

**STRATEGIC PLANNING & COMMUNITY COLLABORATION
FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN SANTA CLARA COUNTY
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INTRODUCTION

When choosing a project for the BASSC case study, I wanted to look at a child care program targeting the area of service delivery for County administered Child Care programs. Upon review of the options available, I chose a project in Santa Clara County.

I had no knowledge about what an Early Childhood Development Collaborative (ECDC) was before I arrived in Santa Clara County. In the orientation, I was given a brief look at the project and discovered it covered more than Child Care. This project covers a strategic planning process and a community wide collaboration whose mission states; "All Santa Clara County children will have quality early and middle childhood opportunities and support to realize their full potential."

Using the orientation materials received, I developed the following five objectives:

1. To learn about the forces in the immediate environment which led Santa Clara County to develop an Early Childhood Development Collaborative
2. To learn about the process used for community involvement in the development of the strategic plan for the Early Childhood Development Collaborative.
3. To learn about the methods that will be used by the Assessment Task force to collect data to set measurable goals and objectives for the strategic plan:
4. To learn about methods Santa Clara County will use to monitor the goals and objectives and to learn how they will be used to shape policy and make program decision, and fiscal decisions.
5. To identify aspects of the Santa Clara model which might be implemented in San Mateo County.

HISTORY

What about the Children? Welfare reform requires every parent that can work, to work. It requires counties to move certain percentages of their welfare population to work at increasing intervals throughout welfare reform. As counties, we are implementing welfare reform, but the question remains, what about the children? Santa Clara County Board of Supervisor Blanca Alvarado stated in her 1998 State of the County Address ; "In order to optimize a child's capacity for success, we need to intervene, early on in a child's life. The most recent research in brain chemistry and physiology shows that the first three years are the most critical in the development of a child's brain." Supervisor Alvarado continued in her address to discuss this need within the community to invest in the future of children and "proposed that the County assume a leadership role in the development of a county wide plan for childhood development programs for children age 0-12."

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Along with welfare reform and the desire not to ignore a child's needs during implementation, Supervisor Alvarado cites community needs for the development of the ECDC. "The community needs assert that reports on the Welfare of Santa Clara County's children show that they face a myriad of challenges, many of which affect healthy childhood development."

The ECDC believes that there must be an investment to ensure welfare reform does work and that Santa Clara invest as a community in this project. As parents return to work, the community must know where the children are during these hours. Are their physical, emotional and cognitive needs being met? Is there access for all to available services within the County? As parents move off the welfare system, can they continue to afford these services? *The collaborative focus is on the needs of quality early care in all aspects of a child's life.*

These questions, concerns and issues are the motivating forces behind the focus of the ECDC. With this in mind, the Social Services Agency, with community involvement a major factor, began the process of developing a strategic plan to meet the needs of Santa Clara County children age 0-12.

PROCESS FOR STRATEGIC PLAN DEVELOPMENT

Planning for the ECDC began in March 1998 with ultimate decision making authority resting with Supervisor Blanca Alvarado. The kickoff meeting invited over 50 representatives from areas invested in child development such as; public health, educators, child care, mental health, juvenile probation and United Way to participate on a design team for the ECDC: Approximately 35 began the process and 25 members have continued to participate in the strategic plan development.

Since the design team had such a large pool of representatives, a steering team was developed to help plan agendas for the design team and develop proposals to be discussed in those meetings. Six members of the design team sit on the steering team.

With team structure, including roles and responsibilities established, the group again looked at team representatives to determine if any other groups needed to be represented. Throughout the process, the collaborative has often re-looked at this question, being sure to invite new members as needed.

The next step was to establish the policies and procedures of the design team. Time was spent on decision making rules, policy on participation in decision making as well as participation and attendance, guidelines for meetings and finally a communication process between staff and team members.

Once this first phase of team structure, policies and procedures were solidified, the design team began to look at the process of designing phase two of the strategic plan.

The steps identified to lay the foundation for the strategic planning process were:

Plan-to-Plan - project plan that describes how the group will develop its strategic plan; set the planning horizon, outline the major steps or tasks, set the timetable, determine who needs to be involved at each phase of plan development, etc.

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Visions, Goals, Values - description of the future and outcomes the group intends to achieve

Needs Assessment - appraisal of existing community assets and barriers

Strategic Objectives - measurable target for achievement

Strategic Priorities - rank strategic objectives in terms of their relative importance or urgency

Strategies- approach or an implementation methodology that will lead to achieving strategic objectives

Evaluation- systematic procedure for determining success of group efforts

The team developed an overall project purpose: " To bring our diverse community together to design and implement a strategic plan to promote the healthy development of all children pre-natal to age 12 in Santa Clara County." They adopted a project vision: " All Santa Clara County children will have quality early and middle childhood opportunities and support to realize their full potential." Along with the purpose and vision, the design of the strategic planning process included:

- How far into the future the strategic plan will look
- Established time lines
- Identified potential barriers and obstacles to the planning process and develop a plan to overcome them
- Established strategic planning objectives
- Designed an assessment process
- Created an outline for the strategic plan
- Identified a structure for completing strategic planning
- Identified other stakeholders who should be involved in the planning process
- Established and outreach strategy for educating interested individuals and organizations about the strategic planning process

During the first phase of the ECDC strategic planning process, the design team faithfully revisited the issue of collaboration and need to allow any member of the community to participate. The design team was successful in meeting their deadline for establishing teams and designing phase two by January, 1999. Phase Two of the process began in February, 1999 and building on the work done during Phase One, the next steps were to assess, envision and strategize a strategic plan for children, pre-natal to age five, with a timeline for completion of January 2000.

