Important Findings:

Through the work of the Family Literacy Support Network in supporting the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative grantees in building capacity, the following recommendations were identified as having guided their process of collaboration:

- Establish a professional climate.
- Honor the different organizational cultures and individual work styles of partners.
- Establish common vision and goals.
- Define clarity of roles and responsibilities.
- Establish a forum for shared decision-making.
- Identify external stakeholders to serve as a feedback loop.

I. Introduction

In 2002, the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) was awarded a contract to create and establish the Family Literacy Support Network (FLSN) to support First 5 LA-funded family literacy grantees in building capacity. The FLSN was originally nested within LACOE’s Division for School Improvement (DSI) at the Los Angeles County Office of Education and through reorganization in 2011-12, FLSN is now housed in the Division of Curriculum and Instructional Services.

Over the years, FLSN developed a flexible Service Delivery System (SDS) that includes articulated services focused on instructional quality and accountability. The FLSN SDS included:

- On-site Customized Technical assistance (TA)
- Professional development options
- Peer networking opportunities

These services are used to support programs moving on a trajectory toward exemplary family education services. The FLSN SDS intentionally promotes collaborative
processes that foster outcomes within programs and their parent agencies, among families and children, and between neighboring community agencies. The FLSN SDS has focused on collaboration and reciprocity through partnerships within and outside of LACOE. Partnering units include the California Pre School Instructional Network-Region 11, Head Start, Migrant Education and others. Additionally, the FLSN team engages in an active partnership with LACOE’s administration to support the Superintendent’s mission to provide quality services for all children in LA County from birth through adulthood. In addition to collaborating with internal partners, FLSN also works to develop and nurture relationships with external partners. Key external partners in addition to First 5 LA include the American Institutes for Research (AIR), the initiative’s external evaluator for the First 5 LA-Funded Family Literacy Initiative. Additional external partners include numerous community-based organizations, school districts, local and state agencies and public and private organizations that partner with FLSN to support building the capacity of local family literacy and school readiness programs in LA County.

In this brief, FLSN identified characteristics that promote strong collaboration which leads to positive outcomes for families with young children, programs, and communities.

II. What is Collaboration?

FLSN’s definition of collaboration is a process through which everyone works together to achieve a common purpose. Collaboration involves the exchange of information, the sharing of resources and the enhancement of the capacity of an individual, team, or organization for mutual benefit. While collaboration requires the aforementioned, “it does not necessarily mean harmony or complete agreement with someone, but it does mean having a working relationship where shared interests are served through the processes of dialogue and cooperation.”

III. Why is collaboration important?

FLSN has learned that in beginning collaborative efforts, sometimes it appears that all participants have a common agenda, that all “falls into place” without much thought or planning. Early on, the FLSN collaboration became a highly intentional process that considered the following factors based on research:

- Collaboration provides a strategic focus on activities aligned with vision, mission, and group objectives
- Collaboration promotes working relationships; establishing effective communication and partnerships
- Collaboration upholds respect and equal opportunities for team members
- Collaboration enhances ethical conduct; with characteristics of honesty, integrity, justice, transparency and confidentiality
- Collaboration acknowledges, honors and respects each member’s individual and organizational style; with a focus on teamwork, trust, respect, knowledge creation and sharing.

FLSN supports the concept of “social capital” with “its value of social networks, bonding similar people and bridging between diverse people with norms of reciprocity” (Decker and Uslaner, 2001). The FLSN team believes that by working together the combined talents of the larger group are often able to bring different perspectives and expertise to the table resulting in a greater contribution to programs, families, and the field. As noted in Building Collaboration: Principles of Collaboration, “in collaboration, no one person’s perspective dominates. Instead, a perspective emerges through dialogue that neither person would have had independently.”
IV. Strategies Used to Evaluate Collaboration

Some of the strategies and examples of how FLSN has evaluated its collaborative efforts include:

• Record and evaluate data from both internal and external partnerships. For example, FLSN tracks all communications like emails, phone contacts, representation at meetings with the programs it serves and other partners. This data is recorded and is available for use by multiple stakeholders. At the end of each year the number of contacts made with each client/partner is reported.

• FLSN promotes the dissemination of collaborative outcomes via published reports on promising practices, lessons learned, case studies, showcase presentations, EVP portfolios with expert reviews, and video presentations. The website at http://flsn.lacoe.edu shows the variety of reports and videos shared.

