Cross-Agency Collaboration:
Shared Professional Development to Advance Child Development

Overview

In recent decades, public sector leaders have increasingly pursued cross-agency collaboration in order to deliver comprehensive services and meet public policy goals, such as healthy child development.¹ To strengthen these collaborative efforts, many state agencies have established shared professional development models, designed to provide staff from across multiple agencies with common language, knowledge, competencies, and practices. Specifically, in relation to child development, Massachusetts and other states have identified areas, such as family engagement, early learning standards, screening of developmental delays, and screening for other issues such as post-partum depression, as important topics of joint professional development. Enhanced knowledge and skills in these areas would support staff from across agencies to more comprehensively and proactively support children and families, and improve outcomes.

The following planning brief is intended to promote further discussion, planning and action related to a shared professional development strategy. It includes a scan of current trends and comparable initiatives, a review of common challenges to shared professional development models, as well as a closer look at two promising shared professional development efforts. With that said, this brief is not intended to be an exhaustive review. It is fully expected that readers will draw from other information resources and experiences to inform discussions and planning.

External Scan

National trends in cross-agency professional development and professional development in general have been heavily influenced by the education sector. However, in recent years, other sectors have recognized the value of shared professional development across agencies and

organizations. In review of these efforts, key elements of success emerge, such as have fostering shared responsibility for one or few key outcome goals, involving staff from across agencies in each step of the planning and execution process, and focusing on content areas and competencies that are relevant to all agencies.

**EEC professional development scan**
The Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) recently conducted a scan of professional development offered across nine state agencies. In this scan, EEC tracked the following information:
- How professional development is organized in each agency
- Who conducts the trainings
- Who receives the trainings
- Training topics covered related to children and families with children

This scan is useful for identifying common content and skill areas of interest across agencies. It also outlines efforts by agencies, such as the Department of Children and Families and the Department of Mental Health, to organize cross-agency and statewide professional development initiatives. Thus, these agencies can share their ‘lessons learned’ when coordinating future efforts.

**Importance of shared goals: Federal Collaboration on Health Disparities Research**

At the federal level, cross-agency collaboration has been traditionally rare and fraught with difficulties. However, in recent decades there has been a significant effort to bring agencies together to address issues that fall across disciplines. One such example is the Federal Collaboration on Health Disparities Research (FCHDR), which was launched in 2006 to engage a wide range of federal departments and agencies (as well as relevant non-federal stakeholders) with the goal of conducting research, and sharing findings and information in order reduce or eliminate health disparities. Agencies from 11 different federal departments including Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Education, Justice, and Labor came together to conduct and sponsor workshops, symposiums, expert panels, and national meetings and conferences in furtherance of the collaborative goal. Leaders from these agencies attribute their collective sense of responsibility and credit the initiative’s success to a clear shared-outcome goal of reducing health disparities.

**Fully defining professional development: National PD Center on Inclusion**

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2 Department of Early Education and Care. (October 2012). Professional Development Scan (Draft).
In support of IDEA compliance, the National PD Center on Inclusion (NPDCI) partners with states to create professional development systems for early childhood providers working in inclusive preschool settings. Prior to developing these systems, which includes the involvement of state child care agencies, Head Start, community-based early childhood/Pre-K systems and programs, community colleges, and 4-year colleges, NPDCI works with all stakeholders to collectively define the following terms and components:

- Inclusion
- The child and family outcomes related to inclusion
- Core competencies related to promoting inclusion
- Effective inclusion practices
- Core competencies for professional development providers
- Effective professional development strategies

Once there is a clear understanding of these terms and components, NPDCI then coordinates and delivers professional development to staff across all organizations and settings. Further, NPDCI requires each state to appoint a statewide liaison to ensure effective coordination.

**Cross-training of frontline staff**

A brief by the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) on the need for “comprehensive, integrated social services” argues that collaboration between staff, especially front-line staff, from different social service agencies working with children and families is essential. CLASP recommends that cross-training of front-line staff on the benefits, programs, and enrollment procedures offered by all other agencies and partner organizations is an optimal strategy. This approach, not only expands knowledge among staff, but also expands the points of service access for families, as any one staff in now equipped to offer information and support related to a range of services and benefits.

