

Building Professional Development Partnerships for Inclusion

Lessons learned from Natural Allies, FPG's cross-sector professional development project

YOU CAN'T PROVIDE HIGH QUALITY INCLUSION without highly qualified teachers. Sounds straightforward. However, while inclusion is a legal mandate, most early childhood teacher preparation programs are not doing an adequate job of students to teach and care for young children with disabilities.

Even if changes were made today to teacher preparation programs, states would still have to play catch-up with the existing early childhood workforce. This means relying on ongoing professional development like inservice training, coaching, or consultation — a challenging prospect as many states have no unified professional development system for early childhood practitioners. Even fewer state professional development systems are cross-sector¹ in nature, offering collaboration and supports across disciplines and roles (e.g., faculty, families, administrators, practitioners).

In 2001, FPG Child Development Institute's Natural Allies project set out to address these challenges. Natural Allies worked with states to enhance personnel preparation programs by growing the capacity of community college and university faculty, from early childhood and early childhood special education disciplines, to collaborate in preparing and supporting practitioners for early childhood inclusion. Project staff used a systems change model in their work with eight states over the course of three years. The Natural Allies project set out to:

1. Increase the knowledge, skills, and confidence of professional development providers to deliver high quality professional development related to inclusion.
2. Enhance the quality of early childhood personnel preparation programs related to preparing students to work with young children with disabilities in natural environments and inclusive settings.
3. Strengthen the professional development collaboration among state agencies, community/technical colleges and universities, practitioners and families.



¹ The term "cross-sector" means representation of diverse sectors of the early childhood field, ranging from agencies to higher education and family organizations.

Evaluation data collected from participants indicate that the model was successful. With federal agencies dedicating more dollars to cross-sector early childhood professional development, the lessons learned from this project provide valuable insights for those working to develop integrated systems that bridge traditional agency and discipline silos.

Lesson 1

Building Cross-Sector Collaboration Takes Time and Focus

Early childhood professionals and early childhood special education professionals operate in completely separate worlds. They read different journals, use different vocabulary, participate in different learning opportunities, work with different state agencies and professional organizations, and often do not know each other. The same disconnects exist between those who work in higher education institutions and those who work at state agencies.

The Natural Allies project fostered collaboration in a number of ways. First, each state had to form a State Action Team that included representatives from 2-year and 4-year higher education institutions, state consultants and trainers, family organizations and networks, state agencies, and local early childhood programs. Then, this team attended an out-of-state, four-day Natural Allies institute. Participants attended instructional sessions, had access to a broad range of instructional resources, and spent significant amounts of time on team building, planning, and networking. An important feature of the institute was its location away from the distraction of work and family.

As one participant noted, “A long evening on the porch of a cabin accomplished more in developing a cross-agency professional development system than a year of meetings could have done.”

Lesson 2

Faculty Are Ready, Willing, and Eager

Early childhood faculty members are sometimes perceived as too busy to participate in state level professional development efforts. While free time is not in large supply, faculty members willingly give it up for something they perceive to be worthwhile. For example, despite the fact that participants were not compensated, project staff could not accommodate all faculty members who wanted to be part of the State Action Team previously described. Many of those who were part of the team used their vacation time to participate in the Natural Allies institute.

Several factors contributed to the strong participation. Potential faculty participants were selected by influential leaders at the state

level, thereby raising the status of being a team member. Project staff also wrote personal letters to deans and department chairs describing the contributions being made by participating faculty. And perhaps most importantly, the project was responsive to faculty needs. Institute sessions were designed to address content and instructional strategies specifically targeting their interests.

Lesson 3

Someone in the State Needs to be Responsible for Collaboration

Interagency collaboration is seldom the focus of anyone’s job description, and organizational supports for cross-sector collaboration are few. Each Natural Allies state identified a state-level insider (liaison) to facilitate the work with the project. It was incumbent upon the liaison to organize meetings, support team plans, and monitor progress. The project had to play a very active role in supporting each liaison. Future projects need to emphasize the importance of the liaison role and plan to provide the organizational support needed for the liaison to be successful.

Faces of Change

Natural Allies helped states create long-term systems changes.

- Pennsylvania developed a statewide initiative to increase family involvement in the education process. The Parents are Presenters program prepares family members of children with disabilities to serve as instructional partners and work with early childhood and early intervention faculty at colleges and universities.
- In North Dakota, early childhood and early childhood special education faculty formed a higher education consortium that meets regularly.
- In Nebraska, early childhood associate degree faculty worked to ensure that all community colleges were providing a universal set of courses and content and that inclusion was part of the curriculum.

Conclusion

The lessons learned from Natural Allies can guide others whose goal is to foster cross-sector professional development systems to support inclusion.

To Learn More

Winton, P., & Catlett, C. (2009). Statewide efforts to enhance early childhood personnel preparation programs to support inclusion: Overview and lessons learned. *Infants & Young Children*, 22, 1, 63-70.

