

## **DEVELOPING WRITTEN PLANS AND PROGRAM POLICIES FOR IMPLEMENTING CONSISTENT, HIGH-QUALITY FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SERVICES**

### *Guidance for Rhode Island's Early Childhood Education Programs*

High-quality early childhood education programs have written plans and program policies in place that describe how families are engaged in program decision-making opportunities and in their child's education. In addition, written plans, procedures, and policies define program practices for transitioning children and families from one setting to another.

These plans and policies guide the implementation of consistent, high-quality services across the program and:

- Reflect research and best practices in the field of early childhood education,
- Comply with the educational and structural standards set forth in the Rhode Island Department of Education's Standards Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Program standards,
- Comply with other federal, state, or local regulations governing the program,
- Result in effective family engagement services that contribute to positive outcomes for children in their early childhood years and beyond.

Standards 10.1 through 10.9 of the Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Program standards state that:

**(10.1) The program level written plan delineates the expectation that all teaching staff engage families in the education of their child. The program level written framework describes the opportunities for families to be involved in program decision-making (e.g. advisory groups) and delineates the expectation that all teaching staff engage families in the education of their child.**

**(10.2) Families are encouraged to take on leadership roles and are actively involved in decision-making opportunities.**

**(10.3) The program uses a variety of methods to engage families in active two-way communication on an ongoing basis such as new family orientations, small group meetings, individual conversations, notes between program and home and written questionnaires.**

**(10.4) The program shall be open to families for observation and visits whenever the program is in operation.**

**(10.5) The program implements activities to facilitate the transition of children and families including:**

- a. Opportunities for the child and parent to visit the program one or more times prior to enrollment,
- b. Activities to support internal transitions within the program, e.g., from class to class, during program enrollment,
- c. Strategies to support families with their transitions to other programs or schools at the end of enrollment. These strategies may include providing basic general information on future program options, enrollment procedures and practices, and opportunities for program visitation.

**(10.6) The program actively seeks and utilizes input from families in the following areas:**

- a. Establishing or refining program philosophies, long-term goals and short term objectives,
- b. Conducting program assessment and evaluation,
- c. Designing family engagement opportunities,
- d. Establishing strategies to ensure that the program remains relevant to the values, culture, identity and home language,
- e. Creating a physical environment that is welcoming to families.

**(10.7) The program plans and implements a wide variety of opportunities for families to be engaged in their child’s education both within the program and in the family’s home.**

**(10.8) The program makes efforts to accommodate families with special needs and circumstances so that they can take full advantage of family engagement opportunities.**

**(10.9) The program has a system that supports teaching staff in developing competencies to enhance families’ involvement in the program and in their child’s learning and development.**

The following guidance will assist programs to develop written plans and program policies for implementing consistent, high-quality family engagement services:

### **Developing a Program Philosophy that Views Family Engagement as a Core Component of the Program**

The philosophies, values, theories, and research that the program holds to be true guide the development of written plans and program policies that describe program services and the expectations of staff.

High-quality early childhood education programs recognize that when families are engaged in their child’s education:

- Outcomes for children improve,

- Curriculum improves because it is built upon the knowledge of the child in the context of his or her unique family, culture, and traditions,
- Families have higher expectations for their child,
- The quality of programs and schools improves.

Programs also know that more families will be engaged when:

- Programs/schools and teachers make families feel welcomed,
- Frequent, reciprocal communications occur between programs/schools and families,
- A continuum of opportunities are available for family involvement,
- Families are respected and their ideas are used in the program.

Programs are encouraged to adopt a broad and inclusive definition of family and promote a culture within their organization where all significant adults in a child's life are encouraged to fully participate in the child's education.

Programs should take the time to engage their program in the development of a philosophy that addresses their view on the role of families in their program and the education of their children. This statement should then be shared with staff and families.

### **Identifying Core Competencies Needed by Staff**

**Standard (10.9) states: The program has a system that supports teaching staff in developing competencies to enhance families' involvement in the program and in their child's learning and development.**

Administrators often hold the responsibility of partnering with families to plan and implement program-wide activities and events. They are also responsible for designing opportunities for families to serve as decision-makers at the program level and supporting family members to grow in their leadership roles. Programs should think carefully about the competencies needed to lead such activities and include this information prominently in key documents such as job descriptions, performance evaluations, and professional development plans.