**Challenges**

Review of shared professional development efforts highlights several challenges that confront coordination efforts. Some of these key challenges are outlined here.

**Different mandates and scopes**

Before launching a combined professional development program that will benefit staff from multiple agencies, it is important for organizers to have a framework that takes into account the sometimes very different nature of each group. Although all stakeholders are in some way involved in the support and well-being of families and/or children, each have different missions,
goals, reporting requirements, hierarchical structures and practices, and definitions and eligibility criteria. For example, a “family” or a “child” may not be a universal concept if some participants only serve mothers or children under the age of 12, while others serve a variety of family structures, perhaps including grandparents raising grandchildren, and children up to 18. Thus, where there are key distinctions, coordinators must acknowledge and address these distinctions when planning and implementing professional development efforts.

**Reaching consensus on the “best” professional development approach**

Professional Development may seem to be an innocuous and obviously beneficial type of resource, but when some stakeholders (especially those tasked with organizing or running such trainings) have fixed notions about the most effective methods of, and prerequisites for participation in, professional development, they may find themselves ‘at odds’ with leaders and staff from other agencies. Across a wide-range of agencies and organizations, there will be varying beliefs about what constitutes appropriate training, as well as established practices and staff reward and benefit structures associated with training that may be stipulated in collective bargaining agreements or human resources policies. Coordinators should seek to reach consensus on what type of training models and conditions are preferred and early in the planning process.

**Allocation of cost and responsibility for professional development**

Highly collaborative professional development requires that all stakeholders take part in planning and execution. However, this objective is often a difficult task as agencies have different budgetary constraints, staff resources, space, and foundational knowledge of a specific subject matter. Thus, coordinators must seek to define differentiated roles and responsibilities that play to agencies strengths and assets, and ensure maximum involvement across agencies. For example, while one agency might contribute funding to pay for a trainer, another might offer space, and yet another might provide staff time for outreach and registration support.

**Data sharing to align efforts**

To coordinate professional development so that it has clear benefit for all participants, collaborating agencies should share and review data related to their outcomes (e.g. children and families they serve, development milestones, risk factors, etc). For example, data from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (via school districts) showing a sudden rise in the number of children with special needs entering at Kindergarten, might lead to a collaborative plan to train staff across agencies and partner organizations in child development, the importance of and process for early cognitive and social-emotional screening, and related supports for families. These staff would then be better prepared to support and inform families of young children they serve, review key developmental areas, milestones, and potential issues, and refer them to appropriate services. Yet, sharing data across agencies and districts faces

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7 For further discussion of training in early child screening see: Johnson-Staub, C. (2012) Promote access to early, regular, and comprehensive screening: Charting Progress for Babies in Child Care project, Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy
several well-established obstacles, such as confidentiality and legal consent issues, technology compatibility, security of information and human resources.

**Promising Models**

*Early Childhood Iowa*\(^8\)

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<th>Key take-away: Identify common professional standards, core competencies, and career pathways across different agency staff positions and professions, and use this as the basis for professional development.</th>
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In 2009, Early Childhood Iowa (ECI) launched a statewide Professional Development System. To develop this system, ECI first developed a comprehensive planning framework (with assistance from NAEYC) that mapped professional standards, core competencies, and career pathways for professionals working in four sectors: Early Childhood Education (teachers) Special Needs/Early Intervention, Family Support, and Health, Mental Health and Nutrition. Based on this framework, ECI identified common content and skill areas required across professionals across sectors, and used this information to plan mutually-beneficial professional development activities. In addition, ECI mapped the data collection systems, advisory structures and professional development funding across these four sectors, using this information to further plan and support ongoing professional development efforts.

