Making Data Meaningful:
Using Data to Support Implementation in Child Welfare

BUILDING STRONGER CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

Over the course of five years, the Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center (ACCWIC) provided training and technical consultation to support the following systems change initiatives to benefit children and families:

- Springboard Georgia – Using implementation science to implement a comprehensive child safety practice model
- Maryland Youth Matter – Enhancing youth decision-making and involvement in their services and permanency planning
- Mississippi Readiness for Family Centered Practice – Building organizational capacity to plan, implement, and sustain FCP
- North Carolina Reaching for Excellence and Accountability in Practice (REAP) – Strengthening community, county, and state collaboration to improve child outcomes
- In Home Tennessee – Developing effective in-home services and engaging children, families, and communities in service planning and delivery
- West Virginia Safety Assessment and Management System (SAMS) – Implementing a statewide child protective services model

One of five Implementation Centers, ACCWIC was funded from 2008 through 2014 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. Part of the Bureau's Training and Technical Assistance Network, ACCWIC assisted public child welfare agencies in Federal Regions III and IV in implementing systems changes. Customized to each agency's particular strengths and needs, ACCWIC's approach was guided by the National Implementation Research Network's framework, systems of care values, CFSR (Child and Family Services Review), and research principles.

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The purpose of this brief report is to share strategies for using data to support implementation of child welfare systems change. Through its provision of intensive, long-term training and technical assistance in six project states, the Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center (ACCWIC) has learned practical lessons and developed multiple approaches to using data in meaningful and effective ways.

Child welfare systems are often overwhelmed with data. Using SACWIS and other data management systems effectively, responding to CFSRs and PIPs, and other alphabet soup-like requirements to comply with state and federal mandates can be both exhausting and disorienting. How discouraging, then, if states and tribes dedicate time and energy to myriad data collection efforts that are not immediately useful to all levels of agency staff in planning and evaluating their behavior, performance and client outcomes. This report is designed to help systems make smart decisions about using data effectively and efficiently. It may be particularly useful for child welfare administrators, quality improvement staff, and evaluators, but it is intended for a broad audience, including anyone with an interest in using child welfare data in useful, relevant ways. In this report, readers will gain insights to maximize the value of their data collection efforts, integrate findings from their data with ongoing planning and decision-making, and sustain data collection to support ongoing change and implementation efforts.

Suggestions and examples are clustered according to five key strategies:

1. Use a team approach. There should be a data team that is cross-cutting and has authority.
2. Collect data for a purpose, not just routinely.
3. Gather information from relevant stakeholders.
4. Use data to feed back information and to stimulate open discussion and learning.
5. Sustain meaningful use of data over time.

National Implementation Research Network's Implementation Drivers

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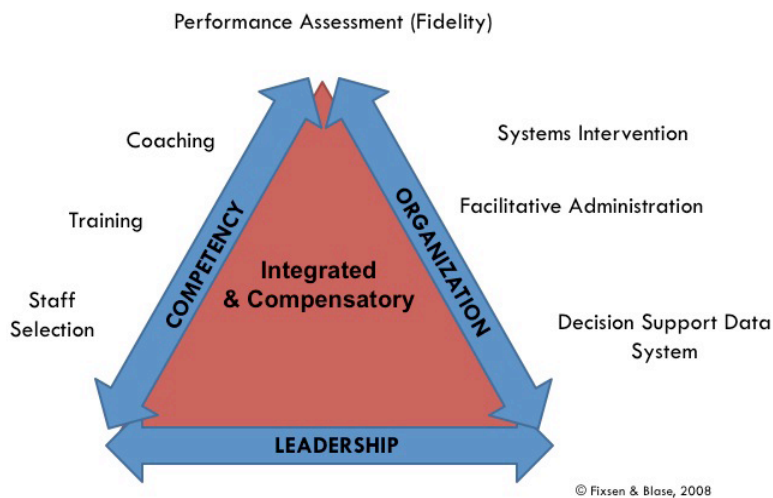
Organizing principles from implementation science:

According to the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN, n. d.), one "driver," or critical component, of implementing any new practice is the "decision support data system." These systems can be as simple as using a logic model to guide thinking or can include complex data collection and analyses. A complete data system guides implementation from the earliest stage, often called exploration, to the final stage, full implementation. In the field of child welfare, the two primary data sources are the statewide automated child welfare information systems (SACWIS) or other data management systems, and quality reviews, but there are many additional sources of data both within the child welfare system and across state agencies (such as health, mental health, juvenile justice, etc.) that can be utilized and integrated into a complete decision support system. Additionally, as an organizational driver of implementation, the decision support data system is comprised not only of the data itself, but also the people who analyze, interpret and make decisions based on it. Above all, the decision support data system focuses on the application and actionable use of the data to inform decisions, recommendations, and next steps.

