Data Direction 4: **Building a Data Sharing Partnership with Other Organizations**

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This is one of a set of five "Data Directions" that present issues ECE staff may encounter if they are interested in or attempting to share or link their data with other agencies. Each Data Direction presents a hypothetical scenario, and then outlines possible action steps programs could use to address the issues raised. This fourth Data Direction offers suggestions for initiating conversations with other organizations about sharing and linking data.

Ms. Hill is the director of a large, diverse Head Start program in an urban area. There are over ten different languages spoken by families enrolled in her program, and the majority of the families are recent immigrants. Ms. Hill knows that the children and families in her program face unique challenges, and she wants to make sure that she and her staff are connecting them to other needed programs and organizations in the community. At the past few family meeting, parents have talked about challenges like the high cost of rent, not having enough money for groceries, and not having a safe place for their children to play. She believes that many families would benefit from other services like food and housing support, but she does not know which families are already receiving community services or which families may be eligible but not enrolled in services. Ms. Hill thinks that linking data[1] about the children in her program with data from other service organizations could help the families in her program access other support services. She would like to link her Head Start data with data from several local social services programs

To learn more about how a Head Start program linked data with another local organization and use the linked data to better serve families, please see *Case Study #3: Telamon North Carolina Corporation's Collaboration with a County Agency*, another resource in this series.

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[1] In this resource, data are considered linked when information from two or more separate data systems or databases are shared, connected, combined, or merged. These data systems or databases may be housed in the same program or in multiple programs or agencies. Linking can occur in various ways ranging from simple, (e.g., sharing a spreadsheet) to more complex (e.g., merging two databases into a single file), to very complex (e.g., fully integrating data across multiple agencies). However, all linked data has the potential to provide useful information to support ECE program improvement.

including the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) run by the county department of social services. She would also like to link with the local activity center, Rogers YMCA, that has a grant to support enrollment fees for low-income families.[2] However, Ms. Hill is not sure who to contact about this or what steps she should take to build a partnership with these other organizations so that she could link her program's data with theirs.

Action Steps

Below are some action steps that Ms. Hill could take to help her establish a partnership with other organizations in order to use linked data to support continuous improvement. Linking data could help Ms. Hill better serve the families in her program by helping them learn about and enroll in other community services to support their unique needs.

1. Identify the questions to be answered and the type of information needed.

The first step in this process is to identify the questions to be answered and the type of information needed. For example, Ms. Hill is interested in learning which of the families in her program are enrolled in other local services and which families are not enrolled but may be eligible for services. To begin, Ms. Hill pulled together a list of other programs for families in the community that had been generated as part of the community assessment and Program Information Report her program is required to complete. She and a few parents from her program also met with some community organizations and leaders to talk about their interests and how sharing data might help serve both the community agencies and families. Next, Ms. Hill worked with families and staff on the program's policy council to develop a list of questions and information to gather. After gathering this input and speaking with program families and staff, Ms. Hill decided to work on a data sharing partnership with two organizations, the local department of social services (for TANF and WIC programs) and the Rogers YMCA.

Summary of Action Steps

1. Identify the questions to be answered.
2. Reach out to possible partners and establish points of contact.
3. Use the program's data governance entity.
4. Decide which data to link and how to use the linked data.
5. Create a data sharing agreement.
6. Develop a plan to maintain and build the partnership.

2. Reach out to possible partners and establish a point of contact in each organization or agency.

After identifying the organizations of interest, Ms. Hill needs to have an initial conversation with agency leaders about this possible partnership. She could first contact the director of each of the two local organizations (i.e., the local department of social services (DSS) and the Rogers YMCA) to ask for a meeting to talk about this possible data sharing opportunity. Or if Ms. Hill reached out to these organizations as part of step 1, she could reconnect with those same points of contact. If this is her first time reaching out to these organizations, she should be prepared to explain why she is interested in linking data and how she believes it will be helpful to the partner organization as well. For example, Ms. Hill could explain that if their data were linked together, the DSS and Rogers YMCA could more easily identify and recruit other families who are eligible for or interested in their services. Based on her conversations with families under step 1, she could also describe to agency leaders the interests families have expressed about this possible partnership or invite a parent to join the discussion.

Once the leaders of the DSS and Rogers YMCA express interest, it will be useful to ask if there is a particular person who can lead the discussions and possible work. This "point person" may be the director or someone who works more closely with the data and can help with the data linking. The point person in each agency may lead certain aspects of the project, but may also need to pull together other staff for some decisions. Ms. Hill should think about who would be the point of contact within her own program for this project.

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[2] The organizations listed here are just examples of local and community organizations and providers. Programs may also be interested in linking data with other organizations or providers in their community such as those that focus on child welfare, or physical, behavioral or mental health.

