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## **ELEMENTS TO BUILD CAPACITY FOR EVALUATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY: DISCUSSION GUIDE**

This document identifies six elements for building capacity for evaluation and accountability. Questions to prompt discussion and reflection among the planning/stakeholder groups are followed by suggested strategies to address each element. Further information on accountability systems can be found in *Assessment and Evaluation: Becoming an Educated Consumer, Part III: Accountability Systems*, available on the Web at <http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/goodstart/building-capacity-guide.html>.

### **Establish a Culture of Accountability**

*Engage partners/stakeholders in a discussion about what the culture currently is and opportunities and/or mandates for accountability.*

- Do processes exist for regularly evaluating how well programs are working?
- Do managers/administrators value and use this information to assess progress, revise/revisit goals, adjust resources and staff focus, or develop new initiatives?
- Are managers and staff committed to learning/continuous improvement through analysis and experimentation?
- Are managers and staff knowledgeable about evaluation research and practice at a “familiarity level” (although they draw on recognized expertise)?

Strategies to build capacity in *creating a culture of accountability*:

1. Commit to self-examination and improvement.
2. Support policy debate through experimentation.
3. Respond to demands for accountability.

Next step(s) to building capacity:

## Develop a Long-Range Strategic Evaluation Plan

*Engage partners/stakeholders in a discussion about the current efforts or skills in long-range strategic planning within the agency as a whole and/or the various programs represented. Discuss support from leadership within the government, including the governor's office.*

- Does your agency have a legislative or driving goal that it is critical to link to?
- Have you identified a process to engage key staff and stakeholders in developing the strategic plan?
- Have you identified who needs to be involved?
- Have you clearly articulated the goal and purpose of the evaluation—in the short term (6 months to 1 year), intermediate term (1 to 2 years), and long term (2 to 5 years)?

Strategies to build capacity in long-range strategic planning:

1. Identify a strategic planning process and resources (i.e., time, staff, and facilitator) to engage in the process.
2. Identify *who* will be responsible for *what*, and *when*?

Next step(s) to building capacity:

## Partner With Researchers and Experts

*Engage partners/stakeholders in a discussion about the current level of partnership with researchers and other experts and discuss opportunities and/or initiatives to further partnerships.*

- Are stakeholders part of the process to develop and execute evaluations?
- Are external evaluators regularly used to plan and conduct evaluations?
- Is expertise of stakeholders valued, used, and supported?

Strategies to build capacity in partnering with experts:

1. Contract with experts for determining methodology.
2. Build staff expertise.
3. Draw on available technical assistance or partner expertise.

Next step(s) to building capacity:

## Ensure Data Quality

*Engage partners/stakeholders in a discussion of what the current data capabilities are regarding collection, data entry, analysis, quality, and ability to answer the right questions. Probe further with the following:*

- Are managers committed to ensuring data are accurate, timely, useful, and reliable?
- Do processes exist to enter, store, and analyze data electronically?

Strategies to build capacity in ensuring data quality:

1. Improve administrative data systems.
2. Build resources into the budget to support increased data capabilities over time.
3. Draw on available technical assistance or partner expertise.

Next step(s) to building capacity:

## Engage Families, Community Leaders, and Legislators

*Engage partners/stakeholders in a discussion about how engaged families and community members currently are, including State agency relationship with advocates and legislators. Probe further with the following:*

- Are families and community leaders included in strategic planning and/or advisory meetings?
- Are opportunities to interact and build relationships with families, community leaders, and legislators available and used to promote goals?
- Are materials written in a language and format easily understood by families, community leaders, and legislators?
- Are materials targeted to the needs/concerns of families, community leaders, and legislators?

Strategies to build capacity in engaging family and community members:

1. Join program partners in pursuit of common goals.
2. Educate program partners and solicit their involvement and support.
3. Develop and implement public awareness strategies (i.e., brochures, public service announcements, short presentations, Web site resources).

Next step(s) to building capacity:

## Communicate Results Simply and Often

*Engage partners/stakeholders in a discussion of how communications to the public are currently conducted, addressing staff expertise and agency culture. Probe further with the following:*

- Have managers budgeted time and staff to analyze and communicate results?
- Are you collecting data on key questions of interest to primary stakeholders?
- Have you identified indicators of early change/success?
- Have you identified staff expertise in writing for a general audience?

### Strategies to build capacity in communicating results:

1. Publications should have one- or two-page summaries that quickly give key information and point to resources for further information.
2. Presentations should be short, illustrative of real concerns and situations.
3. Identify and address concerns of the target audiences.
4. Deliver information in a variety of different formats.

Next step(s) to building capacity:

## Lessons Learned: Tips for Developing a Plan to Build Capacity

- Set realistic expectations for what can be accomplished—it takes time to build skills among diverse groups of people.
- Build awareness and credibility within and among the various stakeholders and constituent groups to build capacity for evaluation and to create awareness for the necessity to evaluate.
- Institutionalize increased capacity efforts by establishing policies, processes, training, and other knowledge-management approaches (i.e., technology).
- Increase all stakeholders' understanding of data, uses, need for reliability, and ability to share or collaborate on data-collection efforts.

## Resources

A brief resource is *Key Considerations: Building an Assessment System to Support Early Learners*, available on the Web at

[http://www.ccsso.org/projects/scass/projects/early\\_childhood\\_education\\_assessment\\_consortium/publications\\_and\\_products/3002.cfm](http://www.ccsso.org/projects/scass/projects/early_childhood_education_assessment_consortium/publications_and_products/3002.cfm).

For more detailed information on steps for establishing an accountability system, see *Accountability Systems: Improving Results for Young Children* (2002), The Finance Project, available on the Web at [www.financeproject.org/Publications/accountability.pdf](http://www.financeproject.org/Publications/accountability.pdf).