

This research was funded under contract by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, the Ministry of Community and Social Services and the new Ministry of Children and Youth Services. The report reflects the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the Ministries.

## **Better Beginnings, Better Futures:**

### **Project Sustainability**

**JULY 2005**



## **acknowledgements**

*We would like to thank:*

- *the senior managers and staff at each of the Better Beginnings, Better Futures sites for arranging the site visits and the review of both the individual site reports and this cross-site report*
  - *all the individuals at the sites who participated in the research*
  - *the following individuals for their contributions to the qualitative research: Susan Alisat, Nadia Hausfather, Alexei Kissin, Claude Lauzon, and Susan Palijan.*
  - *Dr. Yves Herry and Dr. Claire Maltais for their work on the Elementary School September Report database and for the Ministry of Education in providing these data to our research team*
  - *the data analysis team: Dr. Robert Arnold, Dr. Kevin Parker, Shahriar Khan and Andrew Currie*
  - *for their work in helping to format this report, Philomene Kocher and Gail Irving*
  - *the Site Researchers who were responsible for gathering the Senior Kindergarten and Grade 3 teacher ratings led by Caroline Zwaal, the Site Supervisor, and*
  - *all teachers who participated in the research.*
- 

## **for further information, contact:**

Ray DeV. Peters, Ph.D.  
Research Director  
Better Beginnings, Better Futures  
Research Coordination Unit  
Queen's University  
98 Barrie Street  
Kingston, Ontario  
K7L 3N6

Tel: (613) 533-6672  
Fax: (613) 533-6732  
Web: <http://bbbf.queensu.ca>

## **citation:**

Nelson, G., Pancer, S. M., Peters, R. DeV., Hayward, K., Petrunka, K., & Bernier, J. R. (2005). *Better Beginnings, Better Futures: Project Sustainability*. Kingston, ON: Better Beginnings, Better Futures Research Coordination Unit Technical Report.

## INTRODUCTION

### **BETTER BEGINNINGS, BETTER FUTURES: PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY**

In 1990, the Ontario Government announced the Better Beginnings, Better Futures project as a 25 year comprehensive, community-based longitudinal research demonstration project for young children and their families living in eight disadvantaged communities in Ontario. The three goals of Better Beginnings, Better Futures are to: prevent serious long-term emotional and behavioural problems in children; promote the optimal emotional, behavioural, social, physical and cognitive development in children; and strengthen the ability of communities to respond effectively to the social and economic needs of children and their families.

Since 1991, five of the Better Beginnings communities have developed and implemented programs for children between birth and four years of age and their families (*the younger child sites*), and three have developed and implemented programs for children from ages four to eight years of age and their families (*the older child sites*).

Each local Better Beginnings project site was funded to develop and implement all the promising programs that would address the project goals, fit within budget constraints, and meet the needs of that particular community. During 1991 to 1993, each local project developed and began to implement an array of programs, some of which focused directly on children, some focused on their parents, while others included all families living in the project neighbourhood.

The Better Beginnings Research Coordination Unit (RCU) reported results from the first seven years of project implementation (1991-1998) in a research report entitled *Developing Capacity and Competence in the Better Beginnings, Better Futures Communities: Short-Term Findings Report* (Peters et al., 2000).

The official demonstration period for the Better Beginnings project ended in 1997 when the eight project sites were allocated annualized funding through their host organization. Overall responsibility for each local project was transferred from the corporate Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) offices in Toronto to regional MCSS program supervisors throughout the province. This extended project funding provides a unique opportunity to carry out eight case studies on social program sustainability designed to identify important factors and costs associated with the successful maintenance of prevention programs and organizational structures characterized by local resident involvement, partnerships with other service providers, and broader community development initiatives.

In 2000, the RCU received funding for a medium-term follow-up study of the Better Beginnings project covering the years 2000 to 2005. This medium term follow-up research provided an excellent opportunity to add valuable knowledge concerning the relative effectiveness of this unique prevention project in improving the lives of Ontario children and their families living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

The objectives of the medium-term follow-up research were as follows:

- In the older child sites, to determine effects of the Better Beginnings programs on Grade 6 children and their families three years after ending program involvement in 1998, and to attempt to identify pathways through which the Better Beginnings programs are influencing the Grade 6 outcomes.
- In the older child sites, to relate short-term program costs to medium-term potential cost savings through reductions in such outcomes as grade repetition, serious emotional and behavioural problems, and use of specialized education, social and health services.
- To evaluate the sustainability of the local Better Beginnings organizations. The first type of sustainability research was designed to determine the extent to which resident participation and involvement, partnerships created with other service providers and educational organizations, and broader community initiatives are being sustained in each of the eight Better Beginnings sites. The second type of sustainability research examined whether differences between project and comparison site children in 1998/99 were stronger or weaker in 2003.

