

A National Collaborative for Building the Field of Childhood Obesity Research



The Writing Group for the National Collaborative on Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR)

Rising rates of childhood obesity over the past 2 decades have spurred a number of public- and private-sector initiatives aimed at halting or even reversing this trend. Recognizing common interests in this issue, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, NIH, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation began conversations about creating a formal collaboration aimed at accelerating efforts to address childhood obesity by coordinating research agendas and providing support for evidence-building activities. The National Collaborative on Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR) was launched in February 2009, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture joined in 2010. Using the model provided by other previously successful collaborations, such as the Youth Tobacco Cessation Collaborative, NCCOR has emphasized several principles suggested by Petrovich as key elements for successful partnerships: (1) delineate a common purpose by identifying key knowledge gaps in the field; (2) create a shared identity around that common purpose; (3) develop structures for democratic and respectful collaboration so as to strategically coordinate efforts for maximum national impact; (4) identify effective leaders capable of articulating challenges in the field and inspiring a commitment of minds and the resolve to address identified needs; (5) facilitate continuous knowledge exchange and synthesis to keep the field informed; and (6) support assessment of progress and feedback loops for ensuring continual progress. This paper examines how NCCOR has used these principles to help build the field of research, evaluation, and surveillance for childhood obesity prevention and management.

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INTRODUCTION

Data from 1990 through 2010 from state and national health monitoring systems documented that rates of obesity were rising in children and adults.^{1,2} In parallel, for the first time, chronic diseases generally associated with obesity in adults, such as diabetes, hypertension, and fatty liver disease, were being documented in children and adolescents, creating a sense of urgency for a focused response encompassing research and public health programs to address childhood obesity.^{3,4} A number of federal and private organizations developed initiatives, pilot interventions, and programs to assess the readiness of the field to respond to this need.⁵ The early infusion of a \$500-million commitment of funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) in 2007 challenged the research and public health fields to work collaboratively to identify solutions to the epidemic of childhood obesity. Coincident with these national efforts, organizations at local and state levels began a number of natural experiments to explore

approaches for improving healthy eating and active living among children and their families within schools and communities.^{6,7}

With the release of the \$500-million RWJF childhood obesity initiative, NIH and RWJF began discussions about their areas of common interest and invited the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to join with them in planning the creation of a formal collaboration aimed at accelerating progress by coordinating research agendas and providing support for evidence-building research activities in this nascent field.^{2,5} The National

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Collaborative on Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR) formally launched in 2009 as a partnership of CDC, NIH, and RWJF and with strong endorsement of its leadership.⁵ Its aim was to contribute to building a field of research that could produce the evidence needed to address and reverse the nation’s childhood obesity epidemic. In 2010, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the other major federal funder of childhood nutrition research and programs, joined NCCOR. An important strength of NCCOR is the diversity of the agencies’ mission foci and how they are structured and interact with their stakeholders. Some of the agencies are focused on research and food or health monitoring (i.e., CDC, NIH, and USDA), whereas others are focused on programs, policies, and services (i.e., CDC, RWJF, and USDA). The partners recognized that through the work of the Collaborative, they had a tremendous potential to use those diverse strengths to accelerate the development of an emerging new field of childhood obesity prevention research and practice—both the production of needed research and the translation of research discovery into far-reaching national programs, policies, and services. Other successful collaborations, such as the Youth Tobacco Cessation Collaborative, laid the groundwork, not only because they also had a health mission and research focus, but they recognized the importance of having a coordinating center to provide a neutral, centralized management entity to coordinate the work of the partners.^{8,9}

A companion paper in this issue describes the history of NCCOR and how its structure and operations have made it an effective partnership for change.⁵ It describes the NCCOR organizational structure, which has facilitated focused collaborative work across the four partners (also see the companion paper’s Figure 3).¹ Figure 1 in this paper provides an overview of NCCOR’s mission, partners, goals, functions of its coordinating center, and approaches to obtaining input from external stakeholders. Here, the authors share how NCCOR focused on key principles to build this new field and enhance the rapid translation of research and evaluation evidence into programs and practice.

NCCOR’S DESIGN AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS HAVE HELPED BUILD A FIELD

Drawing from the Bridgespan Group’s “Strong Field” framework,¹⁰ Petrovich¹¹ describes field building as “building a branch of knowledge, policy, and practice composed of a multiplicity of actors in relationship with one another.” She articulates the key actions undertaken by funders to build strong fields from nascent efforts, and notes that a strong field engages a diverse range of players who can mobilize effectively to promote understanding and foster action on multiple fronts to pursue needed

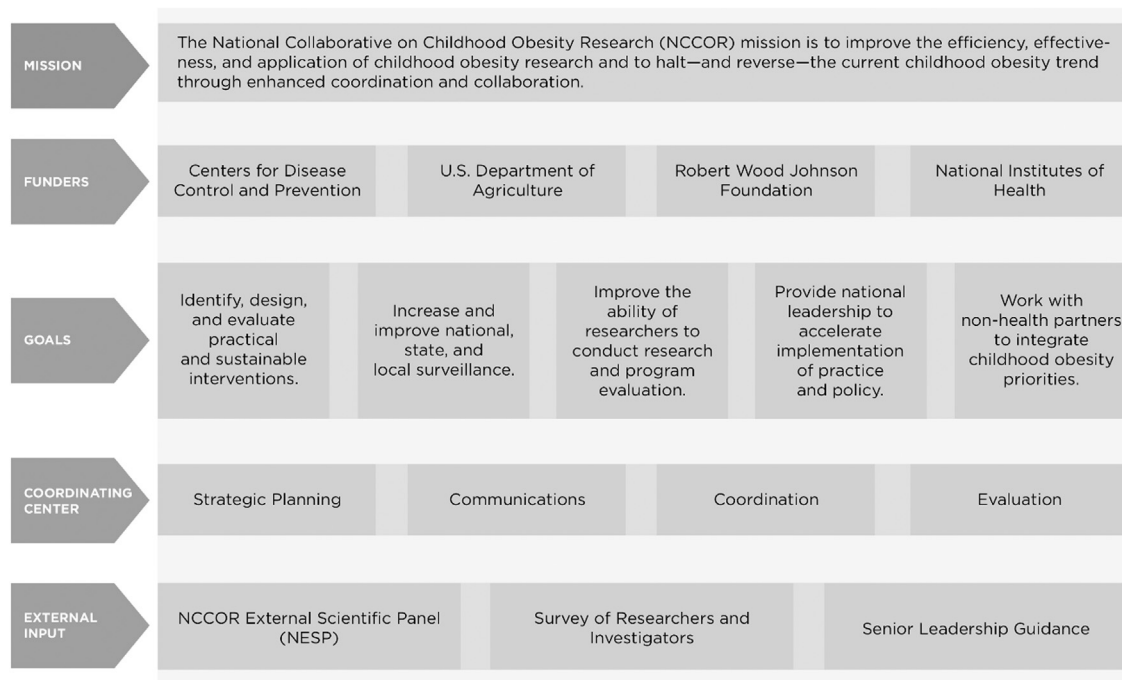


Figure 1. Overview of the National Collaborative of Childhood Obesity Research.

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