FIE Policy Brief

November 2011

Developing a Model of Convergence of Resources to Support Children's Academic Achievement

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The Next Generation Initiative supports local efforts to improve children's academic achievement through a strategic, collaborative focus on two areas: strengthening the links among schools, families, and communities and improving the quality and availability of outside-the-classroom learning experiences. The initiative supports the existing Duval County Public Schools Title I Neighborhood Learning Networks established in collaboration with the Florida Institute of Education at the University of North Florida. Working with school-based Title I Family Involvement Centers, the Next Generation Initiative aims to increase collaboration among the schools and organizations serving children and families at both the district and neighborhood level.

The Next Generation Initiative is funded under the auspices of the Andrew A. Robinson Chair for Education and Economic Development, College of Education and Human Services, University of North Florida.

Key points

- Convergence is a strategic approach focused on building networks and collaborative partnerships.

- The Jacksonville Next Generation Initiative (JNGI) is informed by a model for convergence and provides a test of the heuristic value of the convergence model.

- The JNGI model includes by assumptions about lead, supporting, and partner organizations; appropriate design elements; and effective design processes.

- Relationships among the lead, supporting, and partner organizations are expected to change over time.

- Leaders in organizations moving toward convergence must be managers of strategy.

- Evaluation models for convergence must be sensitive to process and outcome.

Introduction

The purpose of this brief is to describe a general conceptual model for local efforts to support the convergence of school, family, and community initiatives to enhance young children's academic achievement. The model provides the conceptual framework for the work of the Jacksonville Next Generation Initiative (JNGI). The goal of JNGI is to support local efforts to improve children's academic achievement through a strategic, collaborative focus on strengthening the links among schools, families, and communities and by improving the quality of children's outside-the-classroom learning experiences. The initiative supports the existing neighborhood learning networks (NLNs) of Title I schools created by the Duval County Public Schools with the support of the Florida Institute of Education at the University of North Florida. Working with school-based family involvement centers in NLN neighborhoods, JNGI aims to increase collaboration among the schools and organizations serving children and families at both the district and neighborhood levels.

The conceptual model of JNGI is based on a review of specific literature and program reports and on the experiences of staff at the Florida Institute of Education, a university-related institute with extensive history of involvement with initiatives that rely on partnerships for delivery of services. As is appropriate to theory-driven project design and evaluation, the conceptual model both informed development of the specifics of the initiative and will be tested for robustness as the initiative continues to evolve (Chaskin, 2000; Reynolds, 2005). One of the final outcomes of the JNGI will be a general model for supporting convergence of resources through inter-institutional partnerships.

Background and Conceptual Framework

The JNGI was established in 2009 to support local efforts to improve children's academic achievement through strengthening the links among schools, families, and communities and through improving the quality and availability of outside-the-classroom learning experiences. During the initiative, the JNGI has provided staff support and intellectual capital to enhance the existing Duval County Public Schools Title I family involvement centers and neighborhood learning networks. Specifically, JNGI staff work with central office personnel and staff at school-based Title I family involvement centers to increase services for families and to support the collaboration among the schools and other organizations serving children and families. A second, but equally important, goal of the initiative is to document the development of community outreach with the Title I Family Involvement Centers and to develop a general model for the convergence of community resources around children's academic achievement.

The JNGI supports local efforts to improve children's academic achievement by strengthening the links among schools, families, and communities and through improving the quality and availability of outside-the-classroom learning experiences.

Models of sustained, collaborative efforts to support children and communities are available. The Harlem's Children's Zone, the most widely known, focuses on children and providing families whatever support they need. Begun in 1970 as a truancy-prevention program, the Harlem Children's Zone has expanded its service area and its programs over time to include programming for young children, supports for parents and other caregivers, a drop-out prevention program that includes counseling and after-school activities, and several other services. Evidence of the effectiveness of the Harlem Children's Zone is provided through the organization's data-based annual reports and other reports on the initiative (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Tough, 2008; Whitehurst & Croft, 2010). The program has been the model for programs in Rochester, New York, Philadelphia, Miami, and Jacksonville.

A second model is provided by the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, a high-quality child development support program that has demonstrated long-term benefits to children and communities. Funded through Title I allocations to the Chicago Public Schools, the Child-Parent Centers program was begun in 1967 to promote children's academic success and support parents' involvement in their children's education. Elements of the program include early intervention, parent involvement, a language-based instructional model, and continuity between preschool and primary schooling. While less well known than the Harlem Children's Zone, the Child-Parent centers model has been extensively researched and the long-term positive effects documented by Arthur J. Reynolds and his colleagues (Conyers, Reynolds, & Ou, 2003; Niles, Reynolds, & Roe-Sepowitz, 2008; Ou & Reynolds, 2010; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2002).