Examples of the skills and competencies needed for carrying out these responsibilities include:

- communicating effectively with families both in writing and on an interpersonal basis,
- cultural competence,
- group facilitation,
- training and orienting others,
- resource development,
- leadership development,
- problem-solving and conflict resolution,
- maintaining professional boundaries and confidentiality.

Teaching staff also need to hone skills and competencies that they can call upon to build partnership with families, connect families with opportunities for family engagement, and support them in transitioning their child to other settings. Those competencies mirror many that are listed above and include:

- communicating effectively with families both in writing and on an interpersonal basis,
- cultural competence,
- utilizing conversational interview techniques to obtain information from families,
- serving as a role-model when interacting with children, the environment, and other adults,
- maintaining professional boundaries and confidentiality.

To learn more about the early childhood core competencies needed by directors, administrators, and staff, leaders should consult resources such as:

- Institutes of Higher Education
- RIDE Office of Educator Quality and Certification
- NAEYC and other professional organizations
- BrightStars, RI's Quality Rating and Improvement System
- The Early Childhood section of the RIDE website ([www.ride.ri.gov](http://www.ride.ri.gov)) for information on the RI Early Childhood Core Competencies and Career Lattice (draft)

RIDE is currently working with state-wide early childhood experts and stakeholders to update and finalize a set of early childhood core competencies, the RI Early Childhood Core Competencies and Career Lattice, which will include competencies related to family engagement. Once complete, this information will assist program directors in identifying what staff members should know and be able to do to be successful in their family engagement efforts.

### **Supporting Family Engagement in Program Decision-making Opportunities**

**Standard (10.2) states: Families are encouraged to take on leadership roles and are actively involved in decision-making opportunities.**

**Standard (10.6) states: The program actively seeks and utilizes input from families in the following areas:**

- a. Establishing or refining program philosophies, long-term goals and short term objectives,**
- b. Conducting program assessment and evaluation,**
- c. Designing family engagement opportunities,**
- d. Establishing strategies to ensure that the program remains relevant to the values, culture, identity and home language,**
- e. Creating a physical environment that is welcoming to families.**

Programs must establish an organizational and governance structure that includes authentic opportunities for family members to assume decision-making roles within the program. This helps to ensure that the program reflects the values, cultures, identity, and home cultures of the community it serves.

Parent leaders may hold seats on the Board of Directors and/or Family Advisory Councils that function at the program or center level, or Family Committees that function at the classroom level. They can also serve on program self-assessment teams.

The structure should identify:

- the purpose of each group,
- the roles and responsibilities that parent leaders are expected to assume,
- staff persons to support parent leaders in their volunteer roles.

Once the structure is established, the program must develop a process for recruiting parent leaders to these various volunteer positions and providing them orientation and ongoing support to build their leadership skills.

Parents who serve on the program self-assessment team can assist by:

- Interviewing other family members,
- Assessing the facility and environment to ensure it is welcoming to families,
- Reviewing their own child's file,
- Helping to create a family interview or family survey,
- Serving on a self-assessment team charged with analyzing data, prioritizing goals and establishing objectives for the program improvement plan.

Once the program has determined how parent decision-making will look in their program and has outlined a process for recruiting and supporting parent leaders in their different decision-making roles, the program must:

- describe this plan in writing,
- designate staff who are responsible for specific activities,
- include information regarding staff responsibilities in job descriptions,
- develop policies and procedures to support implementation of the plan,
- inform all families of these opportunities using communication strategies that respond to their preferred communication style.

## **Engaging Families in Their Child's Education**

**Standard (10.3) states: The program uses a variety of methods to engage families in active two-way communication on an ongoing basis such as new family orientations, small group meetings, individual conversations, notes between program and home and written questionnaires.**

**Standard (10.4) states: The program shall be open to families for observation and visits whenever the program is in operation.**

**Standard (10.7) states: The program plans and implements a wide variety of opportunities for families to be engaged in their child's education both within the program and in the family's home.**

**Standard (10.8) states: The program makes efforts to accommodate families with special needs and circumstances so that they can take full advantage of family engagement opportunities**

RIELS Level II and Level III professional development provides participants with a model for engaging families in their child's education. This model describes four building blocks that lead to effective family engagement. A description of the first three Building Blocks follows:

### **Building Block 1: Getting to Know Families includes:**

- Getting to know the culture and traditions of individual families in the classroom,
- Obtaining information about the goals that families have for their children,
- Finding out how families would like to be involved and the times they are available,
- Discovering the strengths, skills, and talents of families in our programs,
- Eliciting information that will help you to identify families who may have special needs and need special accommodations to be fully included in family engagement opportunities.

