0.1 Core Sector Engagement

Level at which key sectors have come together to build an early childhood system

Purpose

An early childhood system, by definition, attempts to connect and integrate the core services used by young children and their families, including healthcare, early learning and development, and family support. This measure allows systems to take stock of how much progress they have made in developing these connections and provides information to support decisions about priorities moving forward. It is likely to be most valuable in the earlier stages of building an early childhood system. More developed systems may want to use measure 3.2, Leadership Engagement, which examines a much wider range of connections, for example, to local businesses, faith-based institutions, and elected officials.

Systems using this measure may also consider a companion measure also designed for use by systems in the early years of developing an early childhood system. Measure 0.2, Infrastructure for System-Building, examines other essential elements of a solid foundation for an early childhood system: a trusted and effective backbone organization; a vision and strategy shared by all of the partners; and an agreed-upon set of aligned activities aimed at achieving that vision.

Definition

This measure provides a tool for a team of system leaders to self-assess the extent to which the three core sectors have come together to form an early childhood system in a given community. These sectors include the following types of services and supports:

▸ *Early Learning and Development:* Head Start/Early Head Start, center-based and family-based care, child care subsidy assistance, and early intervention services.

▸ *Health:* pediatric and maternal physical and behavioral health services, with particular attention to the clinic- and hospital-based or affiliated practices that serve the largest numbers of families with low incomes.

▸ *Family Support:* home visiting and other family support services, family resource centers, parent education and playgroups, housing support (subsidies and homelessness prevention and intervention), and income supports (TANF, WIC, etc.).

Implementation

Tool or Survey

The rating tool at the end of this section presents a series of statements to be evaluated with regard to each of the three core sectors. Some of the questions ask about the extent to which the sector is engaged with other parts of the early childhood system, and others ask about the extent of progress in specified areas.

The tool provides several examples of engagement to help participants contextualize what this might mean. These examples are not necessarily required conditions of engagement, nor are they exhaustive; communities may have other examples that come to mind when thinking about their engagement within and across sectors.

The usual unit of analysis for this tool is an early childhood system in a city or county. Stakeholders should come to a shared understanding of the geographical area being assessed through this process. When it is used with regard to an entire state, users should be aware that some items may not apply, or they may need to be modified.

After the tool is completed, individual responses should be aggregated to support a conversation among stakeholders. Please see the Interpreting Results section of the Toolkit, which provides a detailed example of how to summarize results using this measure as the demonstration case.

Summary of Steps

1. **Set intention:** Decide your community's goals with respect to measuring core early childhood sector engagement. It may be as simple as, "We aspire to have a high-quality, coordinated early childhood system in our region; this assessment will provide a baseline for understanding our progress toward that goal (or will provide an update to our previously determined baseline)." This may require discussion about how the early childhood system and the "community" are defined so that everyone is assessing the same thing.

2. **Stakeholder engagement:** Identify early childhood system leaders or representatives to participate in the assessment process. With the stakeholder group, affirm or revise intentions and consider reviewing the tool together, before fielding, so that questions can be surfaced and discussed beforehand.

3. **Complete tool individually:** If the group is large, it will be more efficient to distribute the tool in advance and have people complete and return it, so the data can be aggregated as shown above before the stakeholder discussion. Doing so has the additional advantage of allowing a larger number of people, including some who may not be able to participate in a meeting, to contribute. In a smaller group, you may be able to aggregate data as you go, and simply set aside the first 15 minutes or so of a meeting for individuals to complete the tool. An online version of the tool using Google Forms is available here; communities using this will need to save the tool in their own Google account, and customize as needed, before distributing.

4. **Aggregate the data:** Have a designated person or entity receive all of the individual responses and aggregate and display the data. Or, if participants are completing the tool at the start of a meeting, set aside time to aggregate the data before continuing with discussion.

5. **Discuss:** Review and discuss the aggregated data, with particular attention to variation in responses. Why did those who gave the highest and lowest rating to each item make those choices?

a. *Interpret:* Reflect on the results and identify strengths, weaknesses, and patterns in core sector engagement. Discussion should be aimed both at trying to achieve a consensus rating and at identifying opportunities for improvement.

b. *Rate:* Arrive at a consensus 1-4 rating for each statement, sector, and for the system as a whole. Use the consensus ratings to arrive at a single rating for your system.

c. *Plan:* Identify those aspects of core sector engagement which the group will prioritize for improvement, and what the goal will be for each. Communities can use the action plan template in this toolkit to help plan next steps.

Stakeholders

A diverse group of leaders within the early childhood system should be involved in this assessment process. In this context, "leaders" means people who know the field well, are aware of the system-building efforts, and have credibility with their peers. If the early childhood system has begun to engage parents in leadership roles, their participation would be especially valuable.

Ideally the process of distributing the survey, collecting data, and leading the conversation would be done by someone in a convening or coordinating role for the system, along with close partners.

Data Sources

This performance measure uses a self-assessment tool, which may be completed by individuals in advance of meeting as a group. At the group meeting, participants arrive at a consensus rating for each statement for each sector, and for this measure overall. No additional data sources are needed to complete this assessment.