Elements of both models were incorporated into the vision for the Title I family involvement centers. The centers were placed in Title I schools that serve low-income

families and were supported by district-level personnel. A family involvement liaison, funded through Title I, was hired to staff each center and serve as the link between the center and the families of children served by the school. Elements of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers were incorporated into the programming for the centers, but the JNGI staff also aimed to assist the family involvement liaisons in accessing neighborhood and community resources that could support children's learning and families' ability to be children's first teachers. The intent was also to link the centers to each other in a *network of networks* that would magnify the impact. In sum, because it is focused on children's academic development, the project has more narrowly defined goals than the Harlem Children's Zone but with the intent to use neighborhood and community organizations to support in-school and out-of-school learning.

The challenge at the point of delivery, then, is coordination among and across participating units and organizations, each of which includes committed partners that are pursuing worthwhile goals. A recent article written by Dennis McGrath for the KnowledgeWorks Foundation defined this process of separate efforts coming together as *convergence*, which "promotes alignment and coordination by forming interconnected *networks of organizations* linked by bonds of trust, understanding, and interdependent action among key stakeholders" (McGrath, 2008, p. 5). Convergence is as difficult as it is necessary. In a report published by the Consortium on Chicago School Research, the authors argued that support for learning in neighborhoods with limited social capital requires that teachers be knowledgeable about the local community, that school staff engage parents and the community members in student learning, and that schools draw on community organizations in order to provide additional services to children and their families (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu, 2006). However, in many instances, particularly in high-needs neighborhoods, schools and community organizations generally lack the resources (material, time, emotional energy) to address all the issues relevant to supporting children and families, evaluating outcomes to sort out what works from what is ineffective, coordinating efforts with other initiatives, developing models for sustainability, and/or scaling up. Overcoming these barriers requires a general model for supporting convergence and the resources to establish and sustain it.

A number of constructs are widely used to describe aspects of convergence. For example, researchers at the Wilder Research Center viewed these ways of relating as a continuum, beginning at one end with the serendipitous and generally informal sharing characterized by cooperation through planned, deliberate, and more formal relationships and differentiated roles and responsibilities to, at the other end of the continuum, formal and defined collaborative arrangements that might include a shared governance structure, shared goals and resources, and common outcomes (see Johnson, 2011; Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001). Other scholars have described similar continuums using slightly different terms. A University of Wisconsin – Cooperative Extension publication (1988), for example, described a continuum consisting of communication, contribution, coordination, cooperation, and collaboration. McGrath (2008) distinguished

convergence from other levels of shared efforts by its scale (large) and the area encompassed (regional rather than local). Our use of the term diverges somewhat. *Webster's New Encyclopedic Dictionary* (2002) described the act of converging as "to come together and unite in common interest or focus" and *convergence* as "moving toward union or uniformity" (p. 396). We see convergence as the localized but powerful synergy created when organizations and units with similar goals routinely capitalize on mutual efforts and shared aims, share risks, and seek innovative ways to leverage their collective impact. Convergence also has a moral dimension in the "aspiration to further public interests rather than private gain" (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). In our view, convergence depends more on organizational commitments, habits of mind, and ways of work than on the scale of the efforts undertaken.

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The theory of action for the JNGI is that risk factors for children such as the socio-economic status of families, family structure, gender, identified disability, and status as an English language learner increase the risk of academic difficulties. Increased risk elevates the need for strong supports for in-school learning, for children's learning at home, and for use of outside-of-classroom learning opportunities. A basic assumption of the JNGI is that schools, as established, stable organizations with routine contact with children and families, should serve as lead organizations for achieving the benefits of convergence in their local neighborhoods. A second basic assumption is that few of the resources available to support children's learning in the community and in the schools are optimally used in most communities and neighborhoods. Optimal use would capitalize on organizational capacities and reduce duplication of services, increase resource sharing, enhance joint planning and service delivery, and foster synergy among partner organizations (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). All of this would require increased trust. Optimal deployment of collective resources entails convergence around children's and families' needs.