The first two objectives are addressed in an RCU report entitled *Do Better Beginnings Lead to Better Futures? Three-Year Follow-up Outcomes for Grade 6 Children and Their Families* (2003, revised 2004).

The current report presents research findings related to the third objective, namely the sustainability and ongoing effects of the Better Beginnings, Better Futures project. Several authors have pointed out the difficulty in sustaining successful demonstration programs for disadvantaged children and families after the demonstration period ends (Blakely et al., 1987; Olds, 1997; Schorr, 1988, 1997). In a comprehensive examination of American experiences with promising demonstration projects, Schorr (1997) provides numerous examples of how important elements of program success were compromised when mainline agencies assumed responsibility for the delivery of demonstration programs. Schorr concludes that established methods of service organizations often have to be modified to allow for successful applications of promising approaches to helping those most at risk for negative outcomes. Cameron and Vanderwoerd (1997) and Cameron, Hayward and Mamatis (1992) comment on the need to simplify existing procedures and cross bureaucratic boundaries in order for effective prevention programs for disadvantaged children and families to thrive.

The major goals of the present study were to describe the ongoing effects of the Better Beginnings, Better Futures projects by: a) documenting whether or not important changes occur in the program model, as well as in project organization, management and costs, and b) determining whether child outcomes of the demonstration period have been maintained, strengthened or weakened from 1998/99 to 2003.

## **SECTION A: The Life Cycle of Better Beginnings, Better Futures Organizations: From Planning to Sustainability**

From 1991 to 1998, the Better Beginnings research included a qualitative, ethnographic component to examine the key elements of the Better Beginnings model. Through participant observation, individual and group qualitative interviews, a review of program documents, and a multi-year immersion in the eight Better Beginnings sites, site researchers gathered qualitative data that were used to generate reports about: (a) resident participation, (b) service-provider involvement, (c) project organization and management, (d) the program model, (e) the original coalition and proposal development process, and (f) the stories of residents who participated in the Better Beginnings projects. All of these reports were written during the developmental and research demonstration phases of the sites, and these reports, with the exception of the last two, were updated in 1998. However, since 1998, there has not been any further qualitative research on program development and program model issues.

For this current report, we will examine what has happened at the Better Beginnings sites with respect to program development and the program models over the last 5 years since the sites moved to sustained long term funding. Also, we will document any community and/or program development initiatives in the comparison communities. The following main topics regarding the program models and program development of the Better Beginnings sites will be examined: (a) resident participation, (b) service-provider involvement, (c) project organization and management, and (d) the program models. These four topics will be covered with regard to three main phases in the lifecycle of the Better Beginnings organizations: (a) the developmental phase, during which the programs were planned, (b) the demonstration phase, during which programs were in operation, but under short-term funding, and (c) the sustainability phase, during which the programs received ongoing funding.

## **SECTION B: A Quantitative Examination of the Sustainability of the Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project Based on School Measures**

For this research, a cross-sectional design was employed, collecting information about children living in the Better Beginnings and comparison neighbourhoods at a fixed age of the child, namely the upper age range of the Better Beginnings programs. In the younger child sites, where Better Beginnings programs focus on children from birth to 4 years of age, information was collected from Senior Kindergarten (SK) teachers in the spring of 2003. Teachers rated school readiness, health and behavioural problems for students in their SK class. This provided an assessment of children who had spent a good deal of their preschool years in Better Beginnings communities, and allowed for an ongoing determination of the sustainability of program effects through comparisons to data collected previously in 1999, on 4-year old children in the younger child Better Beginnings and comparison communities.

A similar cross-sectional strategy was employed in the older child sites where Better Beginnings programs focus on children from Junior Kindergarten (JK) through Grade 2. Information was collected at Grade 3 in 2003 on child development indicators using teacher ratings of children's behaviour, special education class placements and grade retention. In addition, information was

collected from the Ontario Ministry of Education's Principals October Report database on special education use in all schools in the Better Beginnings and comparison neighbourhoods. Analyses of these measures were carried out between Better Beginnings and comparison sites and then were contrasted with the same measures that had been collected on Grade 3 children in 1998. This allowed for an assessment of changes in Grade 3 outcome effects over time in the older child Better Beginnings and comparison site neighbourhoods.