

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The Better Beginnings, Better Futures project began operating in 1991. The five younger child sites developed and implemented programs for children from prenatal to four years of age, their families and their local neighbourhoods, while the three older child sites did the same for children ages 4 to 8.

Two parallel streams of research have been carried out since the inception of the project by the Research Coordination Unit (RCU). The first type of research consists of the collection, analysis and reporting of qualitative data designed to describe how the eight local projects developed their organizational structures, involved local residents in those organizations, implemented programs for children, families and neighbourhoods, and coordinated their organization and programs with other local services.

The second major research focus has been on the outcomes and impacts of the local projects. Data have been repeatedly collected, analyzed and reported on how children and families living in the eight Better Beginnings project sites differ from those in non-project comparison neighbourhoods, and also from a Canadian normative sample.

The demonstration phase of the project officially ended in 1997 when the Ontario Government began to provide annualized funding to the eight project sites and transferred responsibility for each project to a Ministry of Community and Social Services (now Ministry of Children and Youth Services) regional office.

The qualitative descriptive research results as well as the outcome evaluation results for the demonstration phase of the project, based on data collected between 1991 and 1998, were described in a comprehensive report by the RCU in 2000 (Peters et al., 2000; see <http://bbbf.queensu.ca> for all research reports produced by the RCU).

In 2000, the RCU began a five-year phase of follow-up research, funded by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, that had two major goals. The first was to follow longitudinally the children and families that had participated in the demonstration phase research to examine longer term outcomes three to six years after their project involvement. The second goal was to collect information concerning the viability and sustainability of the eight local Better Beginnings projects. The current report addresses the second of these goals.

The data collected, analyzed and described in this report were designed to answer two general questions concerning the viability and sustainability of the eight Better Beginnings projects over the five-year period following the end of the demonstration phase in 1997. The first question concerned how well the eight local project organizations have functioned in terms of continuing to provide programs for children, families and local neighbourhoods, whether they were able to maintain meaningful involvement of local residents in organizational decision-making, and whether each local project was able to operate successfully in partnership with other service-providing organizations. This was the major focus of Section A of this report.

The second question concerned whether there was evidence that the eight local Better Beginnings projects were continuing to have demonstrable impacts on a range of outcome measures on children living in the Better Beginnings sites that differed from children living in the comparison neighbourhoods and, where possible, relative to normative functioning for Ontario children or Canadian children as a whole. This outcome evaluation of children's functioning was the focus of the second part of this report, Section B.

**Question 1: How well have the eight local Better Beginnings project organization functioned from 1998 to 2003?**

The research summarized here examined the organizational functioning of the eight local Better Beginnings projects during the five-year period following the end of the demonstration phase when they had been transferred to permanent annualized funding beginning in 1997.

We used a stakeholder approach to information-gathering. The groups that we interviewed included: (a) the Project Manager and program coordinators, (b) direct service staff, (c) community residents who have been involved in the project, and (d) key service-provider partners. The total number of people interviewed at the Better Beginnings sites was 248.

A semi-structured interview guide was used, covering each of the main topic areas. The focus group interviews and individual interviews were all tape-recorded. As well as conducting interviews, each research team visited one or more of the program activities and had a chance to chat informally with program participants and staff. All of the focus group and individual interviews were transcribed.

The research team read these transcriptions and used them to complete the draft of a site report for each of the eight Better Beginnings sites. The site reports were organized into sections that focus on the key dimensions that we studied: (a) resident participation, (b) service-provider involvement, (c) project organization and management, and (d) the program model. Each of these sections was organized into the life cycle of the project, beginning with the developmental phase, moving to the demonstration phase, and ending with the sustainability phase. As we have done previously with the Program Development/Program Model research, we used the individual site reports to generate Section A of this current report which highlight similarities and differences across the Better Beginnings projects over time.

A similar though less extensive approach was used to examine activities in the four comparison communities: Etobicoke, Hamilton, Ottawa-Vanier, and Peterborough. Data were gathered about program activities and service-provider partnerships in these sites via interviews and an examination of websites.

