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## Building a State Child Care Initiative: Applying Principles of Teamwork and Collaboration

Susan K. Walker

Maryland Cooperative Extension, sw141@umail.umd.edu



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## Building a State Child Care Initiative: Applying Principles of Teamwork and Collaboration

### Abstract

It has long been advocated that, for Extension to respond to critical public issues, it will have to work across disciplines and as teams. This article reviews one state's efforts in building a child care initiative. Over the past 5 years, Maryland Cooperative Extension has pulled together individual county and city Extension family and Consumer Sciences educators to provide coordinated child care provider training and to build a statewide system of service to its audience and support to its members. Recommendations about team-building efforts are provided.

### Susan K. Walker

Family Life Specialist  
Maryland Cooperative Extension  
College Park, Maryland  
Internet Address: [sw141@umail.umd.edu](mailto:sw141@umail.umd.edu)

The idea of teamwork and internal collaboration as critical to the future and function of Cooperative Extension has long been promoted. In 1987, Michael Quinn Patton wrote in this journal about the future of Cooperative Extension as making significant contributions in the information age. Rather than providing specialized knowledge, characterized by the needs of an industrial society, he wrote that Extension would best address public issues through "working across program areas, counties, and levels of responsibility in interdisciplinary teams taking a holistic systems perspective." A few years later, Edgar Boone (1990) observed that "Critical issues . . . will require Extension workers in traditional program areas, disciplines and administration to cross lines and function as teams." And in 1996, Arlen Etling advocated teamwork as a principle to help Extension respond to new challenges facing the organization and stay current with the world.

Yet each author cautioned that to address critical public issues as teams, Extension would have to confront certain challenges to its organizational culture. Reward and recognition would have to focus on group--not just individual--effort. Skills and motivations of an already overburdened and highly diverse workforce to work collaboratively would need to be addressed. And regarding Extension as a human, integrated educational system, not merely a collection of individuals with technical expertise may require a re-education for current staff. Therefore, before a cross program team approach can be implemented, in some Extension states it will be crucial to first develop factors that help individuals function collaboratively.

This article reviews one state's process of developing an internal collaboration, in this case statewide training for child care providers. The educational needs of child care professionals draw from disciplines across family and consumer sciences, including child development, financial management, nutrition, health and safety. Presenting a comprehensive program of continuing education requires a diverse Extension faculty with expertise in the content, experience with the audience, and contacts with a breadth of agency partners.

The Maryland experience described here is an example of team building as collaboration, as Kagan (1991) defines it: people working together to achieve common goals that could not be accomplished independently (p.3). More than a coordinated approach to programming, this collaborative effort restructured the expertise and resources of partners (Melaville & Blank, 1993), built an interdependent system to address internal and external needs, and accomplished a shared vision (Bergstrom, et al., 1995).

First, the elements of collaboration within an ecological construct (Bronfenbrenner, 1979;

Bergstrom, et al., 1995), are discussed to serve as a framework for understanding the necessary steps and intended process and structural outcomes of our experience. Next, the 5-year process toward building an internal collaboration in Maryland is described, followed by an overview of the outcomes achieved related to successful collaborations. Finally, some general insights for team-building within Extension are offered that may be applied broadly to strengthen programming in other cross-program issue areas.

## **Elements of Collaboration**

Collaborations are built successfully on the relationships between people, and the empowerment of individuals. As Etling observed from organizational management techniques (1996), people are likely to work as a team when they understand the goals and see that the goals of the group fit with their personal needs and goals. They are likely to act when they see a difference and a reward from their actions and make change toward group goals if they can start from what they know and their personal barriers and strengths are addressed.

Enabling people to function as a team also means the development of resources, processes, and systems to promote efficient operation and achievement of outcomes. Establishing effective communication systems, providing a mechanism for assessment and feedback, and becoming sustainable are examples of process factors that can enhance collaboration success.

