



SHAPING THE PARTNERSHIP

This document highlights key steps to help local early care and education programs to develop and implement plans for managing multiple funding and other shared resources. It assumes that local partners will pursue, as a starting point, the following program goals:

- Providing full-day, full-year child care for families who need it so that parents can work or pursue education and training opportunities;
- Making comprehensive services more widely available for children and families; improving continuity of services; and
- Improving program quality.

Key Planning Steps

Early care and education agencies follow their own planning and fiscal cycles and procedures for early care and education partnerships (as they do for other priority program activities). The following eight planning steps are recommended:

Step 1 - Bring Key Stakeholders Together

At the outset of any serious planning effort that is expected to lead to early care and education partnerships, it is essential to bring identified stakeholders together as early as possible. An effort to be inclusive in this initial dialogue will pay dividends in goodwill and enhanced prospects for success over the long run. While the early care and education delivery system is unique in each community, the following are among the stakeholders who should be considered for inclusion: child care (center-based and family child care), Head Start, public schools, child care resource and referral agencies, and interested organizations and individuals from governmental agencies and private groups (e.g., business, foundation, and religious). As the planning effort evolves, other community partners may become involved—such as those focused on welfare reform, employability, adult education, transportation, intergenerational care, health care, disabilities, and literacy—assuming these stakeholders are not included from the beginning. Careful thought should be given to how best to involve representatives of the families who are the ultimate consumers and primary stakeholders in the early care and education delivery system.

The stakeholders will be asked to brainstorm the vision and to arrive at a consensus on goals for the early childhood partnership. These discussions should lead to broad agreement on strategies and how to carry out next steps. Whenever appropriate, the partnership should obtain endorsement of the approach agreed upon by state and local political leaders and major funding sources.

Step 2 - Conduct Community Assessment

Community assessment is designed to address the question: Where are we now? It is a systematic way of analyzing the gap between the current situation in early care and education services and the vision and goals that were decided upon in Step 1, and it includes an inventory of community assets to implement the approved strategies. If carefully done, community assessment will provide a baseline of information for carrying out Steps 3 – 8. Community assessment can take a variety of forms depending

on the purposes it is intended to achieve. While the primary purpose of the community assessment is to generate data about needs and resources as a foundation for early childhood partnerships, the process for conducting the assessment can play a valuable role in helping to develop or strengthen such collaborations. A well designed and implemented community assessment can help:

- Document needs and gaps in services;
- Identify potential resources;
- Establish a vision, goals, and strategies to meet community needs;
- Build consensus and buy-in to the process of change;
- Build Relationships and foster collaboration; and
- Identify benchmarks to measure progress.

Step 3 - Identify Funding Sources

In most States and localities, the primary funding sources for early care and education programs are Head Start, child care, and prekindergarten, not necessarily in that order. In addition, early care and education programs will, at a minimum, need to address resources related to welfare, nutrition, health, disabilities, and the private sector in order to achieve the goals outlined above. Other resources will be identified as necessary, depending on the specifics of the goals and objectives pursued and the available programs.

Step 4 - Develop Plans for Program Models

Partnership models or structures can take a virtually infinite variety of forms. Except for conforming to the legislative and policy requirements of funding sources, there is no practical limit to the nature of the collaborations that can arise within the pluralistic early care and education delivery system. Partnership models or approaches will develop out of the goals that the collaborating organizations seek to achieve, in the context of the findings of the community assessment plus available resources and funding.

Step 5 - Develop the Budget

The budget is central to planning and fiscal operations. Fiscal planning for early care and education partnerships involves considerations that go beyond what would be done in developing a budget for a single agency. Partnering around resources involves taking into account, in a carefully orchestrated way, the budgets of two or more early care and education programs. Moreover, it will usually call for coordinating additional services (e.g., health, facilities, or training) that may be provided “in kind” and not monetized in the usual way. Also, in many, if not most, of the programs that provide child care, a large portion of the budget will be borne by parent fees or certificates. Collaborative budget models are likely to be shaped by the following factors:

- Who are the partnering agencies at the community level?
- Where is the early education service provided?
- What are the principal funding sources utilized?
- Why was the partnership undertaken—what program goals are the partners seeking to achieve?

Step 6 - Decide Program Management Issues

While partnerships can greatly enlarge the available resources to provide services to children and families, they can also pose significant program management issues for both staff and consumers.

Partnerships should formalize the nature of the collaboration with other programs and providers in the community (and, as appropriate, at the state or regional level) through a memorandum of agreement or other mutually acceptable mechanism that spells out, in general, who is responsible for providing what program services and indicating the resources that will be used for those purposes. The memorandum is a useful way to address program issues such as staffing, training, or use of facilities. Such an agreement will provide a framework for resolving key issues in advance of problems arising. A legal contract might eventually be developed to record the detailed decisions arrived at in the initial partnership agreement.

Step 7 - Arrange for Accounting and Reporting, with a Priority Emphasis on Cost Allocation

Cost allocation is simply a systematic way of sharing costs among child care, Head Start, and other early care and education programs that are engaged in joint program activities at the community level. While not all partnerships will develop a cost allocation plan, a majority will need to do so. The cost allocation plan generally will cover major program costs, including personnel, facilities, nutrition, and transportation. Cost allocation is an important aspect of strategic planning and budgeting. Accordingly, program administrators should work closely with fiscal and accounting specialists in shaping critical decisions in the cost allocation plans. The planning must reflect both program and fiscal considerations.

Step 8 - Evaluate

Partners will need to determine how well the partnership is working in order to assure accountability and to develop plans for the next phase of collaboration. The most important feature of the evaluation is to assess the payoff of the program investment in terms of benefits for children and families. Partners should assess the value of the partnership in ensuring effective use of resources. Partners can use data to estimate the cost savings to the community and/or State resulting from improved outcomes for program participants. Evaluation should be a key consideration in the ongoing planning cycle and in design of the community assessment.

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