating in the 4 week learning process as participants, stakeholders will also engage in a parallel process by which they learn how to construct and facilitate an online learning environment. Such capacity-building will enable CTA IFT and CTA to hold its own virtual learning events in the future without the need for external facilitation. This process will include:

- Weekly conference calls between CTA IFT, the Early Childhood Education Committee, iCoHere and the workshop facilitators. These will take place to review and discuss background planning and work that goes into the creation of the weekly training

Outcomes of this phase include:

- Participants' expanded knowledge and understanding of why strength-based organizing strategies work and are consistent with the philosophy of *teacher driven change*
- Participants' increased skills and knowledge about specific strength-based tools and organizing strategies they can use in their own classrooms and communities to create strength based change initiatives
- Ongoing data collection and dissemination of how strength-based school strategies are being utilized in local school communities, schools, and classrooms.
- Co-creation of a training guide for the CTA IFT on how to design and facilitate future online trainings

Phase IV: Early Childhood Education Alliance Connected School Community Summits

This phase aims at extending the work launched in Phase III by convening all participants via virtually connected synchronous community-based summits (online video conferencing) to officially launch and celebrate the Early Childhood Education Alliance. In an effort to continue building local school community capacity and collaboration, while minimizing travel and time costs, each school community group will participate in a one day, face-to-face summit in their own local community. The school communities will be facilitated and virtually connected (via the iCohere collaborative web platform and video conferencing) to each other through local summits occurring simultaneously. This connected school community event will include:

- Sharing overviews of the projects that have begun to emerge in Phase III
- Conducting additional discovery interviews and engaging in a collective visioning process (using Appreciative Inquiry techniques) to collectively outline the goals of the Early Childhood Education Alliance.
- Further articulating the individual initiatives that participants will be launching after the summit and creating action plans for these projects in a way that leverages the collective capacity of all the individuals and organizations at the summit (helping to establish cross-organizational collaborations, etc.)
- Creating a timeline of action for each proposed initiative

- Announcing a follow-up online conference that will take place 5-6 school months after the summit to showcase the progress of each project and invite other organizations and communities across California to join the Early Childhood Education Alliance
- Providing an overview of the ongoing support that will be available for projects that are a part of the Early Childhood Education Alliance. Such support may include:
 - CTA commitment to help provide further training and resources as needed to the members of the Early Childhood Education Alliance, including sponsoring monthly live webinars (via iCohere) to continue the momentum and learning in the *Virtual Learning and Collaborative Action Network*
 - Work done by iCohere to transform the learning space used in Phase III into an online community of practice with project work areas for each initiative
 - Offering additional training in leadership skills and capacity building to individual projects (Note: Bob Devlin of *Transformational Strategies*, a colleague of iCohere, has expressed interest in providing such training to a pilot group as a model for this kind of capacity building and/or further training as funds are available)

Outcomes of this phase include:

- Continued data collection and dissemination (both within the Virtual Learning and Collaborative Action Network and beyond via the www.teacherdrivenchange.org website) of how strength-based teacher-driven best practices are already being utilized in local classroom, schools and school communities. We can utilize these best practices to leverage teacher driven projects for change
- At least one teacher-driven action-based project plan for conducting a strength-based change project submitted to CTA IFT from each community group
- Participant commitment for reconvening in 5-6 months

Phase V: Online Conference

A 2-day online conference will take place approximately 6 school months following the conclusion of Phase IV's Summit. In order to continue building momentum for the Early Childhood Education Alliance the conference will showcase the progress and success of initiatives

(undertaken in Phase IV) and invite others to join the Early Childhood Education Alliance. This online conference will:

- Showcase the progress and success of each individual project launched in Phase IV
- Provide a way to educate others about the Early Childhood Education Alliance and invite them to participate in the work being done or launch their own projects
- Invite foundation and other funding agencies to participate in the conference to hear the project updates and proposals from each community group with an aim at making connections between initiatives and interested grant-makers
- Include live webinars by sponsors of the Early Childhood Education Alliance to detail what resources each organization brings to the projects underway and future projects
- Provide the dates for the next 4-week training session to be held for new participants in the Virtual Learning and Collaborative Action Network which will be designed and facilitated by CTA IFT

The online conference will serve not only to further energize the projects already underway, but also to launch a new cycle for the entire process to repeat and grow the Early Childhood Education Alliance.



Outcomes of this phase include:

- Action reports from each community on the progress of their individual initiatives which will be further disseminated across the state via www.teacherdrivenchange.org website
- Identification of specific successes to be further showcased around the state

- Generation of a new cohort to participate in the next online-training to be facilitated by CTA IFT
- Teacher-driven best practice outcomes will be made public to state and national educational organizations and associations