A key principle of implementation science is that all drivers (see figure) are integrated and compensatory, and as such, decision support data systems can be used to both prioritize implementation work and monitor implementation capacity and strategies across the other drivers. Implementation capacity surveys, such as the tools created by Fixsen and colleagues (2008), are one way to measure the knowledge and application of implementation science principles to child welfare systems change efforts. When child welfare agency staff complete such a survey, results indicate where within the organization and among the drivers performance is inconsistent, where additional training or administrative resources are needed, or where staff beliefs and values are not aligned with the intentions of change efforts.

Strategy 1: Use a team approach

A team-based approach to collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data in child welfare implementation efforts is essential for effective communication. ACCWIC worked with various types of data or evaluation teams with different compositions. Team members included experts in data collection, data management, and data analysis, but also individuals with practice and organizational expertise who could contextualize findings and locate results within ongoing implementation of changes within the agency. Representation of administration ensures the team has the authority to implement their recommendations. To maximize the effectiveness of the data team, leadership support and involvement is critical (for more information on how child welfare leaders can promote successful implementation, see ACCWIC's issue brief *Leading the Way: The Child Welfare Director's Role in Implementation*).

Each member of the team contributes a different perspective and skill set. Practice experts can consider how best to communicate findings to field staff. Administrators can connect information from one initiative to others within and outside the agency. Quality improvement staff or data analysts can suggest additional data collection methods to gain additional insight.

ASSEMBLY AND PRACTICES OF A DATA TEAM

One example of an effective multi-disciplinary data team from ACCWIC's project states was a group comprised of state level administrators, regional directors, and quality assurance, research, and SACWIS staff members. This team met regularly, was guided by a logic model, determined the best approach and timelines to collect and report data, and worked to ensure that the larger implementation team had the data necessary to guide the project from exploration to full implementation.

Strategy 2: Collect data for a purpose

Data collection efforts should be guided by a clear purpose. An evaluation plan, a logic model, or a set of research questions can clarify the reason for data collection. In the context of child welfare systems change, data can be used to measure process, monitor progress, assess readiness, determine satisfaction, and evaluate outcomes. Once a purpose is clearly identified, informed decisions can be made about what type of data to collect, from whom, and in what quantity.

Non-researchers often mistakenly believe that "data" are a series of numbers. In fact, multiple methods, including focus groups and interviews, allow for a rich, qualitative understanding of the totality of child welfare practice and populations (DeCarolis, Southern, & Blake, 2007). In ACCWIC's work, we found that numbers told only a small piece of the story. If, for example, a group of child welfare professionals indicated low support for an element of a practice change, we had no idea whether this finding represented a philosophical disagreement, a lack of understanding about the proposed change, a lack of resources, or some other problem. In order to clarify and put the numbers (gleaned through quantitative methods) in context, we used qualitative data collection strategies, such as:

1. focus groups in which participants were asked to clarify confusing or concerning findings;

2. open-ended survey items, soliciting information on the reasons participants selected a particular rating;

3. interviews to better understand how affected individuals (internal and external stakeholders) were responding to various elements of a practice change.

Sometimes, data "collection" can mean savvy use of existing information. Existing, or secondary, data sources include client data, case notes, and other information on service delivery (James Bell Associates, 2009). ACCWIC relied heavily on case records to determine how frontline workers were implementing new practices, and to assess fidelity to various elements of the model of practice.

Strategy 3: Gather information from relevant stakeholders

Through SACWIS or other state-level data management tools, all public child welfare systems collect information on child safety, permanence, and well-being. Child welfare has a broad role in the community, however, with multiple, complex partnerships. Gathering, interpreting, and sharing data can be an excellent way to forge relationships with stakeholders and garner support for systems changes. Here, as elsewhere, the data team is of critical importance. Its role is, first, to think critically about whose perspectives are important, but perhaps missing or misunderstood, with respect to a planned or ongoing practice change effort; second, to design a method of data collection to solicit feedback from these stakeholders; and third, to plan specific methods of feeding back information to the identified stakeholders and the child welfare agency.

