

Strategic Use of Consultants: An Interactive Guide for Head Start and Early Head Start Leaders



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Voices from the Field

Strengthening the Family Partnership Agreement Process

Program:

Poudre School District Early Childhood Program, Fort Collins, CO

Contact:

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Brief Program Description:

Poudre School District Early Childhood Program is a school district grantee currently operating Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) programs under blended funding from HS/EHS, the Colorado Preschool Program, Early Childhood Integrated Services (Early Childhood Special Education), the local mill levy, and tuition-based funds. The program has a funded enrollment of 275 in HS and 108 in EHS. The program's focus is on providing comprehensive services in a seamless delivery system that offers a high level of quality and supports for all families, regardless of which funding source supports their program participation. To this end, the Head Start Program Performance Standards have been adopted throughout the program.

Program Improvement Goals:

To establish a comprehensive, strengths-based family partnership agreement process.

Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA) Plan:

Program leadership developed a T/TA plan to hire a consultant to engage staff, Policy Council members, and community partners in learning about a strengths-based family partnership agreement process and its key components, steps, and accountability requirements. The consultant was expected to

- review with staff and Policy Council members examples of family partnership agreement forms, tracking systems, and procedures;
- draft a flow chart for the family partnership agreement process that identifies timelines, phases, and steps to the process and outlines how staff can document partnership activities with flexibility to meet family difference and needs;

- incorporate health, mental health, education, and support staff (e.g., bus drivers) in the family partnership process in order to coordinate across program components and increase the coordination of staff working with families;
- collaborate with community partners who share clients with Head Start in order to explore how Head Start processes might be better coordinated with the community partners' existing processes, all in an effort to support families more effectively;
- create forms and documentation systems in both English and Spanish; and
- review after six months the implementation of the new family partnership agreement process and recommend adjustments as needed.

Consultant Qualifications:

Program leadership sought a consultant with the following qualifications: (a) on-the-ground HS experience with implementing a strengths-based family partnership agreement process; (b) an understanding of the culture of a school district grantee and the integrated program model; and (c) an inspiring approach that would bring positive energy and excitement to interactions among families, staff, and community partners. Because the T/TA plan represented a significant departure from how the program had previously provided family support, leadership also looked for a consultant with existing positive relationships and trust with staff members.

Consultant's Work:

Under the contract, the consultant performed the following tasks:

- Researched resources on family partnership agreements and processes and created and distributed a packet of resource information on best practices in family partnership processes
- Met with the program's Policy Council; family services staff; health, mental health, and education staff; and community stakeholders to provide training on family partnership agreements and best practices for family engagement
- Consulted on the creation of a flow chart for the family partnership agreement process and created a graphic demonstrating how this process would work
- Reviewed proposed family partnership forms and provided feedback on opportunities to improve documents
- Assisted with the creation of a tracking system to be used by all staff to document and coordinate family support activities
- Answered questions, solved problems, and coached staff during the implementation phase of the new process
- Supported the review and evaluation of the new process after six months of implementation

Outcomes:

Following the work with the consultant, the program shifted from having a family partnership agreement that was primarily a one-page needs assessment and referral form to adopting a multi-step family partnership agreement process designed to support more effective coordination and build authentic relationships among families, staff, and community partners. A key feature of the new process is its support for individualized activities and timelines to meet family needs. Process steps include

- building relationships;
- identifying family interests, strengths, hopes, and dreams for the future;
- identifying specific resources and referrals to address family needs if they are beyond the program's scope;
- conducting follow-up on the outcomes of referrals;
- establishing family partnership goals with specific measurable, achievable steps; and
- tracking steps taken to adjust the family partnership as well as to identify moments of celebration.

One year after utilizing the consultant, the new family partnership agreement process was further developed to include the creation of a family portfolio, which is a file that compiles all family partnership documents, resources, photos, and other important items the family wishes to keep.

Advice to Others:

- **Make your expectations clear.** Take time to clarify with the consultant what you need.
- **Relationships matter.** Consider the importance of relationships and trust when working with a consultant. Sometimes bringing in someone with whom you have a prior relationship is important; other times you might want to select a consultant who doesn't have an existing relationship with your program and can then better serve in a neutral role.
- **Monitor the consultant's progress.** Put expectations for the work in writing and establish specific times when you will check in to see if what is being provided is meeting the program's needs. If it isn't, have an honest conversation with the consultant about what to change and how to make the adjustments.
- **Reflect on the consulting experience.** Document all completed work and take time to reflect on what transpired; this reflective process can support learning from the content the consultant provided and from the processes that he or she may have used during the work.
- Implement a pre- and post-assessment of program staff's knowledge along with a final evaluation from all parties to enhance future consultations.