Pressures Supporting and Limiting Convergence

The need for convergence is based on the assumption that current programs and policies are insufficient and that additional resources are unlikely. Convergence as an approach becomes attractive as it promises greater benefits with little additional resource. The temptation is to assume synergy will evolve from co-existence. The literature does not support this. Indeed, the literature suggests that there are formidable barriers to the cooperation and collaboration that convergence requires (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998; Mintzberg, 2007; Takahashi & Smutty, 2002; Van de Ven & Walker, 1984). However, the model of convergence provided here builds into the design critical cautions and suggests an evaluation methodology that will capture the processes of convergence.

Assumptions Underlying the JNGI Model

Several assumptions about the process of supporting organizational change and convergence informed the design and implementation of the JNGI. Working assumptions about lead, supporting, and partner organizations included the following:

- Build the initiative around an existing institution with a long-term connection to the community and a stable funding source. Schools and school districts are likely candidates (Heath & McLaughlin, 1994).
- Identify a supporting organization that can establish or has already established a trust-based relationship with the lead organization and that can play a catalytic role in initializing short-term action as well as to provide long-term support (Takahashi & Smutny, 2002). Universities, or other well-established community organizations are likely candidates.
- Include as leaders in the initiative those with strategic management skills (Mintzberg, 2007) and those who can serve as organizational glue because they are comfortable and have credibility in multiple contexts.
- Select partner organizations based on match of mission and activities and willingness to participate (Chaskin, 2000).
- Use multiple sites with common characteristics when possible.

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The following assumptions about design elements informed the development of the JNGI project.

- Select design elements that are widely recognized as part of successful enterprises and supported by empirical research (Chaskin, 2000).
- Use a financing strategy that differentiates program delivery funds from funds to support and develop organizational infrastructure (Chaskin, 2000; Herrington, 2011).
- Start small, and then expand (Chaskin, 2000).
- Leverage compliance requirements to create opportunity, necessity, and urgency for change.

Finally, the following assumptions about design processes informed development of the JNGI:

- Enlist local champions who understand and support the initiative (Chaskin, 2000).
- Select projects to ensure some short-term successes without weakening the ability to achieve long-term goals (Chaskin, 2000). Collaboration happens through people working together on joint projects.

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- Identify specific collaboration-inducing strategies and mechanisms (Daft, 2007; Firestone & Wilson, 1985).
- Build development of the capacity for collaboration into the initiative, as individuals in organizations will differ in their ability to work collaboratively (Minzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998; Roderick, Easton, & Sebring, 2009).
- Include capacity-developing strategies such as modeling, scaffolding, practicing, providing feedback, and monitoring progress.
- Incorporate planned variation into the design with the intent to identify and expand the components that are successful.
- Expect bureaucratic road blocks (the dark side of institutional stability).
- Acknowledge the life cycle of initiatives and plan an exit strategy (Chaskin, 2000; Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998; Takahashi & Smutny, 2002).
- Consider use of non-traditional evaluation models such as theory-based and developmental evaluation (Design-Based Research Collective, 2003; Patton, 2011; Reynolds, 2005; Roderick et al., 2009; Shavelson, 2003).

Refinement of these assumptions and the conceptual model is an important aim of the study.

Elements of the JNGI Model for Convergence

Project staff developed a heuristic model for local convergence of neighborhood and community resources to support academic achievement in young children (see Figure 1) based on a review of the literature, including the project reports from other, larger-scale efforts; staff experience; and the data collected during the early stages of implementing the JNGI. As identified in the model, the center for any effort toward convergence must be a stable, long-standing institution, identified in the model as the lead organization.

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In the JNGI, the lead organization is the school district, specifically the Title 1 unit within the school district and the participating schools. The model also identifies the need for a catalyst or supporting organization. In the JNGI, the supporting organization is the Florida Institute of Education. Staff at the supporting organization have pressed for greater involvement of the schools with families and for more use of community resources to support children's academic development while, at the same time, modeling these efforts and developing the capacity within the lead organization to continue the efforts after the end of the project. As hypothesized in the model, the roles of the lead and supporting organizations will shift over time, with the supporting organization assuming more of the responsibility for efforts toward convergence in the early stages of the project and the lead organization assuming more responsibility in the later stages.

