

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



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON
Quality Teaching
and Learning

Voices From the Field

Improving Child Outcomes in Areas Related to School Readiness

Program:

Champaign County Head Start/Early Head Start, Urbana, IL

Contact:

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Brief Program Description:

Champaign County Head Start/Early Head Start serves 583 children and their families in both Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS). The program offers center-based (part-day, full-day, and year-round programming) and home-based options for families as well as collaborations with licensed family child care providers to provide HS and EHS services within the providers' homes. The program is operated through the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission.

Program Improvement Goal:

To improve child outcomes in areas related to school readiness goals, with the long-term continuous program-improvement goal of having all children ready for kindergarten when they leave HS.

Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA) Plan:

As part of their annual training plan, the service area managers developed a T/TA plan to hire a consultant to work with their program on an ongoing basis to increase staff knowledge and competence as a means to improve child outcomes in areas related to school readiness goals. The consultant was expected to do the following:

- Work with the service area team to determine the steps needed to support the goal of improving child outcomes in areas related to school readiness goals
- Conduct initial training for the service area team and staff on the importance of their roles in supporting quality teaching and learning in relation to school readiness goals
- Determine a schedule and procedure for ongoing training, monitoring, and evaluation to determine success

- Review assessment information frequently and regularly with the service area team to determine the focus of training and follow-up coaching and to evaluate child progress
- Use child progress and assessment data to inform ongoing content-based training
- Work with each site manager to establish a coach/mentor plan and assist in supporting individual teachers as well as teams of teachers in high-quality teaching and learning
- Commit to monthly classroom visits in addition to staff training and development
- Meet quarterly with the child development services manager to review consultation activities, monitor progress, and make adjustments as necessary

Consultant Qualifications:

As program leaders discussed the importance of their program improvement goal, they realized that they needed to be highly selective in choosing a consultant. They sought the following:

- A consultant who had in-depth knowledge and experience in early childhood from birth to age 5
- A consultant who was well versed in appropriate practice for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers
- A consultant who had the capacity to adapt training and coaching in response to the regular review of child progress data
- A consultant with knowledge of different early childhood assessment tools, data-collection processes, and data analysis
- A person familiar with HS and EHS, school readiness goals, and the HS Early Learning Framework
- A person who would support the philosophy of the program
- A consultant who was respected as an expert in the community and had the necessary “people” skills to build supportive relationships with program teachers

Consultant’s Work:

Under the contract established in collaboration with the service area team and the consultant, the consultant performed, and continues to perform, the following:

- Met with the leadership team to discuss the purpose and expectations of the consultation
- Conducted training to “kick off” the consultative relationship with the staff
- Develops and conducts needs assessments
- Conducts ongoing staff training, with topics determined by child data, progress, and outcomes
- Develops action plans with teachers

- Allows time for relationship building
- Meets with each site manager on a regular basis to discuss progress, review training and coaching plans, determine training needs (both individual and team), and assist with supervision
- Conducts monthly visits to programs and classrooms
- Provides one-on-one assistance to teachers or teaching teams as needed
- Writes objective, easy-to-read reports within 24 hours of visits and trainings and sends reports to staff and teaching teams involved in the observations, site supervisors, and upper management
- Develops training materials
- Helps interpret data
- Meets quarterly with the child development services manager to review/evaluate the consultation and progress
- Stays updated on all assessments used in HS and EHS as well as new requirements and initiatives
- Participates in employee recognition events in order to celebrate teachers' success

Outcomes:

The consultant's work with the program has resulted in many positive outcomes:

- Child outcomes in areas related to school readiness goals are improving.
- The site managers have reported that teachers are feeling more confident and happier with their jobs and are more willing to try new things.
- Teachers have not only changed their teaching practices but are also beginning to recognize the importance of their role in supporting child success in school readiness.
- Enrolled children's CLASS scores have improved, and the consultant recently has been trained on CLASS, allowing her to link the work she has been doing with the teachers on developmental domains and child progress to the CLASS domains.
- Strong relationships have developed between the consultant and the teachers, thanks in part to the ongoing nature of the work.
- The teachers view their work with the consultant as a positive part of their job and look forward to their time together.
- The teachers feel more confident in sharing information with parents about how their children are progressing, what the teaching are doing in their classrooms, and why they are doing it.



Advice to Others:

- Take the time to determine what you are looking for in a consultant. Finding the right person is vital to success.
- When doing fiscal planning, make your consultant budget a priority if the work will support continuous program improvement.
- Find a consultant whose philosophy matches your program's philosophy. Staff can become confused if they are told conflicting information.
- Look for a consultant who is willing to make a long-term commitment to your program and is interested in implementing your plans, helping staff succeed, and supporting program improvement.
- If the consultant will be with the program long-term, allow time for relationships and trust to build.
- Support teachers in developing individual action plans; these plans help teachers to individualize their needs, and they promote accountability. They are also a great tool for tracking staff accomplishments across the year.
- Celebrate successes!