*The Missouri Model*\(^9\)

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<th>Key take-away: The goal of shared professional development should not only be to learn new knowledge and skills, but also to understand and gain appreciation for the goals, perspectives, and practices of colleagues in other agencies. This insight then fosters other forms of collaboration.</th>
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\(^9\) All information on the Missouri Model courtesy of Julie Boatright Wilson, “Cross-Branch Collaboration: What Can we Learn From the Collaboration Between Courts and the Division of Youth Services in Missouri?” [article in process](2012).
The Missouri Juvenile Justice Model, which is often cited as one of the most humane and innovative models in the country, owes its success to the strong collaborative relationship between the court system and the state Department of Youth Services (DYS). Founded out of a desire to produce better outcomes for system-involved youth, the cross-agency collaboration includes regular coordination meetings, pooled funding and resources, and shared professional development. Court staff members are invited to DYS trainings at no cost. This shared professional development has improved working relationships and trust between regional DYS case managers and the court personnel in their jurisdiction. Specifically, joint training has allowed court system staff to learn the philosophy and practices of the Department of Youth Services, as well as obtain deeper knowledge about the youth they jointly serve and the underlying experiences and behaviors that may have resulted in their placement in the system.

**Additional Resources**


**About the Department of Early Education and Care**

The Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) is focused on strengthening the system of early education and care in Massachusetts as a critical element of the education pipeline from cradle to career. Learning begins at birth and families are their child’s first teacher. Research shows that access to high-quality early education and care is vital to helping all children, especially low-income and high needs children, to gain early literacy skills, academic and social school readiness skills, and increases a student’s chances of successfully completing high school, attending college, and becoming a contributing citizen.

EEC’s work is steeped in the notion that brain building is in progress for young children in enriching environments with caring adults and meaningful and engaging interactions. The latest science shows that these early experiences actually build the architecture of the developing brain; much like a house is built from the bottom up. We know that children’s earliest experiences are especially important because building the human brain begins even before birth; a strong foundation in early years greatly increases the chance of long-term positive outcomes. EEC is focused on providing a healthy start for all children and ensuring that every child is reading proficiently by 3rd grade, as a critical strategy in closing the achievement gap. High quality early
learning opportunities and enriching experiences in formal and informal environments provide children with a solid foundation to build off of for a lifetime of success.

In an effort to close the early achievement gap, EEC is advancing reforms in four areas: educator quality, program quality, screening and assessment, and engagement of communities and families. To this end, EEC has defined quality in early education and care settings and continues to provide supports to improve educators’ competencies, skills and abilities through professional development to promote effective practice and increase retention. Further, EEC is advancing early learning and development leadership and shared vision across birth to grade 3, is using evidence-based literacy and universal screening practices in communities, and is improving its data systems to better inform program practice and state decision-making.

EEC launched the Brain Building in Progress campaign to raise awareness of the critical importance of fostering the cognitive, social and emotional development of young children by emphasizing its future impact on economic development and prosperity for everyone in Massachusetts. EEC’s efforts to provide quality formal and informal early education and care experiences for all children in Massachusetts is supporting the next generation to grow and succeed, and helping to ensure the best future possible for our Commonwealth. Brain building is an investment in the future prosperity of the Commonwealth, one that will benefit us collectively over the long term. For more information on the science of brain building and the importance of healthy child development, visit www.brainbuildinginprogress.org. For more information about EEC’s programs and services, visit www.mass.gov/eec.

About Aspire Institute

Founded in 2007, the Wheelock Aspire Institute advances knowledge and solutions in response to social and educational challenges. The Aspire Institute fulfills this mission by mobilizing the expertise of Wheelock College and community partners to promote effective social and education policy, practice and research. www.wheelock.edu/aspire

About Wheelock College

Founded in 1888 and located in Boston, Massachusetts, Wheelock College is a private institution with the public mission of improving the quality of life for children and their families. The College fulfills this mission by providing a strong education in the arts and sciences and in its professional fields – child and family studies, social work, and education — for which its undergraduate and graduate programs are nationally and internationally recognized. Through its academic programs and student experience, the College reflects the multicultural dimensions of the countries in which it operates and fosters diverse learning communities — all of which contribute to the success, leadership, and impact that its graduates enjoy in a wide variety of careers. For more information, visit www.wheelock.edu.