• As technical assistants, FLSN always requests written feedback using evaluation forms at every meeting, regional training, presentation and/or other events. This feedback is tallied and results are used to inform the work and share results with funders and supporters.

• To support grantees in documenting their collaborative efforts, FLSN produced the Collaboration Press Publication. This publication identified and defined nine categories of collaboration (see http://flsn.lacoe.edu/sharing/documents/collaboration_press_Jan2011.pdf)

V. A Summary of Recommendations for Collaboration

The following recommendations have guided the FLSN practice of collaboration.

1. Establish a Professional Climate. Regardless of credentials, a professional climate needs to be established that fosters critical thinking and inquiry, focuses the work, and acknowledges the contributions of all toward the desired outcomes.

   **FLSN Strategies**: FLSN introduces meeting norms early in the process. The norms are shared and reviewed with partners. Characteristics used to heighten responsibilities of the collaborative members include:

   1) Use of a structured, yet shared process. Roles and responsibilities are defined together, with occasional time-outs to reflect on where they are and how they have arrived there.

   2) Operationally, the process is aided by putting structures in place such as agendas, minutes and evaluations at each meeting. Agendas are created at the end of each meeting for the following meeting, allowing all parties to have input on the agenda.

   3) On occasion, homework is given to encourage participation at the next meeting.

2. Honor the Different Organizational Cultures and Individual Work Styles of Partners. With the limited time and resources of collaborative partners, it is essential that the goals of the collaborative honor each member’s agency and personal goals.

   **FLSN Strategies**: In working with partners, FLSN notes that they come from varied walks of life, and with varied experiences, credentials and expertise. FLSN also knows that the partners come from different organizational cultures with unique missions, values, and work styles. FLSN staff pride themselves in welcoming all participants as professionals to the table and honoring their agencies by learning more about them and how the collaborative work has the potential to positively impact their agency’s work. On occasion, FLSN team members attend potential partner meetings to learn more about partnering organizations and their cultures, to meet individuals representing the organization and to also share facts about FLSN.

3. Establish a Common Vision and Goals. All members should talk about and carry out collaborative efforts in the spirit of “all are leaders.” Provide opportunities for individuals/agencies to lead, teach and mentor others. A flat infrastructure must be maintained, building on the strengths of all involved.

   **FLSN Strategies**: To accomplish a common vision and goals FLSN engages in:

   1) Sharing all ideas openly;

   2) Awareness that the vision will not be fully articulated early on-while acknowledging that it’s a process;

   3) “Backwards” mapping that allows partners to define what they believe the vision should be;

   4) Using graphic representations when talking about vision. FLSN integrates the group’s comments to create drawings that show the expected outcomes/vision.
4. **Define Clarity of Roles and Responsibilities.** An environment of “collaborative wisdom” comes from the sharing of different experiences, cultures, stories and approaches to problem-solving, empathy and compassion. All perspectives are uniquely valuable contributions. Each individual involved in a collaborative effort brings different and unique skill sets and learning approaches.

**FLSN Strategies:** Partners are encouraged to sign-off on a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), a non-financial agreement that outlines the agreed upon purpose, roles and responsibilities and timelines. The MOU can be revisited at any time.

5. **Establish Channels of Open Communication and Trust.** Excitement and enthusiasm must be generated on the part of collaborative members. Participants need to be encouraged to take the opportunity to create a new structure or system that provides renewal of existing systems. Working as a collaborative should provide a sense of accomplishment and of heightened responsibility. Progress, big and small, needs to be celebrated.

**FLSN Strategies:** Some of the ways the FLSN fosters a sense of open communication and trust include:

1) Being open with agendas and sending the agendas in advance to encourage input;
2) Providing meeting minutes, then immediately turning them back around to partners;
3) Engaging in constant formal and informal communication—meetings, phone calls, emails to the group, sharing of resources and materials or other;
4) Encouraging communication among the group and between individual members;
5) Letting go of power and control so that leadership for the group is shared.

6. **Social Capital.** All members of the collaborative working group need to understand the concept of social capital. Social capital in collaborative processes should lead to enhancing outcomes and leveraging dollars for families, programs, agencies, and the well-being of entire communities.
7. **Engage All Partners and others.** Partners and others should provide feedback and engage in self-reflection. Asking questions such as ‘how well are we aligned with our original mission and vision,’ ‘what have we accomplished thus far,’ and ‘what challenges and obstacles exist’ are important to the success of the collaboration.