Collaborations operate within a variety of contexts that influence their effectiveness. History of working together, the political climate, and catalysts for action are a few examples of contextual factors. The outcomes of the collaboration can be measured in terms of effect on conditions and by actual resource or policy impacts made (for example) that influence those conditions.

## **Building a Child Care Team: One State's Experience**

In Maryland, childcare center and family childcare professionals must take 12 clock hours of training every 2 years to maintain regulated status (Code of Maryland Regulations, 2001). The state childcare regulatory agency oversees childcare providers and programs; it also approves trainers and training agencies. As an approved training agency since 1994, Maryland Cooperative Extension's (MCE) effort primarily consists of locally held 1 to 2 hour continuing education workshops. These workshops may be offered separately or as part of a day-long conference.

MCE has advantages as a statewide system to fill training needs that other agencies and individuals cannot. Most training opportunities are in highly populated, urban areas of the state; MCE's training also reaches rural and suburban providers, in some cases being one of the only sources of continuing training within a county. Tied to the state and national university system, MCE's training also offers connections for research-based content, distance learning opportunities, and extensive topic offerings. Finally, MCE fills a need for the minimally or non-degreed professional who prefers a more informal approach to adult learning and who may be intimidated by college settings (Walker, 2002).

Yet, despite these significant contributions, the new state Family Life specialist in 1997 observed MCE's childcare provider training to be in need of coordination, focus, and support. County faculty were largely unaware of what their colleagues were teaching. There was no evident plan for addressing the professional development needs of the childcare provider audience or building an agency system to address those needs. Nor were there identifiable efforts to support or respond to faculty needs. The need to coordinate efforts was voiced by the county faculty and reinforced by the Program Leader.

At the same time, there were many internal and contextual assets upon which to build a team effort.

1. The county faculty offered commitment to the organization, were experienced and highly skilled adult educators, and had a history of positive internal working relationships.
2. The majority (85%) of the Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) faculty reported childcare provider training in their Plans of Work. Unlike other specific teaching activity (e.g., nutrition, family finance), childcare was one area that each county FCS faculty member was or could work in.
3. There was evidence of strong partnerships with other agencies, such as childcare resource and referrals or regional licensing offices, and highly popular conferences that drew over 100 providers.
4. Nearly all educators spoke of the reward they felt in reaching the childcare provider audience.

Clearly, in 1997, MCE had strengths to meet critical child care training needs in the state and an opportunity to work more effectively as an integrated system.

### **Year 1: Communicate Statewide Activity**

A first step toward building the team was to internally communicate about the Extension provider

training activity that was happening across the state. Approved trainers in Maryland are required to provide semi-annual (now quarterly) reports of training activity to the state regulatory agency. The reporting requirement was an excellent vehicle to gather information about every county's training activity and report back a statewide picture.

Training reports included numbers of providers trained, types of providers (family, center staff, Head Start, etc.), Extension program areas represented in training, agencies collaborated with, and locations of training. These reports became a regular feature and established state to county communication on the statewide effort, and a county to county reporting of individual effort.

## **Year 2. Address Expressed Faculty Needs for Resources**

FCS faculty desired new, added, and adapted teaching materials for their work with childcare professionals. Yet dollars for the purchase of materials for all counties and specialist time to develop curricula were limited. Two topics important to the provider community that year (1998), that were identified by a statewide survey (Maryland Committee for Children, 1997) but were not currently addressed in the state by Extension, were infant brain development and work and family balance in child care.

Partnership with a statewide non-profit agency with funding to develop and disseminate a curriculum for training childcare providers titled "Baby and the Brain" was an easy and inexpensive way to help address the need for resources on the first topic. Later that year, the Family Life Specialist invited an FCS educator to apply for a small award (\$1,000) to write a curriculum on work and family balance in child care. The award was received, and by early 1999 "Making Home Work: Work and Family Balance in Family Child Care" (Walker & Barnett, 1999) was ready for training to and use by county Extension faculty.

