

SHARED SERVICES AS A STRATEGY TO CREATE EMPLOYMENT PIPELINES IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES

BACKGROUND

Shared Service Alliances are networks of early care and education providers who work together to build organizational capacity, improve job quality, deepen community engagement and promote long-term sustainability. The goal of a Shared Service Alliance is to improve child outcomes by strengthening business and pedagogical leadership in all participating sites, and to create structures that enable sharing of staff, information and resources. Opportunities Exchange catalyzes the development of Shared Service Alliances by working on the ground with ECE providers to transform the business of caring for young children and by shaping public policy and finance to incentivize high quality care for young children.

Shared Services Alliances have the potential to create a pipeline for employment in the child care industry. Although typical child care employment opportunities offer low wages and limited benefits, Shared Services is an intentional strategy to improve job quality and promote sustainable employment.

This paper summarizes some examples of the links between Shared Services and employment/economic development in the following areas:

- Creating one doorway for substitutes and full employment
- Improving ECE job quality
- Enhancing family engagement
- Supporting knowledge exchange and knowledge sharing

CREATING ONE DOORWAY FOR SUBSTITUTES AND FULL EMPLOYMENT

A Shared Services approach has helped several Shared Service Alliances to create stable jobs for employees, and a pipeline for parents and community residents into these jobs. Using a Shared Services framework, these Alliances create a “one doorway” approach to recruit, train and orient substitute teachers for multiple centers. Although initially hiring substitutes, the approach is essentially a workforce development strategy that allows employees to be hired, trained as a substitute, given opportunities to obtain work experience and build relationships, and ultimately placed in full employment as job openings occur. The goal is to recruit and train people for entry-level jobs that put them on a trajectory toward permanent employment and job growth.

Sound Child Care Solutions (WA), Brightside Academy (NY, OH, PA) are two Alliances, among others, that have established a “one doorway” staffing service to recruit subs and staff. These Alliances have found the strategy to be a win-win for ECE programs as well as potential job candidates.

IMPROVING ECE JOB QUALITY

Although most jobs in child care have low wages and limited benefits, Shared Services is a strategy to improve job quality so that child care is a viable career pathway for residents in low-income communities and particularly for those who are entering the workforce and for people with limited English language skills.

By centralizing administrative functions, crafting alternative staffing patterns that enable administrative and supervisory staff to be shared across sites, and freeing up site directors to serve as pedagogical leaders, Shared Services Alliances have been able to transform the work environment for many participating early childhood programs. Focusing on administrative efficiencies frees up resources to invest in increased wages, health insurance and retirement benefits, paid sick leave, and additional time “off the floor” to engage in planning. Freeing up directors to serve as pedagogical leaders (instead of overly stressed managers responsible for all things) deepens teacher effectiveness and improves the work environment. Not surprisingly, many Alliances have experienced lower turnover rates for their employees and employees note greater job satisfaction.

Opportunities Exchange also helps centers to build better jobs by advocating for policy changes. For example, current regulatory and fiscal policy often limits the ability of programs to share administrative staff or create streamlined and centralized staffing services like the “one doorway” approach identified above. To this end, OppEx works with policy makers and funders to help explore alternative policy and finance strategies that encourage a Shared Services framework.

ENHANCING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Research has underscored that family engagement is key to improving child outcomes. Family members are a child’s first teacher, and the extent to which they are actively engaged in early education can establish a pattern of positive interactions with education that ripple through generations. Moreover, many families in low-income communities struggle to obtain a host of needed supports for their children as well as themselves (such as health and dental care, mental health or social services, early intervention, etc.) While the federally funded Head Start and Early Head Start initiatives provide funding for family engagement and comprehensive health and mental health services, other child care funding streams (such as the child care and development block grant or state Prek funds) do not cover these expenses. As a result, community-based child care centers are challenged to effectively respond to these needs.

Several Shared Services Alliances have begun to explore ways to share the cost of building a network of services and supports to engage the family. In a few cases, such as Early Connections Learning Centers in Colorado Springs, the cost of a Family Worker is shared by several centers. In other cases (such as a

new initiative led by the Chambliss Center in Chattanooga, TN) these services are developed through partnerships with community-based nonprofit organizations. OppEx is currently working on a Shared Services business plan with the Miami Children's Initiative in the very low-income neighborhood of Liberty City. Our hope is to craft a strategy to broker a host of supportive health, mental health, and social service supports for the children and families that use child care centers participating in the Alliance.

SUPPORTING KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Shared Services is a framework that can be used to support a host of direct services, enabling programs to focus limited funding on what matters most. Taking Shared Services to scale is not about replication, but rather about supporting knowledge exchange, promoting peer learning, and offering targeted technical assistance when and where it can make a difference.

Opportunities Exchange leads a Shared Service Learning Community and offers a variety of learning opportunities including webinars, study tours, and conferences. Enabling Opportunities Exchange to connect with cross-sector organizations--particularly those engaged in family economic security--would yield learnings and best practices that could deepen knowledge but also support experimentation and help take the effort to scale.