Potential target populations for data collection, in addition to children and families served by the agency, include:

1. children and families in the community;

2. neighborhood associations, trade groups, and religious/faith based organizations;

3. service providers;

4. law enforcement, attorneys, and the judiciary;

5. agency staff members.

Benefits of data collection with these groups may include better informing prevention and intervention efforts, gaining knowledge about community needs and resources, generating data relevant to streamlining referrals or identifying service gaps, describing barriers and facilitators to enacting policy and practice changes, and indicating needed skills and supports for implementation efforts.

Strategy 4: Use data to stimulate discussion

ACCWIC has found frequent, face-to-face presentations, accompanied by interactive, solutions-oriented discussions, to be the best way to disseminate findings. Presenting findings in a quarterly or yearly report, or sending files via email, virtually guarantees that few will read and respond to them. ACCWIC has relied on data teams – those multi-disciplinary groups of people with connections throughout the agency – to share findings and facilitate discussion about what they mean.

Data analysis, which can be as simple as averaging or counting types of responses, often raises more questions than answers. Why is there geographic variation in client outcomes? If satisfaction is high but performance is low, what supports are lacking? What does it mean that a particular stakeholder group did not respond to a request for a focus group or did not participate in a survey? A data team can guide the agency in grappling with questions like these through straightforward presentation and acknowledgement of what is known and unknown.

The data team should present findings in plain, understandable language rather than couching results in statistical jargon or relying only on numbers to tell the story. Tentative interpretations should be offered to generate dialogue. The question on everyone's mind should be: "Given this information, what should we do next?"
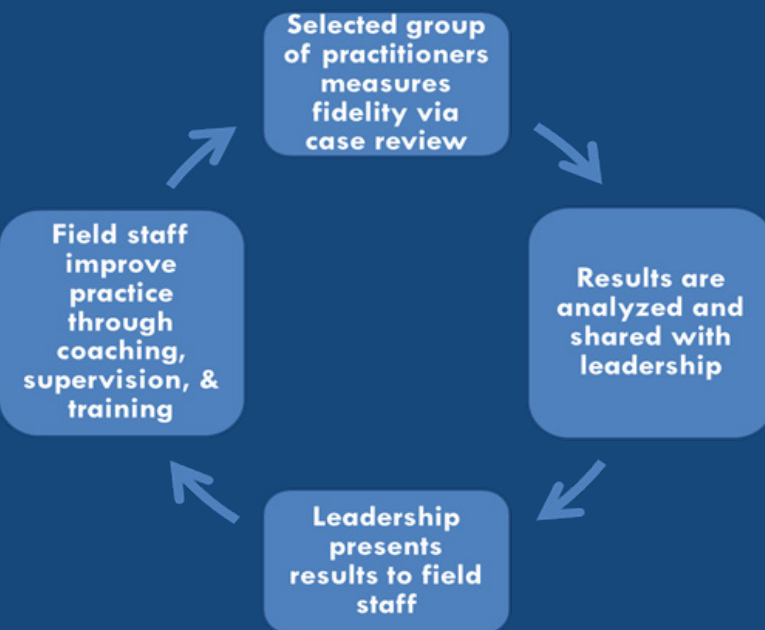
Challenges sometimes arise in conversations about findings, particularly in compliance-driven organizations or among stakeholders who fear "looking bad" or being exposed. In fact, it is ACCWIC's experience that some agencies have historically used data to ill effect – as a method of identifying weakness or punishing those perceived as poor performers. It is incumbent on the data team and agency leadership to promote a culture of knowledge-building and growth, in which data provide guidance on how to best use scarce agency resources. This approach requires the courage to acknowledge and learn from areas of weakness as well as strength.

## EXAMPLE OF TARGETED DATA COLLECTION WITH THE JUDICIARY

Members of one state implementation team reported to ACCWIC that the judiciary was "missing from the table" in planning and discussion about the state child welfare agency's consideration of implementing a new child protective services and safety practice model that would have significant implications for all stakeholders. The buy-in of judges would be essential to implementation of the practice change, but the child welfare agency had no sense of what they knew of the planned change or what their perspective on it was. ACCWIC worked with the state's data team to develop a survey for judges and learned that they had a number of concerns about the planned change. The findings from the survey led to a decision to intentionally involve judges in implementation efforts – this allowed for proper consideration of the sources of their hesitation, and encouraged the implementation team to address their concerns.