## **Year 3. Use Coordinated, Regional Events to Pull People Together**

After 2 years of support and communication, it was time for a significant activity that would bring together the county Extension faculty in a coordinated fashion. MCE applied for and was awarded just under \$23,000 by the state Child Care Administration to provide six regional childcare conferences. The conferences involved:

- Inter-county collaboration,
- Utilization of regional childcare personnel and other experts,
- Coordinated conference and workshop evaluations, and
- Shared conference themes and keynote and workshop topics.

Each regional team had its own marketing plan and conference brochure, and tailored conference aspects to local provider needs. The six conferences reached 483 child care professionals representing 18 of Maryland's 23 counties. Participant evaluations of the conferences revealed them to be popular, of high quality, and effective in stimulating positive change in key aspects of quality child caregiver skill and knowledge (Walker & Morris, 2001). From a team perspective, this statewide activity provided:

- Significant recognition for a statewide effort,
- Experience in working together in program planning, implementation, and evaluation, and
- Opportunities for individual county faculty to have a shared experience in working across program topics.

## **Years 4 and 5. Empower Team Members to Create Resources to Meet Organizational Needs**

The last 2 years have been spent further developing resources for teaching and building processes and structures that are essential for the group to function as team. Early in 2000, the group articulated a mission and prioritized needs to accomplish statewide goals. One of those needs was to develop a standard statewide curriculum for childcare provider training.

The most cost-, time-, and resource-efficient solution was for county faculty teams to develop resources. This approach made sense: the educators had been teaching certain topics for several years, had been well trained and supported in the content by Extension specialists, and had materials and resources for teaching at their fingertips. A team approach to developing curriculum materials allowed individuals to coordinate existing content and materials, and package them for statewide use. This also allowed a single specialist to facilitate the development of 12 teaching packages in a year and a half with a budget of \$2,000.

The 12 topics identified through an assessment with county faculty fit neatly into categories established by the state's new (in 2000) credentialing system based on a Core of Knowledge. Educators fit themselves into topic teams that built upon their existing content expertise. A curriculum committee established lesson plan standards and a timeline for completion. Each lesson plan was to undergo an internal review by a state curriculum team, be externally peer reviewed, and be taught to Extension personnel in the state. Development and training on the lesson plans were completed in November 2002.

A second prioritized need identified by the group was for marketing our work so that provider audiences and potential partners could access our services. The group also desired coordinated

policies and evaluation strategies to demonstrate statewide effectiveness. Marketing, policy, and evaluation committees were established in 2001.

The marketing committee developed a logo that would give us a unique identity (Figure 1). With a budget of \$2,500 from an internal program enhancement award, a marketing brochure was created along with a child care activity panel that fit into county FCS program displays. The policy committee has examined common procedures across counties in the delivery of childcare training and is establishing guidelines, for example, on training fees and registration procedures. The evaluation committee is addressing ways to aggregate data statewide, analyze state and local data for practical use, and examine outcomes of the overall child care initiative on Extension personnel, the Extension system in the state, and on the enhancement of child care quality through provider knowledge and skill statewide.

**Figure 1.**  
Maryland Cooperative Extension Child Care Initiative Logo



The policy committee has examined common procedures across counties in the delivery of child care training and is establishing guidelines, for example, on training fees and registration procedures. The evaluation committee is addressing ways to aggregate data statewide, analyze state and local data for practical use, and examine outcomes of the overall child care initiative on Extension personnel, the Extension system in the state, and on the enhancement of child care quality through provider knowledge and skill statewide.

## Results

Most simply, Maryland's once unfocused, uncoordinated, and unsupported work in child care now operates as an integrated, statewide system of child care provider training and support to trainers. Child care is now recognized by state Extension administrators as a key impact area (University of Maryland, 2002). While to some extent the success of our 5-year experience can be quantified (e.g., we train about 1800 child care providers each year), the prerequisite outcomes of our team-building experience are in the changes in people and processes to function as a collaborative system.