3. Use the program's data governance entity to address issues with linking data.

As part of this possible collaborative effort, Ms. Hill likely will want to work with her program's data governance entity (if her program has one) to ensure that this new data linking project follows the program's policies for data management and data security, and that all those involved are aware of any restrictions with linking the Head Start data with the local DSS and Rogers YMCA. For example, the data governance entity can help develop a data sharing agreement (described in the next action step), develop a parental consent form if needed, and ensure that any data they receive from other organizations are stored securely so that the privacy of the data are maintained.[3]

4. Decide which data to link and how to use the data that are linked across programs.

The organizations must decide which data to link and how they are going to use the linked data. **It may be helpful for agency leaders to start talking about this much earlier in the process to be sure they're linking the data they need.** They likely will continue to talk about this periodically throughout the process and then have another focused discussion once they're ready to use the data. Each of the program leaders who are linking data can work together to jointly make decisions about what data are linked and how the data will be used by each organization. It is important to note that programs should only link or share data needed to answer their questions of interest; not all of the data that each program or organization collects will need to be shared for linking purposes. They may also need to develop specific action steps for using the information. For instance, will Ms. Hill's staff help families complete TANF or WIC enrollment forms and then send the forms to the department of social services? Will the Rogers YMCA staff visit Ms. Hill's program to describe the YMCA program and help enroll families? The partnering organizations may find it useful to develop specific plans as they are working on their data sharing project to ensure that they know how each agency is going to use the data to improve services for families.

In this example, Ms. Hill would like to use the linked data to learn which families in her program are also enrolled in these other programs and services. She hopes that this data linking project will help more families in her program enroll in these services, if they need and want them. The other agency leaders share her interest in wanting to increase enrollment in their services. Ms. Hill agrees to send her enrollment data every 6 months to DSS and Rogers YMCA so that they can link her data with theirs and, in turn, they will send data indicating which services families in her program are receiving. The family support worker in her Head Start program will use these data to identify families who are eligible but not enrolled in these services and help them apply, if needed. DSS leaders agree to visit the program every 6 months to describe the TANF and WIC services and enroll families. Rogers YMCA agrees to offer individual tours for the Head Start families who are eligible but not enrolled. They also plan to use the data to request additional scholarship funds to support the enrollment of more Head Start families in the YMCA.

5. Create a data sharing agreement.

Before the data from Head Start, DSS, and Rogers YMCA are linked together, the program leaders will likely need to create a data sharing agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Data sharing agreements typically outline the expectations of each organization in terms of roles and responsibilities with using, sharing, and linking data. This includes describing the purpose of linking the data, identifying the data within each organization that will be linked, determining

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[3] For more information about developing a data governance entity, please refer to *Data Direction 1: Creating and Managing a Data Governance Entity*, another resource in this series.

how it will be linked and stored in a secure way so the data are protected, and describing how the data will be used and eventually destroyed when they are no longer needed. Program leaders can also reach out to community organizations or partners to ask if they have data use agreement templates they can use, or if they can help the programs in drafting these types of agreements or memorandums.

Resources for developing data sharing agreements or Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs)

Creating a data-sharing agreement involves legal and technical language to ensure that data are kept confidential and private, and it outlines the policies and procedures for data use and linking. Many resources have been created to help programs develop a data-sharing agreement. The following resources may be helpful:

- The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has a Confidentiality Toolkit that provides examples of a Memorandum of Understanding and a data-sharing agreement. Specifically, Appendix B of the Toolkit provides examples of data-sharing agreements in Kentucky, New York, and Colorado that your program could use.

- The Privacy Technical Assistance Center (PTAC), funded by the U.S. Department of Education, has a data-sharing agreement checklist to help programs integrate federal policies, such as FERPA, into data-sharing agreements. The checklist also provides other resources your program can use to create data-sharing agreements.

6. Develop a plan to maintain and build the data sharing partnership.

It will also be useful to develop a plan to sustain and continue building this partnership. For example, Ms. Hill could suggest that they have monthly meetings to talk about any collaboration or data sharing issues. She may want to assign her point person in her program to coordinate these meetings. This could also be an opportunity for the staff from the local DSS and Rogers YMCA who are linking data to think about other local services or programs that might be good to invite to join this data sharing partnership. By having a regular meeting time and plan in place, Ms. Hill can help maintain these ongoing partnerships with the other organizations.

Ms. Hill could also look for additional opportunities to collaborate with these or other organizations. She could invite some agency leaders to be board members or speak at staff or family meetings. Ms. Hill could learn more about the DSS and Rogers YMCA programs by attending their events or reaching out to the staff at community or city-level meetings. Attending each other's meetings and working together on shared projects of interest allows leaders in each agency to learn more about the other agencies and to build trust with staff. This knowledge and trust will provide a strong foundation for discussing the possibility of linking data across agencies. It may also be useful for Ms. Hill to strengthen relationships with other agencies in the community so that if she or they were interested in collaborating at a later time (on a data-related or other type of project), they would already know one another.

Summary

These action steps offer ideas about how to build a partnership with other organizations to support the use of linked data to improve services for children and families. The steps include identifying questions of interest, identifying the possible partner organization and points of contact, involving the program's data governance entity if needed, discussing the data to be linked and for what purpose, establishing a data sharing agreement, and creating a plan to maintain this partnership. Each program and collaboration may differ; these steps are intended to provide a general idea of how to build a data sharing partnership.

Acknowledgments

Suggested citation: Epstein, D., Maxwell, K. L., & Lin, V. K. (2016). *Data direction 4: Building a data sharing partnership with other organizations*. Report #2016-34. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.

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