**Managing the Transition.** Almost all of the sites experienced the transition to the sustainability phase as stressful and challenging, having to deal with changes in leadership, staff turnover, and a changing organizational, community, governmental, and socio-political context. Many of the original project managers who were so key to the success of the projects during the developmental and demonstration phases retired during the sustainability phase. An important organizational change that occurred during the sustainability phase included changing relationships with the sponsor agency. Many of the sites also experienced community changes, including an increasingly diverse population in the community with the immigration of new Canadians. There was no longer a government committee or staff from the corporate office of the Ministry of Community and Social Services to oversee and support the projects. This responsibility was transferred to the area offices of the Ministry of Community and Social Services who had no previous experience working with the sites. Also, there was no increase in funding for most of the projects from government during the demonstration and sustainability phases.

The Better Beginnings initiatives coped with these changes proactively through planned processes of organizational renewal and restructuring. These organizational change processes were designed to assist the sites in dealing with the new realities in the community. Planned change processes are a vital part of the life of learning organizations as they strive to grow and prosper.

**Changing Organizational Relationships.** Each of the sites has worked to find an organizational arrangement that would sustain the community-driven prevention programs. While the Better Beginnings sites appear to have become somewhat more traditional in their organizational structures over time, they are nevertheless more non-traditional and innovative than mainstream human service organizations in their communities. All of the sites continue to have some mechanisms to involve residents in meaningful roles in the organizations; all strive to main the vision, values, and principles on which Better Beginnings was founded; and all are progressive human service organizations.

**Striving to Maintain the Vision.** In spite of the challenges experienced during the sustainability phase noted above, the Better Beginnings organizations used values, principles, and resident participation to hold these initiatives to their original vision.

One of those values was widespread resident participation in all aspects of the Better Beginnings initiatives. During the sustainability phase, all of the Better Beginnings sites continued to involve residents in various roles in the organizations. Some of the sites continued to have the mandated 51% or more resident participation on all project committees and the primary decision-making body of the organization. Others did not have the same high level of resident participation that they had during the developmental and demonstration phases, but they did have some mechanisms for ensuring resident participation. The sites also continued their practice of hiring residents from the Better Beginnings community as staff members. One challenge experienced during the sustainability phase was integrating “new” and “continuing” residents. New volunteers do not have the same sense of history and perhaps the same degree of ownership that the original resident participants had.

Comments from the focus group and key informant interviews pointed to the importance of resident participation in holding the initiatives to the original Better Beginnings vision. Involving residents in the process helps to keep the initiatives honest to their original mandate.

**Staying the Course.** All of the sites have been successful in sustaining a holistic, community-driven approach to prevention programs for younger or older children and their families. In fact, the core programs have become routinized in all of the sites. It is clear from our research that the Better Beginnings sites have many qualities that promote sustainability.

Not only have the sites continued to serve children in the original age groups, but many of the sites have obtained additional funding to augment services for children in the age group or to serve children outside of the age groups. Thus, the organizational infrastructure of Better Beginnings has served as a base or platform from which other prevention programs can be added.

**Being a Beacon in the Community.** In this research, many participants commented that the projects served as a model of how to create partnerships among service-providers and residents using a community development approach. During the sustainability phase, the sites continued to have strong partnerships with other service-providers. While some of the partners have changed, the sites still emphasize working in partnership with other community agencies. Moreover, other community groups or new community organizations often sought out the expertise of the Better Beginnings organizations in helping them to engage residents and service-providers in their initiatives. There were several comments that the Better Beginnings organizations were recognized as leaders in the community, and that the sites had a great deal of credibility in the community regarding a community development approach to prevention for children and families. In their leadership role, the Better Beginnings organizations acted as a magnet to draw partners together around new community initiatives.

## **Conclusion**

While the transition to permanent funding was accompanied by many challenges and changes, some aspects of the sites have remained relatively consistent. Overall, the research concerning organizational structures and function found that: (a) the programs provided by the local projects are sustained and thriving; (b) the organizational structures have functioned effectively as platforms for adding new prevention and promotion programs into the neighbourhood; and (c) the local Better Beginnings projects have served as effective models for creating partnerships among service-providers and local residents, and in this leadership role have acted as a magnet to draw partners together around new community initiatives.

The Better Beginnings project was initiated by the Ontario Government in 1991. For the most part, the original vision of this innovative, community-based prevention and promotion project for young children and their families in eight disadvantaged Ontario neighbourhoods is alive and well.