Partner organizations are specific organizations and institutions within the community that have the capacity and interest to support children's academic achievement. Initial partner organizations in the JNGI included public libraries, the Recreation and Community Services Department, an art museum, and the full service schools. As hypothesized in the model, partner organizations will change over time, first expanding to

include more organizations willing to participate and then contracting to a more rational set of participant organizations.
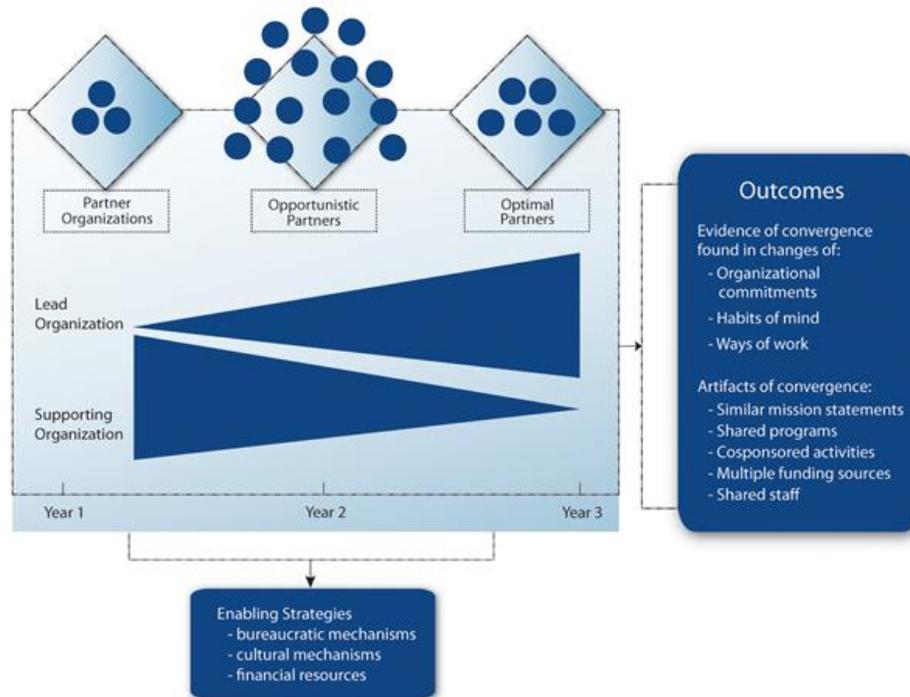
Figure 1 JNGI Preliminary Model for Convergence

The enabling structures or mechanisms to support convergence are listed at the bottom of the figure and include bureaucratic mechanisms such as formal contracts, job descriptions, chain of command, job standards, meeting schedules, and plans for the work. Additional bureaucratic mechanisms might include liaison personnel and standing committees (Mintzberg, 2007). In addition, cultural mechanisms such development of common language, definitions and redefinitions of a way of work, professional development activities, and celebrations of success can also be used to support the intended outcomes. Finally, financial resources can be deployed in ways that support convergence. Mechanisms include requirements for reports to funding agencies, establishing funding and reporting cycles, and public reporting of outcomes.

Strategy management may be particularly helpful in understanding leadership skills that support deployment of these mechanisms at different stages in the history of an initiative (see Mintzberg, 2007; Mintzberg et al., 1998). Mintzberg et al. defined strategy as perspective, "a fundamental way of doing things" (p. 14), but noted that different schools of thought about strategic management view the functions of strategy differently.

Strategy involves both process and content. Mintzberg's (2007) descriptions of strategy management in adhocracies, which are opportunistic by nature, seem particularly appropriate. Adhocracies are innovative, dynamic, loosely-coupled organizations that favor collective learning and responsiveness to the environment. Supporting organizations such as consulting firms, research and evaluation companies, university institutes, and community development organizations frequently exhibit the characteristics of adhocracies. In the work of adhocracies, the specifics of situations morph over time, and strategy managers in adhocracies modify their approaches to be responsive to the situation. As Mintzberg noted, "Almost every sensible real-life strategy process combines emergent learning with deliberate control" (p. 5). Leaders in adhocracies learn their way into strategy "action by action, perhaps also decision by decision" (p. 5).

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In developing partnerships, strategy management calls for what Mintzberg described as "strategic venturing," that is, the combination of an emergent process for doing the work with tangible content for the work. Mintzberg also described planning as "not a strategy but the consequences of it" (p. 69), with the specific strategies shifting as the circumstances require to obtain the outcomes desired. Mintzberg noted that the dilemma of leaders in an adhocracy is "trying to exercise influence without being able to rely on formal controls" (p. 109). What leaders can do is hire people who can do the work, protect them with organizational structure, define broad strategies, recognize and influence patterns as they emerge, and define the mission and vision that supports the intended outcomes. As for the origins of leaders' visions, Mintzberg argued that "they are learned personally, through experimentation in one form or another . . . by venturing. So what ends up as art begins as craft" (p. 364). Mintzberg et al. noted (1998) that "there are many potential strategists in most organizations" (p. 208).