These outcomes are summarized below, identified by the process factors that enhance successful collaborations, as noted by Bergstrom and others with the National Network for Collaboration (1995). Documentation for these outcomes is from program reports and evaluations of training activity, recorded comments from county staff, and observations by the Family Life specialist.

- Building the team started with a clear recognition of the strengths of the individual county faculty assets and efforts, and acknowledgment of the need to link those efforts and make ties to a larger endeavor (understanding the community).
- Change in the existing activity structure was stimulated by a central presence (in this case the Family Life specialist), but is maintained by empowerment of all individuals to make significant contributions, and share in decision-making (leadership).
- Program activity is conducted by county-based individuals who are supported by centralized committees for their curriculum, evaluation, marketing, and evaluation needs (community development).
- The county-based training to providers is linked to a central office that collects and disseminates information about the training and ties that statewide effort to the larger state system of child care professional development (communication).
- This system has an identity that distinguishes it from all other training systems in the state and from other issue or program areas within Extension (sustainability).
- Progressive movement toward accomplishing group goals is achieved through monitoring our achievements, keeping pace with external trends and opportunities, and setting benchmarks for future work (research and evaluation).

With the groundwork laid and the team built, Maryland's child care initiative can take the next steps in completing its mission. We seek to enhance our competencies in child care provider training and meet continuing needs in this field of diverse professionals, in part through offering training at advanced levels and through Internet applications. We aim to maintain (at least) the number of providers that we reach each year, and extend our work to informal caregivers.

## Insights for Effective Team-Building

Those who seek to bring together Extension county faculty towards the development of a statewide team effort on a cross-program issue may benefit from the following insights.

### **The Place to Start: Build on the Good Things That Are Present**

Assets-based planning emphasizes the development of policies and activities based on the capacities, skills, and assets of people involved (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). Team building can capitalize on existing resources: lots of good minds, years of experience, energy, creativity, interest.

### **The Value of You: Empower and Reward Individuals**

As Extension systems develop tangible rewards and recognition for teamwork, it is critical for individuals to find personal reward and meaning in the efforts that stimulate collaborative work. When individuals are empowered to see themselves in the vision and plan and future direction, they can feel rewarded by the effort, even if tangible reward is lacking.

The county educators' work in child care was continually regarded and was the basis upon which the program was built. They developed their own teaching packages, provided training to their peers, conducted conferences and co-authored evaluation reports. As a result, they have products that can be used to meet individual goals (e.g., promotion and tenure, technological applications, a legacy for years of work). Skill and knowledge has increased, and individuals are motivated and confident in contributing to the team effort.

### **The Power of One: Ensure Trusted Leadership**

The Family Life specialist took on the leadership role and acted initially as a convener, or catalyst for group change. Bergstrom, et al. (1995) state that this person "must be respected and be viewed as a 'legitimate' player (p. 16)." County faculty needed to depend on the leadership of the specialist if they were going to expend the energy to work more interdependently. This meant trusting communications to be consistent and clear, and seeing her commitment to team members and the mission.

### **The Need to Look and Listen: Be Responsive to Need**

Each step in building the MCE team was an exercise in responding to the needs of the overall goals of the project while simultaneously responding to the needs, abilities, and interests of the team members. This often required experimentation and improvisation rather than following an established game plan (Etling, 1996). But listening and appropriately responding was the only way to ensure progress of the internal collaborative while it operated synergistically within the larger state and national context of child care professional development.

### **The Need for Help: Seek Resources**

We found creative, cost-effective ways to produce materials and programs, yet the funding received helped greatly. Nearly \$30,000 in internal and external funds to support our efforts has given us a "good credit rating" to attract future funding. These funds helped to facilitate the development of materials and resources for our teaching and the creation of marketing and promotional items and allowed us to better communicate among ourselves and to others. Funding also helped the team feel valued, feel that our work was worth investing in.

Taking the time to build a team requires patience and hard work. But, as with any lasting structure, it is essential to start with a strong foundation.

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