

HIGHLIGHTS OF YEAR 1 OF THE STRENGTHENING FAMILIES STATE PILOT

In January, we entered the second year of the Strengthening Families State Pilot. There has been much learned in the first year of SFI implementation.

- All of the SFI pilot states have engaged multiple partners in their work at the state and local levels. As we see how leadership teams evolve, we are learning about the many diverse partners who can contribute to the success of strengthening families.
- The enthusiastic engagement of early childhood education programs in all the states is leading the way to great implementation and much further scope for SF ideas. Some states are using a pilot program approach, others are using mini-grants as an incentive for ECE programs to complete the self-assessment, while others have established learning networks of ECE programs to provide peer support. A number of states are using a combination of these strategies.
- Each state has some reach into the professional development systems, licensing and other regulatory systems, and is beginning to make connections between child welfare and early childhood. One state is analyzing how the existing SFI protective factors correspond to existing ECE course work at the college level; another is seeking to create a common core capacities framework for all those working with children and families; a number of states are developing new training for ECE and CW workers that incorporate the protective factors.

In addition to what was learned across core strategies, each pilot is developing its “signature” area of focus. This bonus for the initiative, and potentially for the field as a whole, means greater depth of experience in a number of areas.

- ✓ **Alaska: understanding how remote (often fewer than 100 people) and rural communities can benefit from, and extend, SFI.** New methods of communication and resource sharing are developing with state agencies and child care centers moving from an “isolation makes us different” perspective to one of shared understanding of the commonalities among families and communities. Also, Alaska has among its pilot sites a child care center embedded in a homeless shelter—a challenging situation where each success is a heartening achievement.
- ✓ **Arkansas: linking the SFI Self-Assessment Tool to their state’s emerging quality rating system (QRS) for child care centers.** While embedding the tool as a component in QRS is a little like hiking Mount McKinley with a 40 pound backpack, tireless efforts by the Leadership Team have produced much headway. To support use of the tool in the context of QRS, the Arkansas folks are developing a tool kit which guides centers to effectively use the tool to improve practice (and thus their rating!).
- ✓ **Illinois: making SFI a critical component of the child welfare system, ensuring that children under five who are in foster care have access to quality center-based child care.** With communications materials, professional development activities, licensing innovations, and regional learning networks of child care centers, Illinois has constructed a comprehensive system of supports for both staff and families that embodies the SFI protective factors. This support from DCFS promises to improve program quality for ALL children, including those who are wards of the state.
- ✓ **Missouri: building on Parents as Teachers (PAT), embedding SFI into PAT training programs throughout the state.** As the national home for Parents as Teachers, Missouri offers PAT in every school district. Building Strengthening Families concepts into PAT will have impact statewide as well as in all the other states where PAT has been adopted as part of a comprehensive early childhood

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system.

- ✓ **New Hampshire: embedding the SFI Protective Factors into professional development activities from pre-service programs at two and four-year colleges, to certificate programs, to in-service cross training between early care and education and child welfare staff.** New Hampshire is also taking on the difficult task of helping higher education institutions understand that some of their (perhaps outdated) curriculum might not be what's needed by today's emerging ECE teachers.
- ✓ **Rhode Island: working with two entire communities with the assistance of a family advocacy council in each area.** This strategy starts with community buy-in and moves to engage individual centers to join the SFI bandwagon through opportunities for technical assistance around the protective factors as well as augmented professional development.
- ✓ **Wisconsin: knitting together the resources of CCR&Rs and Family Resource Centers throughout the state to provide support for SFI from low-touch communication tools to more intensive training around the protective factors.** This state is also linking SFI to their workforce development efforts so the TANF families have greater access to quality child care.

Looking ahead, we talked about three tough, and necessary, elements of future work that require focus and added attention. In all states, deliberate steps (and in some cases, tremendous strides) are being made to build connections between early care and education and child welfare services. Bridging these two previously thinly linked systems is not easy, and developing multiple strategies and pursuing them doggedly seems most promising. All states also told us of their simultaneous commitment to, and frustration with, deepening parent engagement. Given the lives of parents these days, and the many tasks facing center staff – as well as state leadership teams -- each workday, it's no wonder this important goal needs more joint thinking and support. Finally, we learned that you are forging ahead to embed SFI into policies, practices, and training to sustain and grow the Initiative statewide.