Introduction

EC-LINC (Early Childhood Learning and Innovation Network for Communities) is a networking initiative, sponsored by the Center for the Study of Social Policy, in which early childhood system representatives from across the country collaborate to share expertise and develop recommendations to accelerate the development of effective, integrated, local early childhood systems. The EC-LINC Outcomes and Metrics workgroup, which produced this toolkit, is one of several EC-LINC collaborative workgroups created to further the aims of the EC-LINC initiative.

The EC-LINC communities created the Outcomes & Metrics work group in order to develop measures that could help them, and other interested communities, better understand how their work in developing local early childhood systems was affecting the current status and future prospects of young children and their families. Early on, we divided the work into two parts. The first part involved identifying a short set of desired early childhood outcomes and a companion list of indicators that can be used to measure progress on these outcomes. This work is briefly summarized in the Appendix on page 69. The second part of the project, which is the focus of this toolkit, developed ways to measure the functioning of the early childhood system that supports children and families. (A brief description of early childhood systems appears on page 3.)

We began with a simple question: why should a community have an early childhood system? That is, what additional contribution might the system provide, over and above the contributions of individual service sectors such as pediatrics or early care and education? This led the group to develop four statements that capture the contributions that an early childhood system provides. These statements have been summarized under the labels Reach, Coordination, Commitment, and Equity (see page 5 for further detail). We then asked in what ways we might measure how well the system is doing in each of these areas and, in the process, promote analysis and discussion that can lead to improvements in system performance. In response, the work group developed the system performance measures described in this toolkit.

Purpose of the Toolkit

The purpose of the Early Childhood System Performance Measure Toolkit is to provide:

1. a framework that identifies the key contributions of a well-functioning early childhood system;

2. a set of performance measures to assess those key contributions, either directly or by proxy;

3. new tools, when needed and possible, that enable system stakeholders to measure system performance in areas that have historically not had tools for measurement;

4. guidance for early childhood system stakeholders on how they can implement the performance measures; and,

5. an ongoing research agenda to continue to improve existing system performance measures or tools or to develop tools, where lacking.

The toolkit also offers a sample action planning template to help communities turn their results into actions that will support quality improvement.

This was a challenging undertaking. There are existing sources of routinely collected data for a few of the performance measures. For most measures, however, we had to create and pilot new tools, many of which are designed to support self-assessment. In this regard, there are two important qualifications to convey. First, the tools created are preliminary; they can and should be adapted to local conditions and they will undoubtedly evolve as we gain more experience in using them. We believe, however, that there is value in sharing the tools at this stage and inviting others to use those that meet their needs.

Second, at this early stage of development we are not offering the field validated instruments that support comparison of results across locations. Rather, the tools give system stakeholders ways to assess what they are doing well and where they could do better. As long as they are used consistently within a system, we hope they will prove to be useful aids in self-assessment and quality improvement.

More information about the process used to develop these measures can be found on pages 67-68.

Who should use this toolkit?

The target users of the toolkit are early childhood system conveners or leaders who seek to improve the functioning of their early childhood system and need tools to establish a baseline and ongoing way to measure progress. These conveners or leaders may be representatives of agencies in a system coordination or funding role, representatives of service-providing agencies within the system, parents or other early childhood advocates, and/or elected officials.

What is the level of effort?

Level of effort and "readiness" of a system for using the toolkit will depend on the measure(s) of interest and system resources. The framework allows for a broad assessment of a community's early childhood system performance, but both practical considerations and evaluation interests will determine which measure, or measures, to implement. Some measures require the collection of population-level or agency-level data that may be readily available, while others require engaging with a broad range of stakeholders, and either fielding a survey or hosting convenings to complete an assessment tool collaboratively.

What if we are just starting out?

Users whose early childhood system building efforts are at an earlier stage may find it useful to begin with the *Early Learning Community Action Guide* from CSSP and the National League of Cities. The Action Guide and its accompanying Progress Rating Tool are designed to support communities working to become Early Learning Communities where young children and their families have all the support they need to thrive.

How to Use the Toolkit

For each system performance measure, the toolkit provides some or all of the following components:

- ▶ **Purpose** of the measure and what communities can expect to learn from implementing the measure;
- ▶ **Definition** of the measure;
- ▶ **Implementation** guidelines, including a sample tool or survey (if one was developed), recommended steps to take, stakeholders to engage, and tips for successful implementation;
- ▶ **Limitations** of the measure;
- ▶ **Opportunites** to further develop measures that are considered preliminary; and
- ▶ **Resources** that may provide helpful context or additional guidance for system assessment and change.

