Data in Head Start and Early Head Start

THE NATIONAL CENTER ON
Program Management and Fiscal Operations

Tips for Embracing Data

I truly believe that teaching or planning without data is like tossing a handful of darts and hoping that one hits the target, whatever or wherever that might be! The data is like a GPS system that guides our planning and hard work directly to the target. How can we miss?
~ Head Start/Early Head Start
   Director
   Region VIII

We pulled in all of the teachers and did a presentation showing what our scores were. By sharing the information, we made it part of the culture. Before that, it wasn't meaningful. Together, we thought about what we were going *to do improve our results.*
~ Head Start Director
   Region IV

Data is woven into our quality improvement work groups and into our planning process. We pore over reports and make plans for next year. We chew over data to build consensus.
~ Director of Early
   Childhood Services
   Region IV

Provide the vision, help staff understand the value. Leaders in Head Start and Early Head Start programs that use data well begin by providing staff members with the big picture—the purposes of data collection, the importance of data, how each person and position contributes to the data process by ensuring good data, and how the data will be used. They help staff see the links between the data they have or create, and program goals and program change. The big picture informs the service areas and classroom levels. (For example, does your community assessment data reflect an increase in families whose primary language is Arabic? If so, do you have staff members who speak Arabic? Children's books in Arabic?) And classroom-level data informs the big picture. (For example, does your child outcomes data show that children's math outcomes don't meet national averages? Does your budget allow you to provide training on math? To purchase more manipulative materials?)

Set the tone. Create a non-threatening environment in which staff members feel comfortable talking about what the data shows. Engage staff in the process from the outset so that they know that figuring out how to use data is being done with them, not to them. Help staff understand how the data will help them do their jobs better and thus benefit the children and families in your program. Defuse the fear of numbers and the fear that data will be used inappropriately, such as in monitoring performance or making employment decisions.

Make sure your Head Start systems support data use. Data collection and analysis are dependent on your record-keeping and reporting systems. A robust ongoing monitoring system will ensure good-quality data and enable you to track progress. A strong communication system ensures that everyone who needs to know about, understand, and have input into data use is informed and knowledgeable. Your data feeds your planning system and shapes goal setting. It goes without saying that your data system works hand in hand with your fiscal system. Your self-assessment system will enable you to take a good look each year at whether your program is using data effectively to drive change.

Dedicate resources. Consider what resources—including staff, time, and funds—you will need to allocate to data management, and use the existing resources that you have wisely. There are many ways that this can be done. Some Head Start and Early Head Start programs create time for data management functions by reviewing data during every staff meeting. Education managers can review child assessment data with teachers during their team meetings and help teachers use the data in developing weekly plans. Some programs create a data team whose members transmit their enthusiasm and mentor other staff members.

Provide professional development. Using data well takes practice. Professional development can help make your staff data literate. While there's a lot to learn about data (and some of it can seem technical), people also know more about data and even about statistics than they think they do. Define terms such as *qualitative* and *quantitative*, *formative* and *summative*, *reliability* and *validity*, *aggregate* and *disaggregate*. Remember that, like all professional development, training on use of data is not a one-shot event. Make a plan for ongoing, sequential training, and provide follow-up coaching, support, and encouragement.

Use technology wisely. Gone are the days of paper and pencil data management. Technology speeds up what could be time-consuming tasks if done manually and makes data instantly available. Does your budget include funds for the ongoing professional development needed to bring staff up to speed? For data management software that meets the needs of your program? Is your IT person part of your data team?

Become detectives and data miners together. Help staff dig deeply into data and look for the stories told by the data. Make data transparent and visible. Practice looking at some actual program data together, reflecting on the questions the data poses and the inferences the team can make from the data. Ask non-threatening questions such as "What do you see that you thought you would see?" "Does the data make sense?" "What surprised you?" "What do the outliers tell us?" Look for patterns and trends. Compare data over time and with Head Start data throughout the country.

Base decisions on facts, not opinions or hunches. Avoid looking at data with preconceived notions of what it *should* say so that staff can see what it *does* say. But do remember that people can look at the same set of numbers and reach different conclusions. Asking questions, determining causes, and digging deeper can help programs reach consensus about what the data is saying. Remember that while quantitative data is important, the story told by qualitative data can be telling as well. And sometimes just one story says enough to warrant an important change.

Celebrate the good news that the data shows. **Understand the bad news.** Data can identify program strengths. "Ninety-eight percent of our children received all of their required screenings within the required timeframes. That's cause for celebration!" Ultimately, bad news can lead to good news if you look objectively at the data, seek to understand why the data is showing poor results, consider what you want to do about it, put a plan in place, and check back frequently to see if your plan is working.

Evaluate the process regularly. Make sure that your annual self-assessment looks at the effectiveness of your data process. Be ready for bumps in the road. There will be challenges to overcome along the way. Attitudes, time, technology, resources, turf issues—all of these can add kinks. Remember that you're not in this alone. Sometimes it can be helpful to have an outside facilitator guide the process. Understand that change takes time and developing a culture for data-driven decision making won't happen overnight.