



Opportunities Exchange

Understanding Your Early Childhood Education Landscape & Provider Needs

October, 2023

Understanding what providers might need, want, and value from a Shared Service Alliance is essential to any Alliance's success and sustainability. We recommend that you take the time to use multiple data sources to inform your understanding of the root causes of child care sector challenges as well as how child care business owners view and experience the problems around which you think your Alliance will organize.

Provider and Stakeholder Input: It's critical to take the time up front to engage with providers and stakeholders in your child care community to understand how they conceptualize challenges. This can be done through interviews as well as surveys, and we provide resources for how to approach fact finding in the toolbox at the start of this section (bottom left).

Understanding Your Provider Community's Perspective

Ask providers questions aimed at helping your team understand:

- **How do child care providers feel about the state of the child care sector?**
- **How are they experiencing their roles as business owners and care providers?**
- **How do providers describe their biggest challenges? Do they believe these challenges are solvable or do they appear resigned to the status quo?**
- **What areas do they identify as needing assistance? What services generate the most interest?**
- **Are the services identified by providers likely to address their identified challenges?**
- **What do providers see as their strengths and/or what do they feel hopeful about?**

Tools to Support You In This Section

[Sample interview protocol and questions](#) for interviews with child care providers and child care systems partners. (Courtesy of [Luminary Evaluation](#)).

TIP: It can be tempting for new Alliance design teams to skip this step, but we strongly encourage you to build time to solicit provider and stakeholder input because without it you will be missing insight into the root causes of some of the challenges you're trying to solve, and also missing an early opportunity to engage providers and get them curious about and interested in joining your Alliance. Give yourself at least a month to seek out this input.



QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF YOUR ECE LANDSCAPE:

In addition to eliciting direct provider input, we recommend analyzing any available objective data points that can help you see the strengths and gaps in your local child care system. When combined with the qualitative data collected by talking directly with providers and system partners, these quantitative data points can help you tell a powerful story about the need for Shared Services and identify the highest potential strategies to test through your Alliance.

Understanding Your Local ECE System’s Health

Gather and analyze data that can help you understand:

- **How many licensed providers do you have locally? What are their demographics?**
- **What is your local slot capacity vs. the local demand and need for child care?**
- **Are providers fully enrolled? If not what ages, hours, and locations do they have available spaces?**
- **Do providers have waiting lists? For what ages, hours, and locations?**
- **How long do most child care providers stay in business? What are the turnover trends in the last couple of years?**
- **Are regulatory or quality rating system requirements burdensome or costly for providers?**
- **Are programs tracking workforce turnover data? If so, what positions are most likely to experience high turnover?**
- **How many programs are experiencing chronic understaffing and what impact are staff shortages having on program operations and overall supply?**
- **How much does the average provider (by license type) charge? Is this in line with the typical market price in your community, or do they feel pressure to under-charge?**
- **Do providers know their cost of care (by age of child) or has there been a cost of care study? If so, how does the likely cost align with provider tuition?**

MAKING SENSE OF YOUR FINDINGS:

After you’ve collected enough information from providers and secondary data sources to have a sense of what is happening in your local early care and education ecosystem, it’s time to make sense of your findings, look for the root causes of your greatest challenges, and use the data set to identify the priorities for your SSA.

There are many protocols available to support groups in discussing data and defining problems of practice. The steps below are [adapted from the National School Reform Faculty’s data protocol](#)—feel free to use, adapt, or seek out your own.

- **Ask yourself what parts of the data (qualitative and quantitative) catch your attention.**
 - Make note of what you see and what pops out.
 - Look for patterns and trends.
 - Look for things that surprise you or seem unexpected.
- **What does this information tell you? What does it NOT tell you?**
 - Pay close attention to what providers say they need, and what they believe an Alliance can deliver. We have noticed that there is sometimes an incongruence between what child care providers will identify as their biggest problem, and what they identify as something they’d want from an Alliance. For example, providers may identify that staffing is their greatest challenge, but may also indicate they’re most interested in lower-impact SSA services like bulk purchasing because they don’t believe that the staffing problem is possible to solve.
 - Don’t be afraid to aim high and set goals around solving previously intractable problems—what providers DON’T say tells you a lot about what they believe, and where they may have just given up hope.



- Generate possible explanations for what you see.
- Think about what you can infer from what you've collected.

■ Look for bright spots

- Identify areas of resilience, innovation, or recent growth that you can celebrate in your findings.
- Look for assets that already exist in your community that can and should be connected to the work of the Alliance. Most communities already have some business and quality supports in place; think about how you can build on or connect to those.

■ Identify your problems of practice/problem statements, the things your SSA will work to change.

- Based on what the data show, name the problems you're facing with as much specificity of language as possible.
- A problem statement might read something like: "In XYZ County, the number of child care providers has decreased from 200 in 2018 to 150 at the end of 2022, reducing the supply of available child care slots in our community by 25%. New providers are struggling to enter the profession citing high costs and barriers to entry, and existing providers struggle to keep their doors open due to high costs, high staff turnover and inability to pay a living wage, confusing state and local regulations, and lack of business management support and skills."

Your problem statement is essentially a summary of the most pressing issues in your data set and will serve as the north star for the rest of your planning process. The services and strategies you set forth in your design should connect directly to solving the problem statement. With clarity of understanding around your provider's needs and your problem statement clearly defined, you're ready to take the next step—developing your theory of change, metrics, and service menu. 