### **Building Block 2: Creating a Welcoming Environment includes:**

- Ensuring that the program is open to families for observations and visits whenever the program is in operation and including this assurance in program policies and parent handbooks,
- Looking at the physical facility with a new set of eyes; the eyes of a parent entering for the first time,
- Making adjustments to the environment so that it is family-friendly and sends a message that families are a part of the program.

### **Building Block 3: Effective Communication includes:**

- Improving the communication skills of staff in order to make positive connections with families,

- Ensuring that staff engage in reciprocal, two-way communication through conversations, notes sent between home and the program, family surveys, newsletters, and more,
- Communicating with families who speak languages different from our own,
- Creating many opportunities to engage in effective communication with all families.

One of Rhode Island’s strongest assets is its ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity. In some communities, this strength can also represent a challenge as programs strive to achieve regular, effective two-way communication with all families. Programs should develop a profile of the families in their community by accessing community data through RI Kids Count ([www.rikidscount.org](http://www.rikidscount.org)) and collecting information from families each year during the enrollment process.

Using the information from the family profile, programs must make every effort to hire staff who represent the cultures and languages of the populations they serve to facilitate effective communication with both children and families. In addition, programs will want to translate program materials so that they can be understood by families whose written language is other than English.

Programs are encouraged to spend adequate time addressing the first three building blocks prior to moving to **Building Block 4, Creating a Variety of Opportunities to Engage Families in their Child’s Education.**

Programs are more successful in engaging families in their child’s education when they know the families in their program, when they have created a welcoming environment, and when staff have made positive connections with each family through effective communication. Once these initial building blocks are in place, programs are well-positioned to engage more families in meaningful way.

One of the primary ways that teaching staff engage families is during the development of classroom curriculum. During the “getting to know families” phase, programs should intentionally create opportunities for families to share information about themselves and their child. This can happen during enrollment, home visits, and meetings where information is collected through conversational interviews and documented in children’s files. It is the teacher’s responsibility to then use this information to:

- honor the goals that families have for their child as they engage in curriculum planning,
- create a culturally-relevant classroom environment that represents continuity between home and school,
- design activities that incorporate information they learn about each family’s linguistic, racial, religious, and cultural background.

In addition to partnering with families to plan curriculum, programs should develop a wide variety of family engagement opportunities that occur both within the program and in the home that are suited to the individual families participating in the program. Family engagement opportunities should be developed with the following outcomes in mind:

Outcome 1: Families are aware of what young children should know and be able to do:

- Hold parent workshops focused on the domains and learning goals,
- Use open house and parent meetings to inform families about the RI Early Learning Standards and how they are used in the classroom to guide curriculum and child assessment,
- Include information about what children should know and be able to do in the parent handbook and in newsletters.

Outcome 2: Families recognize how Standards-based programs support their children's learning:

- Create a brochure to inform families about the ways that your program exemplifies a high-quality Standards-based program,
- Post information in the classroom that helps parents to see the connection between learning opportunities and the Standards,
- Send notes home that inform families of the activities their child was engaged in that includes the associated learning goals.

Outcome 3: Families understand and embrace the positive role they play in supporting their child to learn both at home and at school:

- Share research and information with families that illustrates the connection between purposeful play and positive child outcomes,
- Hold parent events that introduce families to the *Fun Family Activities for Preschoolers* resource and engage families and children in select activities,
- Use time during parent-teacher meetings to share goals for children and ideas for home activities,
- Create activity kits to send home with children.

The *Fun Family Activities for Preschoolers* resource, available through the RIELS website at [www.ride.ri.gov/els](http://www.ride.ri.gov/els), is an effective tool for informing families about ways that they can support children's learning through family-friendly home activities. Teachers should be encouraged to use this resource and augment the activity cards with their own creative ideas and the ideas they obtain from families. In this way, home activities are culturally relevant and responsive to the developmental levels, learning styles, and interests of individual children.

The RIELS Project has also designed a 6-session parent training series focused on the domains and learning goals of the Standards that introduces families to ways they can use Fun Family Activities to support their child's growth and development. Programs who have invested resources to provide this or similar training for families in their program report that participants leave with new ideas, enthusiasm, and renewed commitment to engaging in their child's education. Information on the Fun Family Activities training series can also be found on the RIELS website by clicking on Parent Training.