**FLSN Strategies:** The FLSN staff helps each individual understand that they are each a vital and important link in the collaborative process. Often times, partners share that they are hesitant because they do not have the academic credentials or experiences of others. FLSN works to help participants appreciate, better understand, and engage in mutually beneficial relationships. In addition to meeting the goals of the collaborative, the growth of all partners is equally important. Building on the strengths and interests of partners has served FLSN well.

8. **Establish a Forum for Shared Decision-making.** A “safe zone” must be provided where all responses in shared decision-making are discussed as a viable option for resolution.

**FLSN Strategies:** FLSN Staff prefer to use the term ‘agreement,’ not ‘consensus.’ Reaching ‘agreement’ means that an individual may not like the decision, but she/he agrees not to undermine the work in any way. FLSN strategies used to promote shared decision-making include:

1) Using an anonymous ballot as a means to reach a decision so that every individual votes their true feelings without pressure from the group.

2) Looking at what data and research tells us about the impact to families. Doing so enables the group to make informed decisions that have the greatest impact.

9. **Create a Systems Thinking Approach.** Collaborators must be encouraged to use a systems thinking approach to align current actions with existing initiatives and efforts.

**FLSN Strategies:** FLSN works with a systems approach in mind. Throughout FLSN’s collaborative endeavors, staff considers differing change mechanisms and how they will influence the outcomes. FLSN always considers how the work aligns with the mission and goals of the parent agency in which it resides, as well as the needs of funders and the goals of partnering agencies. FLSN also considers the importance of how the work integrates and/or supports local, state, and national initiatives that benefit the families and programs served. FLSN acknowledges that change may not be easy and takes time, but change is part of the organic process and a natural outcome of the group’s work. Lastly, FLSN believes that it is the responsibility of facilitators to instill in each collaborative working group the necessity and inevitability of change in systems and maintaining an attitude of resilience throughout the process.

10. **Identify External Stakeholders to Serve As a Feedback Loop.** Feedback loops help to better understand cause and effect. When working together it is not unusual to become so involved in the process that one neglects to look at the larger picture. Engaging others in a feedback loop helps the group refocus as necessary.

**FLSN Strategies:** FLSN borrows and combines best practices from many disciplines to build a framework for collaboration. For FLSN, feedback loops have included local experts (First 5 LA family literacy grantees), internal and external LACOE partners and supporters, as well as third party experts. Mapping external feedback onto loops gives everyone an opportunity to see and discuss cause and effect relationships, why and where delays may occur and how to continue building momentum.

**VI. Conclusion**

A summary of FLSN’s key lessons learned regarding collaboration:

1) Genuine care and the willingness to listen to one another are key to the success of a collaborative effort.

2) Individuals entering partnerships cannot know what the outcome of a process will be, or if there is even going to be workable findings and outcomes. FLSN has learned to tolerate ambiguity early on.

3) Collaboration requires individuals who have the capacity for both personal and shared reflection.

4) Participants must be willing to reflect on and share her/his perspectives, thoughts and feelings.

5) Prepare to “hit the wall” at times. Feeling frustrated, tired, or discouraged is inevitable when there are many varied opinions and approaches.

6) View the process holistically so you can think broadly and imaginatively about what you want to create together.
Acknowledgments

First 5 LA oversees the Los Angeles County allocation of funds from Proposition 10, which added a 50-cent tax on tobacco products sold in California. Funds raised help pay for health care, education and child development programs for children from the prenatal stage to age 5 and their families. First 5 LA’s mission is to increase the number of young children who are physically and emotionally healthy, safe and ready to learn. For more information, please visit www.First5LA.org.

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Endnotes


7) Take the time to establish a common language. Too many times groups assume that everyone means the same thing if they are using the same term(s). Sometimes it is just a matter of semantics, but sometimes not. Having a written glossary of terms helps keep partners on the same page and forging ahead.

8) Acknowledge the partners. A professional climate is established and maintained by the action of acknowledging the contributions of all partners.

Of all the lessons FLSN has learned along the way, none is more powerful than the following: to realize and instill the realization in others that, “collaboration is no longer a choice; it is a necessity and that working together is not just rhetoric—it is essential in order to address the increasingly diverse and sometimes daunting needs of clients.”

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