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Political skills are also salient for leaders in converging organizations. Daft (2007) listed several tactics for increasing the power base of organizations and leaders, for using power, and for enhancing collaboration. To increase the power base, for example, leaders "enter areas of high uncertainty," "provide scarce resources," and "create dependencies" (Daft, 2007, p. 501). In using power, leaders "build coalitions and expand networks," "assign loyal people to key positions," "enhance legitimacy and expertise," and "create superordinate goals" (Daft, 2007, p. 501). Finally to enhance collaboration, leaders use tactics such as "confrontation and negotiation," "intergroup consultation," and "member rotation" (Daft, 2007, p. 501).

The model being developed also describes the outcomes of convergence, which are discussed in more detail in the next section of this brief. The desired outcome is a sustainable model of convergence that can be used in other educational and social

settings. If a model is sustainable, it is affordable, understandable, viewed as legitimate and attractive by stakeholders, elegant, and replicable.

Evidence and Artifacts of Convergence

As the *JNGI* is launched and convergence begins to take hold, we expect to see the following results in reference to the organizational commitments, habits of mind, and ways of work we would expect to find in the lead, supporting, and partner organizations. We would expect the following markers indicating organizational commitment:

We expect organizations and partners to develop a shared vision and begin to align priorities to support common goals.

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- Partners agree on and use common indicators of success.

We would expect to find evidence of the following habits of mind or ways of thinking about problems and solutions that support convergence.

- Organizational members develop trust and assume collective risk, adding to a focus on individual agency and specific programmatic responsibilities. The focus shifts from individual goals to building collective goals and sharing responsibilities among the team or group.
- Organizational leaders think strategically and are responsive to opportunities.
- Organization leaders extract patterns that support success from experience.
- Organization members at all levels support and encourage public engagement.
- Organization leaders routinely seek ways to help policy makers understand and support the organization's work.

We would expect to find evidence of the following ways of work that reinforce convergence:

- Alignment of human resources with collective goals.
- Frequent, routine communication between and among the partner organizations and the lead and supporting organizations.
- Frequent communication within each neighborhood learning network and between networks.
- Neighborhood stakeholders are familiar with and leverage local assets.
- Organization leaders share and jointly review data to understand problems, establish goals, track progress, conduct evaluations, and establish accountability.
- Funding streams are optimized resulting in improved service delivery, better coordination and planning, and reduction of duplication.

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Theory would suggest that observable changes in administrative and procedural mechanisms would signal deeper and more powerful changes are occurring in the ways in which success is being understood by the partners. Over time, we would expect different types of organizations and different types of networks to emerge. The neighborhood networks and the individual organizations that they comprise would accelerate development as learning organizations. We would expect to see greater use of strategic thinking and greater responsiveness to new opportunities. Learning would occur collectively as well as individually. As a learning organization, the network would accelerate learning from collective experience, seek to avoid blame, and celebrate successes. The networks would be more open to supporting each other and encouraging public engagement and would seek to share their learning with policy makers.

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Collaborative activities, particularly in the human and social services, rest on the premise that additional value can arise from convergence. Convergence serves as both an element built into the program design as well as a desired outcome. This is a challenge to traditional evaluation methodologies that derive from input/output equations and assume a treatment will result in a change (Herrington, Berry, & Johnson, 2011). The changing nature of collaborative initiatives is itself a program element and a target of evaluation as well as a limiting condition of initiative success.

Conclusion

Much of the prior work on convergence has been large-scale community development initiatives supported by major foundations and government programs. For the most part, the projects ended when funding ended, and the results were largely disappointing. By contrast, the *JNGI* was designed deliberately as small-scale with the explicit intent to build organizational capacity and ensure sustainability. Built into the design was the added intent to test a model of convergence and document the process of implementing the theory-based design. The results and the model have implications for efforts to use community resources to support children's academic learning in school and out of school and through small-scale and large-scale initiatives.

Questions for Consideration as the JNGI model is further developed

1. What is the vision for the Title I Family Involvement Centers?
2. What are the challenges that emerge during the planning and delivery phases?
3. Which of the basic assumptions of the JNGI are the most significant? Why?
4. Which of the basic assumptions of the JNGI are the least significant? Why?
5. Of the key elements, which are the most important to consider for the model of convergence?
6. What strategies are needed to support convergence among key stakeholders?
7. What are some limitations in reaching a general model of convergence?
8. What steps are needed to overcome these challenges and reinforce convergence?

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