

Family Engagement and Empowerment in Ohio: Strengths and Opportunities in the Field

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Executive Summary

This report analyzes the results of a five-month, qualitative study of the state of family engagement and empowerment efforts in the State of Ohio. The purpose of the research was:

- 1) To identify the existing family engagement and empowerment resources in order to more fully understand what exists that is working well,
- 2) To determine ways of strengthening and coordinating these existing resources, and
- 3) To propose the design elements for a state-wide Family Engagement and Empowerment initiative. This work was driven by the question: How can we orchestrate and continue to build family engagement and empowerment state-wide and across service systems?

Key informant interviews with 20 state level advocates and 29 family members and local advocates were conducted. Twenty focus groups representing each of the five OFCF Regions were held and 71 additional family members completed an Internet survey.

In analyzing the interviews, several themes emerged as areas of concern and promise for strengthening family engagement and empowerment opportunities in Ohio. They are:

1. There are inconsistencies in access to information about resources and linkages to service.
2. There are opportunities to develop more meaningful roles for family members.
3. Key informants see ways to improve relationships and communications between providers, systems and families.
4. There are opportunities to increase understanding and respect between families and providers—this includes building awareness of the realities of family life and the limitations of bureaucratic actions.
5. Although there are many family engagement opportunities in the state, there have been fewer efforts aimed at institutionalizing family involvement and input.
6. As well as increasing family engagement and empowerment opportunities, key informants also spoke of a desire to increase the availability of support services.
7. Families desire a broader advocacy focus.

The themes were then presented at several community forums to generate a range of feasible short-term actions and long-range strategies to address each of these themes.

It has become clear through our research that there is a tremendous amount of support for the idea of creating mechanisms to empower and engage families across systems in Ohio. And the idea of institutionalizing, coordinating and building upon family engagement and empowerment opportunities is supported by families and family advocates alike. Indeed, this support cuts clear across the responses of families involved in all the systems that serve them.

A series of strategies has been developed to increase family engagement and empowerment in Ohio. These strategies have been designed to help the state work toward three significant goals:

- To promote and maintain the enthusiasm and momentum by continuing the conversation that this research process has catalyzed;
- To focus the vision, by building a sustainable implementation and design structure for a Center or Network to support family engagement and empowerment across systems; and
- To increase the impact and effectiveness of existing family involvement opportunities through increased coordination, which would reduce duplication of effort and increase efficiencies.

The strategies have been organized into categories to assist in the development of an implementation plan. Some of the strategies could be acted upon quickly and could be implemented with existing resources or with small amounts of dedicated funding. Other strategies would take more time and would require additional resources or the pooling of existing funds spent on family involvement efforts, identification of new funds, and/or reallocation of existing resources. Some strategies are very broad and would involve multiple state Departments, and some are specific to a Department, program, or program enhancement. A Summary Chart displays a snapshot of specific strategies to institutionalize and enhance family involvement and is cross-listed with the major themes identified in the research. It is designed to complement the complete description of these strategies.

Conclusion

The following three recommendations emerged from this project.

Recommendation 1: Proceed with efforts to increase the engagement and empowerment of families in Ohio through the development of a mechanism such as a Center or Network.

Recommendation 2: Increase coordination among existing and new family involvement efforts - - to reduce duplication and increase the impact of existing and future efforts.

Recommendation 3: Proceed with the following strategies identified as immediate next steps to build on the momentum. The description of these strategies can be the basis for a Scope of Work for Ohio to contract with individuals and/or organizations to implement the next phase of the development of a Center or Network for Family Engagement and Empowerment.

Next Steps

The following strategies are both low cost and important to sustaining and building on the excitement and enthusiasm generated by this project.

- **Regular Listening Sessions**—Families want to be heard. We therefore recommend implementing a schedule of regular listening sessions at the local and or regional level (every six months). Although this strategy would demand some funding, through this research process a cadre of parents and family advocates have been trained who have the skills needed to conduct these “listening sessions.” Implementing this strategy would not

only give these advocates and family members another significant role, but would also provide an opportunity for the many families throughout the state who have a desire to tell their stories. To fold this into the Ohio Families and Children First infrastructure would create opportunities for increased dialogue between families and state-level entities, build community-level support, and build the skills of families and family advocates with minimal additional investment on the part of the state.