Once the program has crafted a vision for family engagement in their program and has outlined a process for planning family engagement opportunities and connecting families to these opportunities, the program must then:

- describe this plan in writing,
- designate staff who are responsible for specific activities,
- include information regarding staff responsibilities in job descriptions,
- develop policies and procedures to support implementation of the plan, and
- inform all families of these opportunities using communication strategies that respond to their preferred communication style.

### **Family Engagement in Transition Activities**

**Standard (10.5) states: The program implements activities to facilitate the transition of children and families including:**

- a. Opportunities for the child and parent to visit the program one or more times prior to enrollment,**
- b. Activities to support internal transitions within the program, e.g., from class to class, during program enrollment,**
- c. Strategies to support families with their transitions to other programs or schools at the end of enrollment. These strategies may include providing basic general information on future program options, enrollment procedures and practices, and opportunities for program visitation.**

Research tells us that children are better able to sustain and build upon the gains they have made in their social, emotional, and cognitive development when they experience continuity as they move from home to school and from one program setting to another. This is especially true when children with special education needs move from one setting to the next.

Just as teachers facilitate the transition of children in their classroom from one activity to another, programs must be planful in the way they transition children and families into their program from home and/or other early care and education settings, to different classrooms and services within their program, and from preschool settings to kindergarten.

The following list contains examples of practices that programs have implemented to successfully transition children and families. When developing a transition system, programs may want to draw from this list or develop strategies of their own to meet the unique needs of children and families within their own community setting.

Examples of transition practices:

1. Involve staff and family members in the design of transition processes and delineate staff roles and responsibilities for transition activities,
2. Clarify enrollment processes so that they are transparent to family members,
3. Conduct home visits before the start of your program to make a positive connection with the family and gather information about the child and family culture,
4. Develop formal mechanisms to minimize disruptions in services before, during, and after the transition of the child and family,
5. Make families aware of the importance of transition planning and have information they need to actively participate in transition planning with their child,
6. Partner with families to plan transition activities for individual children,
7. Facilitate families in becoming active participants in gathering information about their child's growth and development,
8. Provide parents with information and answers to key questions regarding Special Education services; clearly specify referral processes and timelines,
9. With parent permission, develop a transition referral packet to share with the new program containing child assessment information and effective teaching strategies,
10. Provide children opportunities to develop and practice skills they need to be successful in the next environment,
11. Support staff-to-staff communication both within and across programs and time for meetings to collaborate and plan for child and family transitions,
12. Invite key individuals (school district representatives, therapists, future teachers, etc.) to attend transition meetings with families,
13. Participate in planning and placement meetings with staff from sending and receiving programs,
14. Arrange for children families to visit before starting new programs,
15. Support parents in preparing for meetings by helping them identify appropriate & relevant questions,

16. Provide time for staff to visit and understand the sending and receiving environments,
17. Plan joint workshops/trainings across early childhood programs to facilitate continuity between and among programs; make connections between curricula and child expectations between one program and another,
18. Provide information to staff about a broad array of agencies & services available within the community,
19. Provide families information and link them to resources and services to help them meet their specific child and family needs,
20. Follow-up on children after the transition to support their adjustment.

Once the program has determined the ways that they will support children and families during program transitions, the program must then:

- describe this plan in writing,
- designate staff who are responsible for specific activities,
- include information regarding staff responsibilities in job descriptions,
- develop policies and procedures to support implementation of the plan, and
- inform families of these processes and how they can participate.

#### Resources:

- *National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria, 2005*
- Rous, B., Hallam, R., McCormick, K., & Cox, M. (2010). *Practices that support the transition to public preschool programs: Results from a National Survey*. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 25(1), 17-32.
- Rous, B., Myers, C.T. & Stricklin, S. (2007). *Strategies for supporting transitions for young children with special needs*. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 30(1), 1-18.
- *SOLAR Skill Profile for Directors, Managers, and Supervisors, Developed by the Education Development Center, Inc. under the Innovation and Improvement Project grant, ACF, US HHS*
- [www.hdi.uky.edu/NECTC/practicesearch.aspx](http://www.hdi.uky.edu/NECTC/practicesearch.aspx)
- *Technical Report 3: Rous, B. (2008). Recommended transition practices for young children and families*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, Human Development Institute.