

BUILDING A CONTINUOUS LEARNING SYSTEM

With increased public demand for accountability and cost effective services, pressure continues to be placed upon programs, organizations and systems to work more effectively and produce better results. By investing FSSR funds into building collaborative infrastructures, Pennsylvania has begun to see organizations and systems using data to create outcome baselines, developing community strategies that align programs and services to achieve outcome goals, and promoting system and policy changes that redeploy traditional system funds into proven programs and services that support families. Through continued support, these collaborative infrastructures can be enhanced and refined resulting in a continuous learning environment that enables key stakeholders to focus their efforts around a common community agenda.

To enable communities to establish a continuous learning environment, Harvard Family Research Project has developed a continuous learning system² that seeks to create continuous opportunities for the development and use of relevant information, for encouraging corrective actions and participation, for implementation of research findings and programs, and for recognition of performance improvement. The first step in building a continuous learning system is to find common ground among collaborative partners. This common ground includes the following:

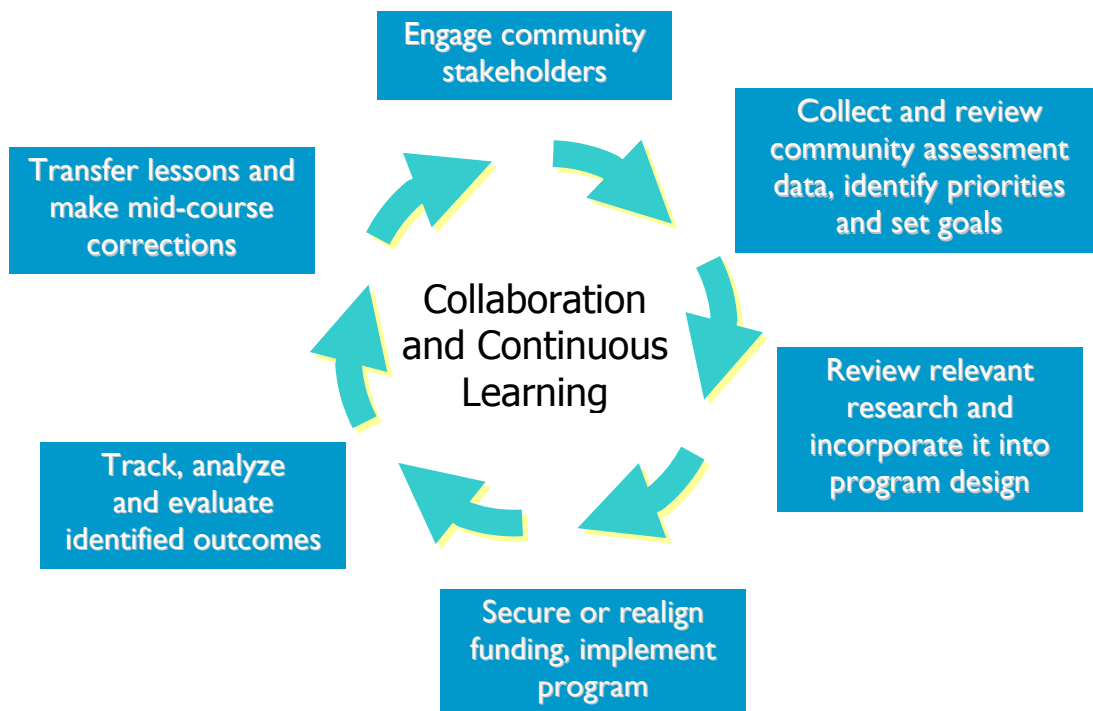
- Develop a collaborative community agenda
- Set outcome performance measures - indicators and goals
- Allocate existing and new resources – with assessment of results
- Establish expectations and accountability agreement
- Build an on-going component of education and communication

After common ground is established among stakeholders, the Harvard framework envisions a continuous, five stage learning process:

1. Engage stakeholders in strategic planning; set an agenda with performance goals and indicators using relevant data;
2. Learn from experience and incorporate research and research-based programs into program/policy design;
3. Engage in innovation, monitor and assess progress, design evaluation and analyze data to measure performance;
4. Learn from evaluation, establish benchmarks to evaluate progress, make course corrections and use knowledge from relevant and applied research;
5. Transfer lessons/learnings from course corrections and program redesign across service systems and policy structures, and identify knowledge and research gaps.

² Weiss, Heather B. & Morrill William A. (Vol. IV Number 3/4 1998) *Useful Learning for Public Action, Harvard Family Research Project.* 2-5.

Over the past several years in Pennsylvania, local collaboratives have been working to develop and enhance the infrastructure necessary to engage partners, assess local data, develop a common agenda and establish children and family outcome goals, initial stages found in the Harvard framework. It is important that collaboratives now take the next steps to evaluate their infrastructure development, identify areas that need additional investment and earmark FSSR funds that will result in a collaborative structure that has the capacity for continuous learning to occur. Once this approach is established, all members of the collaborative have the potential to evaluate their efforts and produce information that can be used to engage new partners, determine resource allocations, and drive program and policy decisions.



The process is illustrated by the Continuous Learning diagram. The collaborative identifies and engages appropriate community stakeholders. They collect and review community assessment data to establish priorities and set goals. They examine successful programs, review relevant research and incorporate learning into program design. The collaborative identifies existing community resources, realigns those resources if necessary, and/or identifies new funding in order to implement their strategies. Because ongoing program monitoring is essential to determine program effectiveness, the collaborative tracks, analyzes and evaluates desired outcomes. Throughout the cycle, the collaborative disseminates information to transfer lessons learned and guides the implementation of responsive course corrections such as modifying program design or developing new programs. It is important to note that feedback from consumers is essential to every step of the cycle.