METHODS FOR TASK FORCE ASSESSMENT

The first goal of Phase Two is to assess needs for children pre-natal to age five. The design team created an Assessment Task Force and broke the needs down into four areas:

1. Maternal and Child Health
2. Parenting Education and Family/Community Support
3. Child Care and Early Education
4. Child Safety and Security

Each area is headed by a chairperson with expertise in the area to be assessed. The responsibilities of each Task force team are:

- Members consistently attend meetings
- Task Force chairs join Steering team
- Answer assessment questions and collect existing data
- Identify existing data gaps and conduct primary data collection as permitted (surveys, focus groups)
- Communicate with Social Services staff
- Identify additional Task Force and collaborative participants
- Compile, summarize, and present assessment data and key findings to collaborative in a standardized way

By June 1999, the Task Forces are to present their results to the collaborative at a kick off meeting. The questions the Task Forces were charged with answering are:

- What are the data indicators (i.e.: low birth weight, licensed capacity of child care centers, rate of autism, rate of families with library cards)?
- What does the data tell us about the indicators (i.e.: distinctions between geographic areas, county-wide needs, specific sub-populations)?
- What services exist (where, for whom, how much or how often, outcomes)?
- What are the "best practices" or "models of excellence" (what local and national programs or services do we know improve outcomes for children and families)?
- What long-term cost savings have been realized as a result of local or national programs?
- What are the key findings (what findings should be highlighted given their implications for healthy early childhood development)?

The work of the Assessment Teams seems a daunting task! This piece of work during Phase Two brings together the current services as well as services that are missing in the community, and will be a major factor in the future services being offered in the community. Therefore, the design team developed a support system for the Task Force. Support comes in three areas:

1. The steering team will plan Task Force meetings and help chairpersons think through any issues members are experiencing in finding or synthesizing the data.
2. Project staff will assist with research, data synthesis and analysis, meeting logistics, materials, communications, and documents or presentations produced (for example, writing, editing, design, production).
3. The strategic planning consultant will assist in planning and facilitating Task Force meetings, data synthesis and analysis, survey or focus group design, and documents or presentations produced

To complete Phase Two, the collaborative will have to combine the results of the needs assessment and then envision and strategize the needs of children pre-natal to age 5 before implementing the plan.

METHODS USED TO MONITOR AND ASSESS

During the Phase One process of building the foundation for the strategic plan the ECDC identified the need to build-in the ability to monitor and assess throughout implementation.

For purposes of this project, the collaborative is still in the initial stages of phase Two with the timeline indicating that the first implementation for children pre-natal to age five being January 2000. To include children through age 12, the plan indicates that this will occur by January 2005.

At the time of implementation for children prenatal to age five, the project map indicates that the collaborative will return to a Phase Two process, revise the current plan and begin designing the plan to expand the scope to children 6-12. This process is set to occur throughout implementation and gives the collaborative the ability to evaluate and monitor during implementation.

OTHER ASPECTS

At the beginning of the ECDC, the assumption was that a separate funding work group would need to be formed during the strategic planning process to implement the needed services developed by the ECDC. This predated Proposition 10.

Proposition 10 passed on the November, 1998 ballot and imposes a 50 cent per pack tax on cigarettes. The resulting revenue will be used to fund anti-smoking and early childhood development programs.

Because of the strategic planning of the ECDC and due to community wide inclusive dynamics, the ECDC was approved to be the advisory committee to the county commission.

Santa Clara County has five districts and allotment of Proposition 10 funding will be based on live births per district. As the legislation is written now, Santa Clara County could potentially receive 27.1 million dollars in Proposition 10 funding.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Do not plan too much before you begin! When building community partnerships, the more you have prepared for the process makes community partners uncertain of the intentions for a true partnership.
2. Consultants are extremely important! The outside consultant brings a level of neutrality that can facilitate the feelings of trust within the group.
3. Relationships and trust are important! Many times counties are perceived as taking over. Many community partners are concerned about this big brother effect. Nurture the relationships and always remain credible and trustworthy.

CONCLUSIONS

Shared vision, project goal, organization and communication will continue to make this collaborative a success not only in terms of successful strategic planning, but in the implementation of needs for Santa Clara County children. At the same time this project has demonstrated that San Mateo County has built solid foundations for successful strategic planning.

Throughout the meeting notes for the Phase One process, the shared vision and project goals are continually repeated. This created clear direction and allowed the team to continue to move

forward with their goals. As you read through the meeting notes, they always seemed to begin with a reiteration of the goals and vision to keep the team focused on where they are going.

Organization of the meeting is another area that allows a collaboration of this magnitude to continue. From agendas you can tell that at each meeting the team moves one, two, sometimes three steps forward in the process. Setting the agendas, staying with the agenda while being sure all opinions are heard is a sure way to make progress.

Communication of the process has definitely contributed to the ability of this collaboration to reach milestones. Meeting notes are taken, processed, and distributed to all members. You could write a paper on this collaboration from meeting notes, which demonstrates how effective and clearly defined the team has been.

Attention is being paid to the relationships in this collaboration and the importance of each member's participation. There is an "all are welcome" attitude, and in combination with the shared vision, project goals, organization and communication, the ECDC will continue to be an important force in the area of early childhood development.

San Mateo County has also successfully built a strategic plan in the area of service delivery for the Human Services Agency. We are currently implementing this plan which was developed in collaboration with our community partners, which is our model for welfare reform, called SUCCESS (Shared Understanding to Change the Community to Enable Self Sufficiency). San Mateo County invited all stakeholders. and continuously urged participation, which set the stage for collaboration and relied on shared vision, project goals, organization and communication to propel the model forward similar to the Santa Clara County process.

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