**Question 2: How are children in the eight Better Beginnings sites functioning in school relative to children in the comparison sites? Have differences between the two groups changed over the five-year period from 1998 to 2003?**

In the younger child sites, data were collected in 2003 on several aspects of children's functioning by Senior Kindergarten (SK) teachers rating each child using the Early Development Instrument (EDI). This measure, developed in Ontario by Janus & Offord (2000) was designed to assess a broad range of children's development and school readiness. The measure has gained national and international attention, and is being employed widely throughout Ontario and Canada to provide a repeated cross-sectional "snapshot" or "report card" on the developmental functioning of groups of kindergarten children.

The EDI measure, collected on children in the five younger child Better Beginnings project sites and on children in the two neighbourhood comparison sites was analyzed in two ways. First, a set of items used in the EDI reflecting children's emotional, social and behavioural functioning had also been collected via teacher ratings of Junior Kindergarten children in both Better Beginnings project and comparison sites in 1999 at the end of the project demonstration phase. This allowed for analyses of differences on the measures between kindergarten children from the Better Beginnings and comparison sites in 1999 and then again in 2003 to determine if differences on these aspects of children's functioning were increasing, decreasing, or remaining constant. A second analysis employed all five of the EDI domains, and examined whether SK children living in the Better Beginnings sites in 2003 differed from those living in the comparison sites.

In the older child sites, cross-sectional analyses of teacher ratings of a group of Grade 3 students, collected in three Better Beginnings and two comparison sites in 1998, were compared with teacher ratings on a group of Grade 3 students in 2003. The measures included ratings of several types of children's emotional and behavioural problems using rating scales employed in the NLSCY. Also, several teacher rating measures of children's social skills and use of special education services were collected at both points in time.

The analyses of data collected in the younger and older child sites were designed to provide evidence concerning the sustainability of Better Beginnings program effects over the four to five year period between 1998/99 to 2003.

The main research question was whether or not differences between children in the Better Beginnings and comparison neighbourhoods in 1998/99 changed over the subsequent five year period. If positive differences favouring Better Beginnings children relative to those from the comparison sites on data collected in 1998/99 remained stable or increased in the 2003 measures, this was seen as providing support for the sustainability of the impact of Better Beginnings programs. If the differences became smaller or began to favour the comparison site children, this was seen as providing evidence for the lack of or decreasing sustainability of Better Beginnings programs over the five year period.

**Summary of findings in the younger child sites.** The results of the analyses on teacher ratings of children in the younger child sites indicated more positive outcomes for children from schools in the Better Beginnings neighbourhoods than from children from schools in the comparison neighbourhoods. These positive outcomes favouring the Better Beginnings children were significantly stronger in 2003 than they had been in 1999 for teacher ratings of hyperactivity-inattention.

For the EDI measures, collected for the first time in 2003, the results also favoured children from the Better Beginnings schools relative to those from the comparison sites. The results for the EDI domains of language / cognitive development and communication skills / general knowledge were the most consistent in favouring the Better Beginnings children.

Students from the three Better Beginnings younger child sites in Ottawa, Regent Park and Walpole Island showed more positive outcomes than did those from the Better Beginnings schools in Guelph and Kingston. The descriptions of how Better Beginnings programs changed from 1998 to 2003, in each of the five younger child neighbourhoods presented earlier in Section A of this report, noted that both Ottawa and Regent Park added programs after 1998 that were focused on improving the cognitive and language development in children from 0 to 4 years of age. Also, the Walpole Island Better Beginnings project became fully integrated with other child-focused programs, and program resources were increased for such early development programs as parent home visitation and centre-based day care for all preschool children. The program modifications in these three sites may have contributed to the positive outcomes in several measures of school readiness, and also lower percentages of children being rated by their SK teachers as showing severe problems in any of the EDI domains.

SK students from the Better Beginnings sites in Guelph and Kingston, on the other hand, were rated by their teachers as scoring lower on several of the EDI domains than children from the comparison sites, particularly in the domains of emotional and social competence. These lower average teacher ratings in Guelph and Kingston were particularly apparent in the calculation of the percentage of children whose scores were below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile for Ontario children in one or more of the five EDI domains, an indication of serious difficulties or delays in school readiness. 53% of Guelph children and 47% of the Kingston children showed severe problems in one or more of the EDI domains, as opposed to 38% of the comparison site children and 24% of all the children in the Ontario normative sample. Only 26% to 29% of children in the three Better Beginnings sites in Ottawa, Regent Park and Walpole Island were reported by their SK teachers as showing this level of poor school readiness, percentages well below those in children from the comparison sites, and nearly as low as the Ontario average.