While the measures taken as a whole are intended to provide a comprehensive assessment of a community's early childhood system performance, both practical considerations and research interests will likely mean system stakeholders select a subset of measures to implement, or a single measure, rather than all the measures. To facilitate this selection, each section devoted to one of the four contribution statements begins with a table, which provides an at-a-glance summary of each measure. The table provides, in abbreviated form, the content of each measure, an overview of the investments needed to implement the measure (including human or data resources), system stakeholder engagement needed, and data collection required. It also provides an estimate for the amount of time implementation will take and an overall assessment of level of effort, ranging from low to high, with the caveat that the timeframe is generally dependent on data accessibility. Stakeholders can use these tables to quickly assess their interest in and readiness for implementation of any of the measures. Toolkit users can then refer to the detailed description of each measure and the relevant tools (if applicable) for step-by-step information on implementation.

A few notes and tips for toolkit users:

Customization: Communities are invited to customize the measures as needed to fit their particular needs and circumstances. Most of the measures are not intended to compare performance with other communities; they are offered as self-assessment tools to build system self-awareness and inspire and support quality improvement. Customization of measures that do offer opportunities for cross-community comparison, such as 1.1 Early Prenatal Care, would limit that opportunity.

Frequency: After baseline data collection and assessment, how frequently a community implements the measures—whether quarterly, annually, or using a longer timeframe—will depend on a variety of factors. For example, if the measure is time and resource intensive, a community may prefer a longer time horizon. If a measure is tied to quarterly or annual strategic planning objectives, communities may select a shorter time horizon.

Buy-in: Some communities that piloted the tools encountered initial reticence on the part of front-line workers to be honest in their assessments and caution among leaders for fear the results would make their agency look bad. However, after stakeholders saw the results and understood the value of the assessment, they were less fearful of the results. These experiences prompted the following recommendations for building buy-in:

- ▶ **Leaders:** Consider convening a planning discussion with the leaders whose organizations will be participating in the self-assessment to review the tools and identify which measures are most critical to assess and why. Also, consider sharing some of the sample results included in the Implementation section of the toolkit; leaders in the pilots had a higher level of comfort after they saw the results and could visualize how the tools could help them be more effective. Assure leaders that the intent is not to cast blame or point a finger at any one agency in the system but rather to find ways to improve overall system functioning to everyone's benefit.
- ▶ **Front-line staff:** Front-line staff were more willing to honestly assess their system functioning when they were given explicit encouragement by their supervisor to participate in the survey and when they were assured that results would be anonymous. A planning discussion with leaders prior to implementing the survey would increase the likelihood that this encouragement would take place.

Overall Ratings: Many of the measures consist of self-rating tools which can be filled out individually as an online survey, completed collaboratively with a group of stakeholders, or both. The tools typically start by walking the respondent(s) through specific practices of a well-functioning system and asking the respondents to rate how well the system performs on that practice (e.g., within measure *2.2 System Navigation,* respondents are asked the likelihood that families will be given a "warm hand off" when referred to another agency). After each of those specific practices are rated, many of the tools then ask respondents to convene to collaboratively rate overall system performance on the measure using a four-level scale (e.g., overall, system stakeholders might rate their system at Level 2 for *2.2 System Navigation* because some sectors usually do a warm hand off, but not all, and none do so consistently). The process of going from ratings of specific practices to an overall rating is necessarily subjective and there is no wrong or right way to go about it. In instances when a survey was fielded among front-line staff, for example, communities may want to average the results of those ratings for specific practices. We suggest, however, that this be seen as a starting point for discussion, not a definitive rating. Some of the specific items may be more important to a community than others. For particularly large groups, communities may want to engage a facilitator skilled in consensus-based decision-making methods. Smaller groups may be able to easily arrive at an overall rating through dialogue. It is important to note that consensus may not be possible or valuable in all circumstances; different perspectives provide an opportunity for a community to explore those differences. The four-level rating is simply a strategy to enable stakeholders to distill many complex aspects of a system's functioning into a result that is easy to understand, communicate, and track. Ultimately, however, it is the assessment process—and the increased understanding and actions that result—that is the priority and will provide the greatest benefit to system quality improvement.