

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



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## Voices From the Field

### Increasing Children's Physical Movement and Outdoor Play

**Program:**

Waldo Community Action Partners Head Start, Belfast, ME

**Contact:**

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**Brief Program Description:**

Waldo Community Action Partners (WCAP) Head Start is funded to provide Head Start and Early Head Start services to 201 eligible children, pregnant women, and their families living in mid-coast, rural Maine. The program offers half-day options to families four days a week at seven sites. The Searsport Head Start site, which is in the small coastal town of Searsport, serves 40 children and their families.

**Program Improvement Goal:**

To increase the range of opportunities for physical movement among all children enrolled at the program and to provide a more welcoming outdoor play space to stimulate physical activities.

**Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA) Plan:**

A self-assessment of the program revealed a need to increase both the amount and range of children's physical activity and specifically to expand outdoor activity opportunities for children with disabilities or with limited gross motor abilities. Approximately one-third of the children enrolled in WCAP Head Start are at risk for health issues due to being overweight. The program applied for and received a Head Start Body Start grant to purchase equipment and materials to upgrade and expand the Searsport site's playground. The grant specifically funded the purchase of an outdoor xylophone and new trees as well as the construction of a bike path and a new slide built into a hill. Slides built into hillsides offer easier access for children with varying physical abilities, including those with disabilities. The management team engaged a consultant with experience in playground safety and design to work with program staff in designing the new playground—including placement of the grant-funded elements—and developing a timeline and action plan for completing the upgrade.

### **Consultant Qualifications:**

Program management sought a consultant who was a certified playground specialist, familiar with Maine's weather and rural environments, and experienced with facilitating groups so he or she could effectively engage the entire Searsport site staff in the playground upgrade project.

### **Consultant's Work:**

The consultant led two meetings with program management and the Searsport site staff shortly after the program received its Head Start Body Start grant. At the first meeting, the consultant facilitated a "visioning" activity during which he encouraged them to think about and share with the group the physical, sensory, and outdoor activities they loved as children. This meeting and activity helped to generate staff buy-in and excitement about the playground project as well as staff ideas for the playground redesign. At this first meeting, the consultant also shared research on the benefits of natural playscapes and examined and measured the existing playground. One week later, the consultant returned for a second meeting, during which he led a group process for creating a large-scale site map for the new playground as well as a timeline and action plan for completing the work by the grant deadline.

### **Outcomes:**

- A larger and redesigned playground that allows for a greater range of opportunities for movement among enrolled children
- A natural playscape slide built into the playground's hillside and accessible to children with disabilities
- Increased natural vegetation in the playground, including shade trees and a grassy area for group games
- Parental engagement in the development of the playground, as demonstrated by parent group financial support for the installation of a new bike path
- A new bike path that allows enrolled children to ride tricycles outside
- Increased exposure to and enjoyment of the outdoors among enrolled children
- A low-maintenance playground
- A more beautiful and welcoming outdoor environment to stimulate physical activities among enrolled children, their families, and their teachers

### Advice to Others:

- **Make your intentions and expectations clear when you hire a consultant.** A program needs to know why it is hiring a consultant and should communicate to the consultant what exactly needs to be accomplished.
- **Find a consultant who can work well with your staff.** Program staff need to buy into the T/TA plan and the consultant's work. Find someone who will listen to staff members' ideas and experiences, facilitate collaboration, and incorporate staff expertise into the action plan.
- **Demand a timeline.** An important product of consulting work is a timeline and/or action plan for implementing change and achieving program goals. Consider listing a timeline as a deliverable in your consultant agreement.
- **Determine goals and desired outcomes before the consultant arrives.** Prior to engaging a consultant, program management and staff should meet to assess their services' strengths and areas for improvement. Once program needs are identified, staff should collaboratively develop a T/TA plan that includes distinct program goals and desired outcomes.