



Battle Creek Shared Services Alliance: *Insights and Ideas*

Overview

In 2017, three early education centers in Battle Creek, Michigan formed as members of the Battle Creek Shared Services Alliance (BCSSA), with the Battle Creek Community Foundation serving as the hub (service provider). The goal of the Alliance was for members to work together to pool needs and share a variety of services so they could reduce administrative costs and redirect those dollars to the classroom to boost the quality of their services to young children and their families.

As of 2019, the Alliance has grown to include two additional centers, for a total of five members. The Hub provides the following services to its members.

- Accounting
- Reporting
- Human resources support
- Tuition, subsidy, and CACFP billing
- Centralized marketing and enrollment
- Substitute pool
- Behavioral health supports
- Pedagogical coaching, training, curriculum and materials

With all new ventures, there are learnings along the way. Key insights and ideas from BCSSA include:

1. Make Sure the Center's Board is on Board
2. Meet Members Where They Are
3. Building an Alliance Takes Time
4. Keep Business and Pedagogical Leadership Front and Center
5. Communicate Before You Activate

Make Sure the Center's Board is on Board

Going from being a totally independent entity to part of an Alliance is a big move and one that potentially can cause questions and concerns for a center's board of directors. Have an intentional strategy to communicate with the board on a regular basis to help them understand what it means to be part of an Alliance and to garner their support is critical.

BCSSA found that certain steps helped to ensure a higher level of board understanding and buy in. For example, one member reported that: ***"Bringing all the boards together was a powerful experience to lay out what was possible and what was at stake."*** Another member found that a doing cost analysis about the value of the services and providing a detailed cost/benefit analysis to the board on a regular basis, increased their understanding of the advantages of the Shared Services approach.

Meet Members Where They Are

The Hub provided in-person, email, and phone support and communication to center directors as they rolled out services. In-person support was critical for all directors in the beginning as they launched a new child management system. Over time, directors had different preferences for ongoing support and communication. Some preferred email communication, while others preferred in-person support and the Hub had to be flexible to meet member needs. As the Alliance grew and a new center joined that was located on the outskirts of Battle Creek, providing on-site responsiveness proved to be more challenging. Again, the Hub had to be flexible. One idea from BCSSA was to have the Hub assign a regular time each week when the Hub would visit the new center to answer questions and help solve problems. Another insight from BCSSA

was to carefully consider the timing to bring on new members to ensure that everything is working smoothly before adding new centers.

Building an Alliance Takes Time

While members of the Alliance are now enjoying good results from their partnership, startup was not always easy. In some cases, members expected to see results more quickly or thought things would improve faster than they did. Initially, the Hub didn't have any structures in place for the Alliance (e.g. policies for accounting, reporting, policy and procedures, hiring etc.). One staff member suggested ***“using the Shared Services website for model policies and asking existing Alliance to share their manuals would save time and grief.”***

Realistic timeframes are crucial to success. Expecting too much too soon is a cautionary tale. Directors pointed out that staff was not freed up immediately and, in some cases, had more to do initially. As one member put it: ***“It gets busier before it gets better.”***

Front and Center: Business and Pedagogical Leadership

Both business leadership AND pedagogical leadership are necessary for high quality early care and education. Members of the BCSSA found that by focusing on streamlining business processes and improving fiscal management they were able to direct more resources (time and money) to improve pedagogical outcomes. One director noted, ***“billing and bills went from taking me quite a bit of time to almost nothing now.”*** Another reported, ***“It’s been a huge timesaver having the Alliance monitor my vacancies. The financial stability that comes from a stronger enrollment base is huge.”***

With the help of pedagogical leaders, teaching staff were better able to focus on classroom responsibilities, resulting in increased assessment scores. One director reported ***“we had a big jump in scores in one of the classrooms that I’ve been coaching; the PQA score increased more than a point.”*** Additionally, teacher training has become coordinated across all centers, with all five centers coming together for a full day of professional development four times a year. As a result, teachers are able to totally focus on learning and development, unimpeded by their day-to-day responsibilities. Teachers not only benefitted from the professional development, they benefitted financially as well. One director reported that ***“this is the second consecutive year I gave my staff raises without raising tuition.”***

Communicate Before you Activate

Communicating clearly about expectations upfront before the Alliance launches is essential. An insight from BCSSA is to ***“be explicit about the need for directors to redirect resources from administration to the classroom.”***

Because change is hard and can be frightening, BCSSA members realized (sometimes after the fact) that they should have focused more time and attention on addressing concerns and changing the mindsets of various stakeholders when they began the project, and consistently throughout the work. A BCSSA insight is the importance of fostering honest, on-going communication with fellow members and with the Alliance Hub.

Find Out About Starting an Alliance

There are currently over 30 early childhood Shared Services Alliances across the country. Members are improving long term financial strength and quality of service, while maintaining the small, intimate setting so important to young children. One organization summed up the advantage of an Alliance this way: “Shared Services lets programs be big where big matters and small where small matters.”

Learn more about starting a Shared Services Alliance: <https://opportunities-exchange.org/wp-content/uploads/Startup-Kit-9-18.pdf>