

## BUILDING AGENCY CAPACITY TO IMPROVE PARENT ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES IN OTTAWA

FINAL REPORT

December 20, 2019

### ORIGINAL EXPECTATION FOR THE PROJECT

This project was funded through the City of Ottawa's Capacity Building funding stream. The project plan was to support six to eight Early On sites with their parent engagement strategies by assessing sites and determining several areas where they would likely benefit from focusing their engagement efforts. Coaching and guidance in the form of an action plan and evaluation framework were planned as additional support to sites.

### DESCRIPTION OF IMPLEMENTATION

The collection of tools developed for the purposes of this project was adapted from the *Parents, Developing Leaders A Self-Assessment and Planning Tool for Nonprofits and Schools* tool developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in August 2016. The resulting booklet, entitled "Building Agency Capacity to Improve Parent Engagement Practices in Ottawa" includes three tools to be used by sites to guide their parent engagement efforts. Tool #3, Engaging Parents, Developing Leaders, was the primary tool used for the purposes of this project. This assessment is split into four sections, or domains, which focus on (1) Building a culture of respect, inclusion and equity; (2) Coaching parents on competence and confidence; (3) Listening to and forming partnerships with parents; and (4) Partnering with other organizations to serve the whole family.

The "Building Agency Capacity" booklet was presented to the community in May 2019 once the Early On sites were announced by the City of Ottawa. Recruitment began after the tool and the project were presented to the community, however, despite a thorough effort, only three sites could be recruited to complete the Assessment. Assessment results were analyzed and summarized and coaching sessions were offered to the three participating sites. One of the three sites ultimately participated in a coaching session in December 2019 and due to a variety of circumstances, the other two sites were not able to participate. A tailored action plan was developed for the participating site, alongside an evaluation framework for their particular focus areas. For those sites that were assessed but not coached, a template with a series of guiding questions was developed to support them in building their framework when they have the capacity to do so.

### LIMITATIONS OF THIS PROJECT

Due to the timing of the announcement of the Early On sites and the demands on sites once the announcement was made, staff capacity for an additional project was clearly limited. For this reason, despite the sector's interest in the Parent Engagement Tool, recruiting sites to participate was unusually challenging. In addition, it was clear that the sites that ultimately chose to participate lacked the capacity in terms of staff time to truly engage in the project, unsurprisingly considering the circumstances.

### **SUPPORT MATERIALS DEVELOPED AS A RESULT OF CAPACITY BUILDING FUNDING**

- The “Building Agency Capacity to Improve Parent Engagement Practices in Ottawa” toolkit was developed to present to the child care sector. This tool provides advice on implementation and interpretation of the results of assessments and has been the first step in familiarizing the sector with this approach to parent engagement.
- The assessment tools have been made available in a user-friendly Word format to adapt if needed.
- A logic model and full evaluation framework are available for reference and for sites to adapt to suit their specific areas of focus.
- Excel file template to guide self-assessment of the tool will be available for the sector to promote the sustainability of using this tool.
- Tailored action plan template built for the three sites that participated (only completed for site that participated in coaching)

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE OTTAWA COLLABORATIVE FOR PARENTING SUPPORT**

In order to ensure that this Parent Engagement assessment tool is sustainable and that the sector has the capacity to be engaged, several recommendations for future iterations of this project have been developed.

1. In order for sites to sustainably continue working with the “Building Agency Capacity” tool, the assessments and analysis files should be simple to use and stored in an accessible location so that they are widely available across the sector to anyone who needs them. The Ottawa Collaborative for Parenting Support will determine this location.
2. Sites focused on the second domain, “Coaching parents on competence and confidence”, but did not complete the first domain assessment as the outline in the toolkit recommended. It would be prudent to complete the first assessment to be sure that some of the early foundational steps to parent engagement have been completed. To support this in future iteration, coaching could be offered as part of the assessment process, in the form of a facilitator who could guide a focus group through the assessment. This would address an additional challenge that is typically faced in these types of evaluations, where parents are reluctant to provide negative feedback, likely for fear that staff will be penalized or funding for their program will be taken away. Using a coaching model to solicit accurate feedback from families and staff would support a more efficient action plan as a final result.
3. In general sites do not have the resources (staff time) to do anything additional to their ongoing commitments. Time must be spent to build the sector’s engagement in parent engagement itself before they will trust that it’s something that will benefit them and something that to which they can devote the resources to take action. Coaching must be conducted in a way that minimizes the time commitment by the participating sites, but also identifies the clear benefits to their program. One way that this might be done is by drawing lines between existing activities (i.e. part of prescriptive programs sites are already doing) and parent engagement activities, supporting staff to do both activities sustainably and without redundancies.

4. Over the course of this project, it became clear that there are many ways that sites are already doing much of the work that will lead to parent engagement, however things are disjointed. Across Ottawa, child care and early years programs follow the How Does Learning Happen pedagogy. Aligning the actions that are to be taken to support parent engagement with this pedagogy and other common frameworks used across the sector would streamline efforts that staff are making to successfully implement their programming, without any redundancies. Taking the time to align these paradigms would, in turn, lead to sustainability where sites do not have the staff capacity to take on additional projects or assessments. Evaluation for these could be aligned as well, simplifying the measurement of success and the identification of areas for improvement in all of the domains of the How Does Learning Happen pedagogy and the parent engagement framework, as there is quite a lot of overlap between the two paradigms. Taking this time on the front end to create this alignment would help to ensure that incorporating the parent engagement action plan is a fluid process, built into their existing pedagogy. One simple way to begin this process is to change the language in the “Building Agency Capacity to Improve Parent Engagement Practices in Ottawa” tool to reflect the common language used in the sector. For example, the How Does Learning Happen literature uses the terms well-being and belonging, not stress and adversity, which is the language used in the *Parents, Developing Leaders A Self-Assessment and Planning Tool for Nonprofits and Schools* tool.

## CONCLUSION

Before the early years sector in Ottawa can shift their focus to engaging parents, resources must be invested in engaging the early years sector in parent engagement. It is challenging across the sector for sites to find capacity to add to their existing activities, therefore time must be spent aligning this parent engagement framework with existing frameworks, pedagogies and paradigms across the sector. This will create the opportunity for an effective and sustainable parent engagement effort without a significant amount of additional resources needed by sites.

This project has provided the toolkit, logic model, evaluation framework and a set of lessons learned, as well as introduced a different approach to parent engagement to the early years sector. Moving from here, building trust, engagement and alignment would be the logical next steps in a successful parent engagement strategy in the early years sector in Ottawa.