Limitations

The value of the tool for local communities lies primarily in clarifying the sectors or actors within the sectors to prioritize for strengthening engagement and the type(s) of additional engagement desired. It is not intended for cross-community comparison, since the landscapes differ in terms of current engagement, desired engagement, resources, priorities, and how early childhood systems are conceptualized.

0.1 Core Sector Engagement: Rating Tool

1—Little or no evidence so far of engagement or progress

2—A few strong early examples, not yet widespread engagement or progress

3—Significant engagement or progress, with some gaps remaining

4—Engagement is strong and widespread, or progress approaching complete implementation

DK—Don't know/not enough information to answer

For each sector, statements 1 (about building connections within the sector) and 2 (about building connections with other sectors) are followed by one or more examples of ways in which some early childhood systems have addressed these needs. As stated above, the examples are meant as illustrations only. If your system has made progress on these issues in other ways, feel free to assign a high rating even if none of the examples apply. The open-ended questions should be presented as optional but encouraged.

EARLY LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Leaders in this sector are...

1. Building a foundation for improvement and connection among the different parts of this sector. Examples to consider include: ▶ If there is a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), it includes effective mechanisms to help providers with lower ratings improve. ▶ There are routes for professional advancement in Early Care and Education (ECE), e.g., ways for Family, Friend and Neighbor care FFN) providers to become licensed, for parents to become employed in ECE, for ECE providers to become credentialed and advance their careers. ▶ There are effective mechanisms to connect FFN providers to one another and to resources, training, and supports.	1 2 3 4 DK
2. Building connections with other early childhood sectors. Examples to consider include: ▶ The child care resource and referral provider is able to help families connect to a wide variety of services and supports, not limited to ECE only. ▶ Similar assistance is available at child care subsidy intake. ▶ Information on community-based resources is disseminated to providers to share with families.	1 2 3 4 DK
3. Advocating for policy changes to benefit young children and their families.	1 2 3 4 DK
4. Working to increase the reach of their services across the community.	1 2 3 4 DK
5. Working to achieve equitable outcomes for all children.	1 2 3 4 DK
6. Engaging parents as partners and working to make services and supports more responsive to parents' needs.	1 2 3 4 DK

What examples came to mind as you considered your ratings, particularly in relation to statements 1 and 2?

HEALTH

Leaders in this sector are...

	1	2	3	4	DK
1. Building a foundation for improvement and connection among the different parts of this sector. Examples to consider include: ▸ Health care providers conduct universal developmental screening. ▸ Providers assess for social determinants of health. ▸ Providers use team-based care to identify and attend to a wide range of family needs.	1	2	3	4	DK
2. Building connections with other early childhood sectors. Examples to consider include: ▸ Help Me Grow, or a similar local program, is in place and is used by pediatric practices to help families connect with the services and supports they need. ▸ There is universal outreach to new parents with the capacity to provide support to parents who want it.	1	2	3	4	DK
3. Advocating for policy changes to benefit young children and their families.	1	2	3	4	DK
4. Working to increase the reach of their services across the community.	1	2	3	4	DK
5. Working to achieve equitable outcomes for all children.	1	2	3	4	DK
6. Engaging parents as partners and working to make services and supports more responsive to parents' needs.	1	2	3	4	DK

What examples came to mind as you considered your ratings, particularly in relation to statements 1 and 2?

FAMILY SUPPORT

Leaders in this sector are...

	1	2	3	4	DK
1. Building a foundation for improvement and connection among the different parts of this sector. Examples to consider include: ▸ Providers of home visiting, family resource centers, playgroups, parenting support groups, and similar family supports network with one another and are aware of the full range of supports available to parents. ▸ Providers have effective mechanisms to help parents learn about and connect with other family support services as children's needs change.	1	2	3	4	DK
2. Building connections with other early childhood sectors. Examples to consider include: ▸ Family support providers have effective linkages with providers in health care and early care and development to help parents connect with the services they need.	1	2	3	4	DK
3. Advocating for policy changes to benefit young children and their families.	1	2	3	4	DK
4. Working to increase the reach of their services across the community.	1	2	3	4	DK
5. Working to achieve equitable outcomes for all children.	1	2	3	4	DK
6. Engaging parents as partners and working to make services and supports more responsive to parents' needs.	1	2	3	4	DK

What examples came to mind as you considered your ratings, particularly in relation to statements 1 and 2?

EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

Next, thinking about the ratings you have assigned to the statements within each sector, turn your attention to the early childhood system as a whole. Assign an overall rating for each statement, using the same 1-4 scale.

1. Building a foundation for improvement and connection among the different parts of the sector in which they work.	1	2	3	4	DK
2. Building connections with other sectors.	1	2	3	4	DK
3. Advocating for policy changes to benefit young children and their families.	1	2	3	4	DK
4. Working to increase the reach of their services across the community.	1	2	3	4	DK
5. Working to achieve equitable outcomes for all children.	1	2	3	4	DK
6. Engaging parents as partners and working to make services and supports more responsive to parents' needs.	1	2	3	4	DK

What examples came to mind as you considered your ratings, particularly in relation to statements 1 and 2?