- **Structure to Respond to Listening Session Input**—By formalizing a structure of sharing the input from the listening sessions and giving feedback to families, the Cabinet could make tremendous progress toward helping create accountability and increase effective two-way communication between professionals and families. This strategy would demand an agreement among Cabinet members to create a mechanism for reviewing listening session information in a timely way and incorporating feedback into future actions. If actions could not accommodate parent requests, there would also need to be explanations provided. Additionally, regular updates on the feasibility of requests would need to be conducted in order to ensure that ideas that require long term focus such as funding or system changes stay on the radar screen.
- **Conduct Annual Family Engagement Cross Systems Congress**—In order to continue the dialogue and build upon the conversations and momentum that has been initiated, we recommend bringing together the highest level state system representatives, family members and advocates from each region and service system on an annual basis. These meetings could do much to highlight successes, refocus family engagement and empowerment initiatives across systems and build communication and support. Using strengths based methods of collaboration would lead to high engagement and offer constructive opportunities for families and professionals to arrive at solutions together.
- **Create Cross Systems Learning Opportunities**— At the Community Forum held on September 3, 2008 participants suggested increasing the understanding of the value of family engagement by developing and conducting a training for both family members and professionals on the positive outcomes resulting from family engagement and empowerment. The development and implementation of this training would strengthen the relationship between agencies and families and build trust and understanding. Additionally, as noted by key informants, this training could help to build a pool of individuals who could act as a Speaker’s Bureau and talk about the value of family engagement throughout the state.
- **Create Cross-Systems Family Leadership Opportunities** —There are opportunities to formalize parent input through the creation of a Cross-Systems Family Leadership Council. This council could serve to focus efforts on cross systems sharing of resources and materials, bring family strengths, assets and needs to the state-level dialogue, and also serve as a leadership training ground for both family members and advocates. Similarly, participants at the Community Forum on September 3, 2008 recommended that an Advisory Committee of Families and Professional be formed and meet quarterly, or as needed, to network and give and seek advice, with families determining the agenda.

- **Develop Work Groups**—Much work is already being done by individual systems in the family engagement and empowerment arena. This means that there are tremendous opportunities to create cross systems work groups. The small groups that were formed at the September 3, 2008 meeting discussed nine specific strategies, some or all of these could be continued through ongoing work groups.
- **Increase Awareness of and Utilization of Existing Resources** —There are several resources that have already been created that could be disseminated across systems. Examples include a document that explains children’s rights in Ohio located at <http://olrs.ohio.gov/Other/ChildrensRights.pdf>; a self assessment tool developed by the Family Support Council that helps agencies and families identify what existing practices are family friendly and identify changes to increase family involvement; and a guide to service coordination for families.

Summary Chart

There was overwhelming support from the families and family advocates involved in this research project to create some type of mechanism to support families across systems in Ohio. The idea of institutionalizing family engagement and empowerment in the state through the creation of a Network or Center was supported by families and family advocates involved in all the systems that serve families in the state, and was seen as an opportunity to coordinate and build on existing family involvement resources.

The following chart provides a snapshot of specific strategies to institutionalize and enhance family involvement and is cross-listed with the major themes identified in the research. It is designed to complement the complete description of these strategies.

Summary Chart of Strategies for Increasing Family Engagement and Empowerment in Ohio

Category A: Immediate Next Steps to Build on the Momentum							
Recommended Strategy	Access to information about services	More meaningful roles for family members	Improved relationships/communications	Increased understanding about the realities of families and professionals	Institutionalizing family involvement and input	Increasing availability of support services	Broaden advocacy focus
Regular Listening Sessions		*	*	*			
Structure to Respond to Listening Session Input		*	*				
Conduct Annual Family Engagement Cross Systems Congress		*	*				
Create Cross System Learning Opportunities – the Value of Family Engagement							*
Create Cross-Systems Family Leadership Opportunities (themes)						*	*
Develop Work Groups	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Category B: Broad Strategies Related to Institutionalization and Sustainability of Family Involvement

Recommended Strategy	Access to information about services	More meaningful roles for family members	Improved relationships/ communications	Increased understanding about the realities of families and professionals	Institutionalizing family involvement and input	Increasing availability of support services	Broaden advocacy focus
Funding – Pooled and new funding	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Encourage and Incentivize Family Communications					*		
Consistently Adopt Best Practices	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Institutionalize Family Engagement					*		
Access	*						
Mini-grants	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Website of Websites							
Economic Development	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
System Integration and Financing Alternatives	*	*					

Category C: Strategies Specific to a Department, Issue, Program, or Program Element

Recommended Strategy	Access to information about services	More meaningful roles for family members	Improved relationships/communications	Increased understanding about the realities of families and professionals	Institutionalizing family involvement and input	Increasing availability of support services	Broaden advocacy focus
Build on Existing Communication Tools	*						*
Parent and Family Consumer Rating System	*						
Train Parents to Advocate to the Legislature							*
Engaging Families from Early Intervention to Adult Transition	*						*
Children in DYS					*		
Self –esteem building		*	*				*
Support for Kinship and Foster Families	*	*				*	
More Community Events at School			*	*	*		

Coaching/Mentoring Parents, Parent Advocacy	*	*	*				
Develop Preschool Playgroups						*	
Stigma Reduction	*						*