What IS Shared Accountability?

**Shared Accountability** is not a phrase people hear every day, so it can be a bit difficult to unpack its meaning in the context of early childhood systems development.

As one of the six foundations of the [Early Childhood Colorado Framework](#) for which local Early Childhood Councils statewide are responsible, **Shared Accountability** can also be thought of as shared *ownership*. In the context of early childhood, it means that all partners in a community who are serving young children and their families are working together to make that system of services easily accessible, available and affordable. It means that early childhood service providers from all four domains (health, mental health, early learning, and family support) are:

- Developing and implementing a common vision and goals for the system;
- Planning across organizations; and
- Coordinating data across the system to track progress.

Sharing accountability in early childhood systems building is the same. Partners in the system develop a common vision and goals (e.g., early childhood services in the community are accessible and high quality); they plan for how they will achieve those goals (e.g., changing policy, aligning services, braiding funds); and they take an active role in implementing and evaluating the success of those efforts (and changing course, when needed).

Like a soccer team, during the second quarter of SFY2011 (October 1 - December 31, 2010), each of Colorado’s 30 Early Childhood Councils worked with its team of players — leaders from early learning, family support, health, and mental health — to share accountability for the local early childhood systems. Together they worked across agencies, organizations, sectors and issue areas to improve services to young children and their families. And as a team — collaboratively, many took stock of their (Continued on page 2)

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Shared Accountability is a Team Sport
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successes and challenges so they could redirect course.

The graphic to the right shows what this looked like in action for Councils during the second quarter of SFY2011. All but three Councils were working off of strategic plans that were less than three years old, demonstrating a common vision and goals. Over 76 percent of Council members had participated in the crafting of those plans and the specific actions for success outlined in them. This means that approximately 800 early childhood leaders from nearly 450 agencies and organizations across the state agreed on ways they would work together to make high quality early childhood services available and easily accessible to families across the state. This is efficient, effective, elegant government in action!

At the same time, Councils report that only about a third of their members shared data — a key element in determining what actions of the plan are effective and which need to be revisited, revised or removed.

Why is that? Why are Councils having trouble securing data to assess their success or the need for change? The answer to this is multi-faceted, beginning first with limited funding and capacity to invest heavily in data coordination between agencies and diverse organizations.

This is an issue that is not just local. Currently, there are major efforts being undertaken at the state level to facilitate cross-domain data coordination, including work by the Governor’s Office of Information Technology, the Colorado Department of Education’s Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems grant, and by the Early Childhood Leadership Commission. These efforts are interrelated in many ways and should, ultimately, result in an ability to much more easily, reliably and affordably coordinate data about children and families across domains and across the state.

In the meantime, many Councils can and are engaging in work with the partners at their tables to encourage data collaboration that will inform the process of shared accountability — identifying common visions, planning and implementing actions to realize those visions, and cooperatively taking stock of successes and opportunities for change.

At present, local data efforts take many different forms. Most Councils (90 percent) actively collect some data themselves or through agreement with their partners. Eighty-three percent of Councils collect program data and nearly as many collect data about.

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Shared Accountability — Data Opportunities

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early childhood service
providers. Far fewer (43 percent each) collect data about children or about the
early childhood system itself (see Figure 1).

Councils that are collecting
data have fairly limited
capacity to do so at the
moment. Effective data
collection and analysis is
expensive and requires
very specific training and
tools.

As of December 31, 2010,
twelve of the 30 Councils
across the state were either
not collecting data or were
only able to utilize low-tech
and/or sporadic data
collection techniques (e.g.,
Excel spreadsheets, online
survey tools, paper
tracking).

Eighteen Councils reported
that they use either the
National Association of
Child Care Resource and
Referral Agencies (NACCRRA)
database and/or a separate
formalized database
system (e.g., Access) for
tracking data (Figure 2). Fourteen of these Councils
use the NACCRRRA
database, nine of which
actually function as their
region’s Child Care
Resource and Referral
agency. Only four Councils
currently have their own
dedicated Council
databases.

In order to complete the
cycle of shared
accountability, Councils need
to be able to coordinate
and analyze data across
domains. Their partners
and members need to be
able to safely and reliably
share relevant data. And
the Councils themselves
need the tools and skill sets
to collect and make sense of
that data. Currently,
resources for data
collection, housing,
coordination and analysis
are very limited.

What can Councils do now
on limited funding to
improve data sharing and
coordination? Start with
developing data sharing
agreements and protocols
among members. A data
inventory and mapping can
also help Councils to identify
which partners already
collect data that could be
regularly shared in order to
track and assess progress
toward the shared goals
outlined in the Council’s
strategic plan. And even
formalized sharing of success
stories can be an effective
way to gather qualitative
data on systems
development.

Data collection systems do not
have to be complex or fancy.
Excel spreadsheets or Access
databases can work for many
purposes. And, if needed,
Councils can draw upon the
data skills of members or a
data-analysis committee to
collaboratively review
collected data and make
sense of it.

Creativity and persistence will
be the key ingredients to
closing the shared
accountability loop.

“We HAVE JUST
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RURAL RESORT REGION —
WESTERN DIVISION
Members of all 30 Early Childhood Councils across the state participated in an annual collaboration survey in the fall of 2010. The survey, created by Professors Darrin Hicks and Carl Larson of the University of Denver, has been used successfully in their past research to assess the health and strength of collaborations such as the Nurse Family Partnership and Metropolitan Planning Organizations.

The intent of the survey for the Councils initiative was to give Councils:
- Individualized reports that provide specific information about each Council’s own scores, along with an explanation of how to interpret the results; and
- Related training and technical assistance on how to interpret and use the results of the survey to facilitate future Council collaboration.

The survey will be conducted annually so that Councils will be able to see and respond to changes in collaboration over time.

At the state level, aggregate data will be analyzed to describe collaboration across all Councils, both as a point-in-time picture and longitudinally. This information can help inform future technical assistance for Councils and will also assist the state in communicating funding and policy needs to local and state-level stakeholders.

The survey looked at several key areas that tend to impact the strength and effectiveness of a collaboration. These are highlighted in the box to the left.

The survey also examined Council members’ perceptions of the context, structure and results of the collaboration, as well as looking at issues of trust, willingness to compromise, and process credibility issues.

On average, Councils statewide scored well on almost all subscales. Respondents praised the extent to which their Councils represent multiple domains, support teamwork and partnerships, promote leadership and facilitate communication across entities.

The only score that consistently fell into an area warranting further attention by most Councils was on one of the authenticity questions: “Often decisions are made in advance and simply confirmed by the process.”

A review of the results by Dr. Hicks identified four common themes for further potential Council growth and development:
- Council Logistics
- Trust
- Stagnation
- Role Clarity

A complete discussion of these themes and opportunities for addressing them is being developed by Professor Hicks and will be available on the CDE website in the near future. In addition, recent regional meetings have included opportunities to explore these themes as well.

Nearly seven hundred individuals across the state responded to the survey. Forty-three percent of respondents represented the early learning domain, while family support (18%), health (13%), mental health (12%) and other community representation (14%) made up the rest.