An explanation for the high percentage of children with serious school readiness problems in Guelph and Kingston is not readily apparent. Since the EDI does not contain questions regarding family socioeconomic risk factors such as low parent education, unemployment, use of English as a second language, or single parent status, it was not possible to determine whether there was an increase in the percentage of high-risk children in the Guelph and Kingston samples from 1998 to 2003. Searching individual school records for changing demographic characteristics of

children in SK over the past five to six years in all the Better Beginnings and comparison sites was well beyond the scope of this study.

The Kingston Better Beginnings site did eliminate a program that provided enrichment to neighbourhood child care centres in 1998, and that may have had some effect on children's school readiness. The introduction in Kingston of a program for preschoolers designed explicitly to foster school readiness was only introduced in 2002, and then only for a small number of children. There were no obvious program changes in the Guelph Better Beginnings organization that might help to explain the high percentage of children showing poor school readiness. However, it was noted in Section A that the Guelph Better Beginnings neighbourhood experienced a sharp rise in the percentage of immigrant families starting in the mid-1990's, a fact that may have contributed to the high percentage of children with school readiness problems.

In the combined five younger Better Beginnings sites, there were 10 outcome measures analyzed and the results were summarized in Tables B.1 and B.2. As well, an additional six analyses of the percentages of SK students showing severe school readiness problems on the EDI were presented in Tables B.3 and B.4. Of these 16 analyses, 15 favoured the combined Better Beginnings sites relative to the comparison sites. Of the 15 positive effects, two were statistically significant: the 1999 to 2003 change in ratings of the Hyperactivity-Inattention scale, and the percentage of children scoring below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile on the EDI domain of Communication Skills / General Knowledge. Two of the five analyses of average EDI domain scores were marginally significant, and two of the younger child sites showed a significant decrease in principal-reported use of special education services, while one site showed a significant increase on this measure relative to the comparison sites.

**Summary of findings in the older child sites.** The analyses of teacher ratings for Grade 3 children revealed a positive pattern of results, indicating more improved outcomes from 1998 to 2003 in children from the Better Beginnings schools relative to those from the comparison site schools. These positive outcomes were stronger and more consistent in the Cornwall and Sudbury Better Beginnings sites than in Highfield. The positive outcomes in Cornwall and Sudbury resulted from the fact that in their comparison site in Ottawa-Vanier, the Grade 3 student ratings by their teachers and also in the Principals October Report of the measure of special education use, were poorer in 2003 than in 1998 (i.e., more problems, fewer social skills, more use of special education services) on all measures analyzed, while in Cornwall and Sudbury, these measures all either improved or remained stable from 1998 to 2003.

For the Highfield Grade 3 teacher ratings, the average scores presented in Figures B.6 to B.12 in Section B, were more positive than those from their Etobicoke comparison site schools in both 1998 and 2003 on all of the measures except one, ratings of indirect aggression. Thus, although Highfield Better Beginnings students did not show any significantly greater improvements from 1998 to 2003 than students in the Etobicoke comparison site, their overall functioning was more positive in nearly all of the teacher ratings at both time points, as well as in the Principals October Report of special education use from 1992 to 2001. One possible reason why the outcome effects in Highfield did not significantly improve from 1998 to 2003 relative to those in Etobicoke is the discontinuation of the Lion's Quest Skills for Growing program that had been offered through the Better Beginnings project to all students in the Highfield school from 1995 to

1999. This comprehensive social skills program administered by classroom teachers, was identified as one reason students in the Highfield Better Beginnings site had shown large improvement in a number of teacher ratings of social and emotional behaviour during the demonstration phase (Peters et al., 2000).

The positive Sudbury results are particularly striking due to the fact that there was no evidence of a positive difference in teacher ratings of students from Sudbury relative to those in the Ottawa-Vanier comparison site in data collected during the demonstration phase from 1993 to 1997 (Peters et al., 2000). This lack of positive outcomes for school ratings during the demonstration phase may have influenced the decision to increase the emphasis on homework completion and academic work in the Better Beginnings after-school program in Sudbury described earlier in this report, thereby improving the school performance of Grade 3 students in the 2003 ratings relative to those in 1998.

