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## *Project: Transformation Zone Implementation*

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### **Summary**

The North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC) provided coaches, professional development, and technical assistance for the local community-building and support needed to effectively implement high-quality programs, practices, and early childhood systems building in the Transformation Zone (TZ) with the goal of improving outcomes for children so that every child comes to kindergarten ready to succeed in school and in life. The project was designed as a collaborative project between NCPC and the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) to apply lessons from implementation science to effectively implement selected early childhood strategies, apply systems change strategies, and inform early childhood systems improvements across the state. The set of strategies included in the Transformation Zone included a universal home visiting program (Family Connects), a family strengthening strategy (Triple P: Positive Parenting Program), two literacy strategies (Reach Out and Read and MotherRead), and several child care quality improvement strategies (Infant Toddler Expansion, North Carolina Babies First, Healthy Social Behavior Project, Child Care Health Consultation). Four rural low-resource counties in northeastern North Carolina were selected to participate in the Transformation Zone: Bertie, Beaufort, Chowan and Hyde counties.

NCPC hired four county implementation coaches and a coach coordinator to support the county level work and communication with state level groups. Coaches were housed with the county convener for each county who provided day to day supervision in coordination with the coach coordinator. The coaches led cross-sector county implementation teams and staffed cross-sector county leadership teams throughout the project period. They provided communication between teams, led data collection and reporting efforts, and communicated with purveyors. Implementation teams coordinated planning/implementation, identified barriers to strategy implementation and community development, and provided recommendations for policy/practice shifts to leadership teams to effectively implement strategies and systems improvements. The coach coordinator received coaching from NIRN and provided regular coaching and technical assistance to the coaches to support their effectiveness, consulted with county conveners to coordinate and troubleshoot, and served as the key communicator with state teams.

State and local teams participated in "policy to practice feedback loops" to resolve issues and celebrate successes. NCPC actively participated with other state agencies that received funding to implement TZ strategies, specifically the Division of Child Development and Early Education, and Division of Public Health, as key members of the state leadership and implementation teams. NCPC assisted NIRN to plan for state implementation team meetings, cross-county meetings of state and local team members, and jointly planned leadership team meetings with NIRN and the RTT-ELC grants management team.

Coaches received training regarding implementation science and ongoing coaching from NIRN. NCPC provided professional development opportunities for coaches, county team members and community stakeholders in Motivational Interviewing, meeting facilitation skills using the Adaptive Schools training, community systems change using the ABLe Change framework, and stakeholder communications and messaging. Coaches and team members were also offered coaching in the ABLe Change Framework processes, and individualized assistance from NCPC in county-specific communications strategies.

Additionally, NCPC took advantage of available consultation from NIRN to increase use of implementation science internally and with contractors and contracted purveyors.

## Successes

- All counties developed a cross-sector shared vision and strategic plan including desired community conditions, priority goals and indicators, and initial action steps.
- All counties developed sustainability plans for their team infrastructure, selected program strategies, and approaches to work influenced by implementation science and systems change framework. Two counties secured funds (one from county commissioners and the other from the Smart Start local partnership) to continue some aspects of the coach role, and the other counties are seeking funding. Coaches were intentional in transition planning and knowledge transfer to support continuation of team efforts. Every county adopted a new name for their collective effort to use going forward.
- All counties are implementing new early childhood communication strategies targeted to different community audiences.
- All counties expanded their team membership and increased the diversity of community service sectors participating in teams. Accordingly, a greater shared understanding of community resources has developed with one county committing to continue "agency mixers" that have proven to increase connections among providers.
- Counties increased their awareness of the importance of parent voice and gathered information from families to inform planning and decision-making.
- Counties began collecting and using data to inform decision-making, especially community information through a systems scan and development of a data dashboard for program strategies.
- Counties increased their knowledge of implementation science and learned to apply the principles to plan and implement program strategies.
- NCPC was instrumental in reconvening the state leadership team during the last year of the project to consider issues raised by the county teams and plan for improved alignment across state and federally-supported services.
- NCPC launched a cross-departmental implementation science team to work closely with agency leaders to embed implementation science into agency processes and is committed to continuing to support the team and the work.

## Challenges

- The state leadership team met during the initial stage of the project and then stopped meeting due to changes in state administration and personnel as well as perceived lack of specific tasks. The lack of unified state agency leadership communication with counties slowed the overall project progress and proved frustrating to county partners.
- NCPC made an early joint decision with NIRN to postpone introduction of the ABLe Change training and coaching until teams were well-oriented to implementation science and strategies were initiated. This resulted in a two-phase approach to introducing the two frameworks. Counties expressed feeling overwhelmed and that the systems change work would have been helpful in the beginning. In hindsight, it would have set the project up for more success to work together more upfront to coordinate a more integrated approach to technical assistance so the community development work could have begun earlier.

## Lessons

This is complex work that requires great attention to clear, responsive communication, transparency regarding the learning and decision-making processes, dedication of ample time for community stakeholder engagement, and expert training and on-going coaching. Communities have unique cultures and at times unexpected strengths and resources when assisted to cultivate diverse stakeholder engagement for a collective vision. Although the counties made impressive progress, fewer program strategies (selected by the counties based on their assets and needs), a more integrated training and coaching approach, and a longer project period would have been beneficial to build more community capacity to successfully integrate and sustain use of implementation science and systems change frameworks. State level collective work is challenging, especially when there is a change in several key leaders and likely would have benefited from additional expert training and coaching as well as more interaction with county representatives.

## Closing Thoughts

NCPC is grateful for the opportunity to participate as a key partner in this project and we have learned a great deal in the process that will certainly influence our state and community level work going forward. We are actively seeking resources to continue to support community capacity-building for early childhood systems change and will continue to improve our incorporation of implementation science. Just like the TZ counties, we have changed the way we work. NCPC will continue to support the TZ counties' work by hosting a shared, dedicated on-line Community of Practice where documents are posted as well as links to training webinars that were developed for them, and where they have the opportunity to post questions and discussions.