USING CASE RECORDS TO ASSESS AND COMMUNICATE ABOUT FIDELITY

One ACCWIC project state was implementing a new safety model, which required decision-making based on assessment. In order to determine the degree to which the model was being implemented with fidelity, ACCWIC utilized both practice model experts and researchers to review case records and evaluate the extent to which all components of the model were being implemented, within a randomly-selected set of cases. The information was disseminated as shown in this diagram, which illustrates the iterative nature of communicating about data, with the implementation team reporting on findings and adjusting support for practice change.

Selected group of practitioners measures fidelity via case review

Results are analyzed and shared with leadership

Leadership presents results to field staff

Field staff improve practice through coaching, supervision, & training

In order for any data system to be sustained, several considerations are critical: making data use routine, promoting high fidelity to the new practice, providing organizational support, and assigning clear responsibilities. A decision support data system is sustained through an ongoing team and integration into regular data collection processes. A well-integrated data team requires reinforcement from leadership and other organizational supports, such as dedicated time and resources for data collection and analysis, and time on agency meeting agendas to describe findings and generate discussion on next steps.
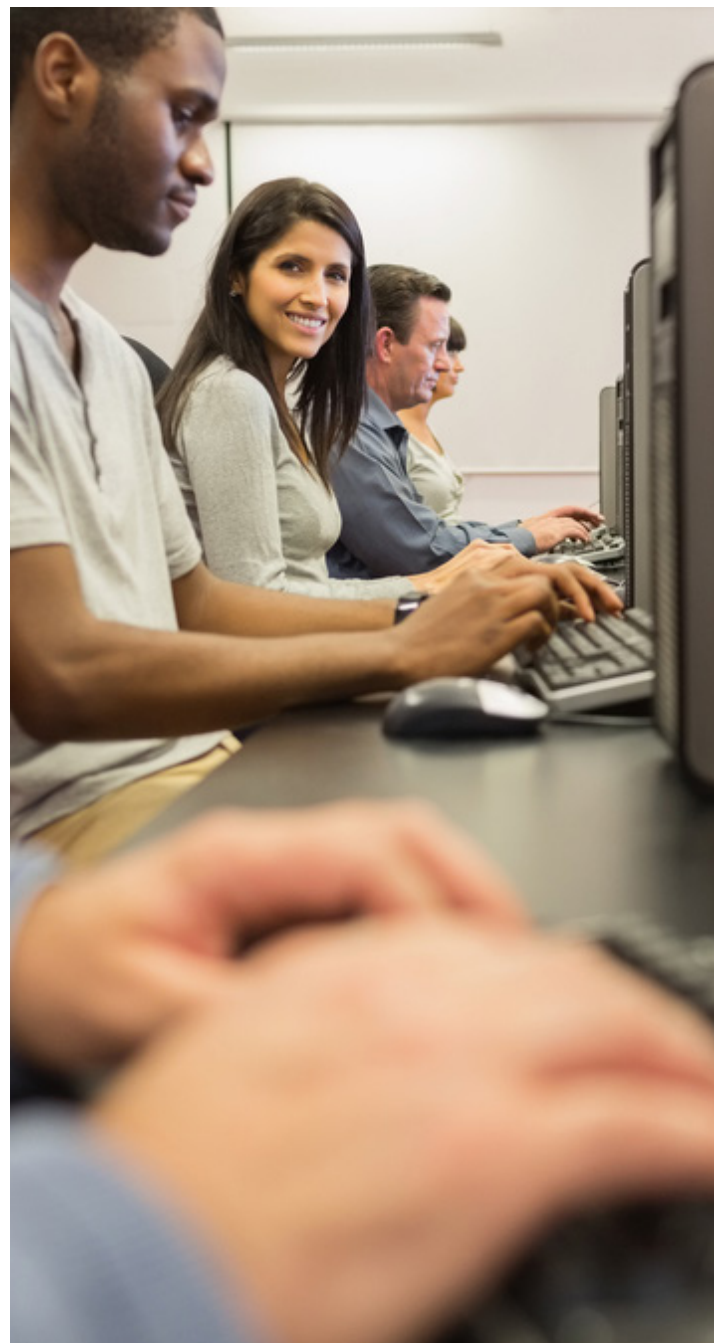
Summary of recommendations

This brief has shared strategies for integrating smart use of data into implementation efforts in child welfare. Data collection, analysis, and reporting should be purposeful, comprehensive, and sustainable. Dissemination of findings should be used to point to areas for growth and support. Strong leadership is an essential part of using data wisely to transform a child welfare system. Finally, a team approach is critical, so that the questions asked, methods used, and information shared are of maximum relevance.

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Additional resources

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