Cornwall made few changes from 1998 to 2003 in the array of programs offered through Better Beginnings, and continued to emphasize school-based prevention and promotion programs for children in JK through Grade 2. The positive school effects found in Cornwall during the demonstration phase continued to strengthen during the next five years despite the major modifications to the organizational structure of the project described earlier.

Few prevention or promotion programs for primary school-aged children in the Ottawa-Vanier comparison site were identified in the research reported in Section A. This was in contrast to the Etobicoke comparison site where many programs existed for 4 to 8 year old children. These differences likely contributed to the poor ratings of Grade 3 children in the Ottawa-Vanier schools and relatively good ratings of children in the Etobicoke comparison site schools. These differences between the two comparison sites may have contributed to the more positive effects in the Cornwall and Sudbury Better Beginnings sites relative to their Ottawa-Vanier comparison site, and the fewer positive effects in the Highfield Better Beginnings site relative to their comparison site in Etobicoke.

The results of the analyses of children's outcome measures for the combined Better Beginnings older child sites can be summarized as follows. All ten of the analyses presented in Table B.5 were favourable to the three older child Better Beginnings sites combined relative to the comparison sites, and six of the 10 positive effects were statistically significant. Also, Cornwall and Sudbury showed significantly greater decreases in principal-reported use of special education services from 1992 to 2001, contrasted with their comparison site, and the third Better Beginnings site in Highfield showed a marginally significant decrease. There were no statistically significant negative Better Beginnings effects for any of the analyses.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, then, the pattern of positive outcomes favouring the Better Beginnings sites was generally more consistent for the three older child sites than for the five younger child sites. There may be several reasons for this difference. All three older child Better Beginnings sites offered in-school or after-school programs that involved virtually all children in JK to Grade 2 living in the Better Beginnings neighbourhood. These programs focused on strengthening

academic and social skills, and were provided consistently throughout the school year. In the younger child sites, there was a wider range of programs, involving parents as well as children, and none of these programs was as intensive nor able to involve as many children as the in-school and after-school programs in the older child sites. Since nearly all children go to school, at least starting with SK, providing programs during or immediately after the school day allows an opportunity to involve almost every child of early school age. For children aged four and younger, however, there is no easy way to consistently access all children, making universal programs much more difficult to deliver and program impact effects more difficult to demonstrate for these younger children. It is for these reasons that there are very few universal prevention projects for children before school entry (universal screening at birth is one exception), and also why the most effective prevention programs for children younger than five years of age have predominantly been highly targeted projects for very high-risk infants or preschoolers, and are “centre-based” programs that provide structured and intensive programs in a preschool or child care centre setting on a half-time or full-time basis for several years. Three of the most noteworthy projects in this regard are the Abecedarian Project (Campbell et al., 2002), the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project (Schweinhart et al., 1993), and the Chicago Parent-Child Centre Project (Reynolds et al., 2002).

Another possible reason for the somewhat weaker effects in the younger child Better Beginnings sites is the finding that there were many early childhood programs available in the Peterborough comparison site. Since children from this site constituted the majority of the total comparison site group, the early childhood programs in Peterborough may have improved the children’s school readiness, making it more difficult to demonstrate a positive effect for the five younger child Better Beginnings sites relative to the comparison sites. Of course, there are many early childhood programs and initiatives in most Ontario communities, such as Healthy Babies, Healthy Children, Early Years Centres, the federally funded Community Access Programs for Children, and the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program to name a few. The existence of these programs in the comparison sites make it more difficult to demonstrate positive differences in Better Beginnings sites relative to the comparison sites.

Despite these considerations, however, the pattern of generally positive findings across the Better Beginnings sites indicates that children in these neighbourhoods are functioning better in school than children in the comparison sites.

These findings support the view of this report that the eight Better Beginnings, Better Futures projects are continuing to function well, are maintaining local resident involvement, are offering a range of support programs for young children, their families and the local neighbourhoods, and are working effectively with other local service-providing organizations. They also serve as models of how to create partnerships among service-providers and local residents using a community development approach and provide an excellent platform from which other prevention and promotion programs for younger children can be added. Finally, the eight projects are continuing to have positive impacts on children’s functioning in school. In a word, the Better Beginnings, Better Futures projects are sustainable.