

Newport Family & Child Opportunity Zone and the Core Competencies 2011 Pilot

Since joining the NF COZ (formerly the Sullivan School Family Center) in 1999, the after school and youth development field has evolved from a fledgling, though innovative, child care option for families and occasional educational support strategy for school districts to a now integral part of learning in Rhode Island and the Nation. Increased emphasis on quality improvements in the field have led to the development of various quality improvement models. Rhode Island's efforts in the development of core competencies are evidence of this quality improvement work.

Building off the Providence After School Alliance's (PASA) work in helping the development of RI After-School Quality Standards as well as the RI Program Quality Assessment tool (RIPQA)—in collaboration with the Weikart CYPQ—the Rhode Island Core Knowledge and Core Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals (Core Competencies) are used to document a youth development professional's actions, personal attributes, and efforts towards competency in the field just as the RIPQA tool is used to observe and document specific activities in a programs effort to continually improve practice. These core competencies define what after school and out-of-school time (OST) professionals need to know and be able to do in order to provide best practice when working with children and youth.

The van Bueren Charitable Foundation-funded and RIASPA-coordinated Core Competencies 2011 pilot, of which the NF COZ was a part, has helped us by working with our current RIPQA improvement plans, specifically in the areas of building capacity and a knowledge base with frontline staff and adult family members in leadership roles. NF COZ staff, with technical assistance from Core Competencies consultant Shevaun Keogh-Walker and our Quality Advisor Maryclaire Knight, prepared and co-delivered a series of workshops for frontline staff, including 12 parents and 76 community partners facilitating activities in NF COZ 21st Century Community Learning Center Programs.

The idea for the workshops came from the two series of supports provided under the pilot: the *methods series*, which focused on active learning, building community toward cooperative learning, ask-listen-encourage, voice and choice, and planning and reflection; and the *administrative professional development series*, which focused on supervision, hiring and personnel issues, leadership, and managing change. These NF COZ-facilitated workshops included a frontline orientation in NF COZ policies and procedures, active Learning, team development and cooperative learning, active listening and encouragement, youth voice and choice, and planning and reflection. We plan to deliver this latter topic to our community of learners in November 2012 as the final installment of our frontline PD opportunities.

One of the best outcomes from the pilot was in the building relationships with our local colleagues who also participated in the Core Competencies pilot. These Newport County colleagues included the Boys & Girls Club of Newport County, the Newport Community School, and the Jamestown Teen Center. We met together with quality advisor, Shevaun Keogh-Walker approximately 10 times over the course of the project. In these meetings around core competencies work, we shared ideas, learned about working styles, and often shared successful strategies as topics came up around building capacity and documenting professional competency with all staffing levels.

This connection with area youth development colleagues has helped to build capacity at the local level as well. Many of the same professionals involved in the Core Competencies pilot also participate in the Newport Partnership for Families Educational Success Committee to share best practice and coordinate professional development that benefits local community-based agencies and the Newport public school teachers. Colleagues who participated in the pilot were able to focus professional development opportunities around the critical areas covered and garner support for opportunities that include a youth development-centered approach. This collaboration helped to defray the cost of professional development and expand the capacity not only of NF COZ programs and services, but also for agencies involved in youth development throughout the city.

Through our participation in the Core Competencies pilot, specifically the *methods series*, we have also incorporated several teaching strategies into program activities. This has led to the semi-quarterly dissemination of “hot topics” in best practice. The first of these teaching strategies learned during the Core Competencies pilot is the daily “check-in” with youth. Another hot topic shared with our partners and facilitators outside of the NF COZ workshops is on how to incorporate youth voice and choice into activities. Next on our agenda of frontline professional development and hot topics are practical strategies to check for understanding, and incorporating the use of reflection.

NF COZ staff has taken this work with the utmost of importance and, with intentionality, have devised ways to support connections in students’ learning both in school and during out-of-school time. Our participation in the Core Competencies pilot has given us a strong sense of the role of the youth development professional. It has helped us recognize our own areas of expertise and exceptional skill while providing a clear road map of what professionals need to know and be able to do in order to provide high-quality care and education to the youth with whom we work.