Promoting Systems Change Using the ABLe Change Framework

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Acknowledgements

The ABLe Change Framework would not have been possible without the inspiration and hard work of the members of the Saginaw, Michigan System of Care effort and the organizations, residents, and funders involved in Yes We Can! in Battle Creek, Michigan.

This manual would not have been possible without:

Our partners:

- *Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth*
- The Early Childhood Investment Corporation
- Focus Hope Detroit
- Shape NC
- Oklahoma Smart Start
- The W.K. Kellogg Foundation

The System exChange Team:

- Sara Hockin
- Katie Irey
- Jenny Lawlor
- Kathryn McAlindon
- Sara McGirr

- Jenny Mortensen
- Alissa Parks
- Kelly Warsinske
- Abby Wattenberg

More tools and materials to support your understanding and use of ABLe Change concepts are available online: systemexchange.msu.edu/ablechangeonline

DEFINING A SYSTEM

A **system** is a set of *interacting* and *connected parts* that has a *shared purpose* and *functions* as a *whole.*

Examples Include:

- a family
- a neighborhood
- an organization
- a school district
- the curriculum department in a school district
- a human service delivery network
- the federal welfare system
- a city

A "system" is perhaps best thought of as the *product of the interactions* between its parts.
 (Ackoff & Rovin, 2003).

The outcomes of a system emerge from the patterns of behavior (the habits!) that develop over time as the system parts interact with each other

What are some of the parts in a system related to preventing early childhood obesity?

Boundaries Determine:

- What problems are prioritized

- How we understand those problems

- How we design solutions

- Who benefits – and who doesn't

- Resource availability

- What we learn, and who experiences that learning
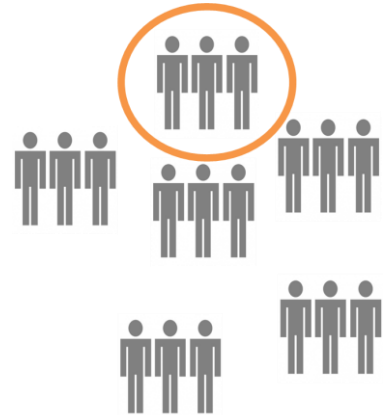
Questions to Guide your Boundary Dialogue

- What are different ways to understand this problem and how to solve it?

- Who might have different perspectives or understandings about what success should look like?

- Who could play a key role in carrying out our efforts?

- Who do we need to include in learning about our progress to make next step decisions?

- Given this, who should be included in our problem definition, solution design, implementation, and decision making processes?

- Who is *outside* these processes? Do we risk our success by keeping them on the outside? What are the other impacts of excluding these perspectives?

ASSESSING CURRENT PERSPECTIVES

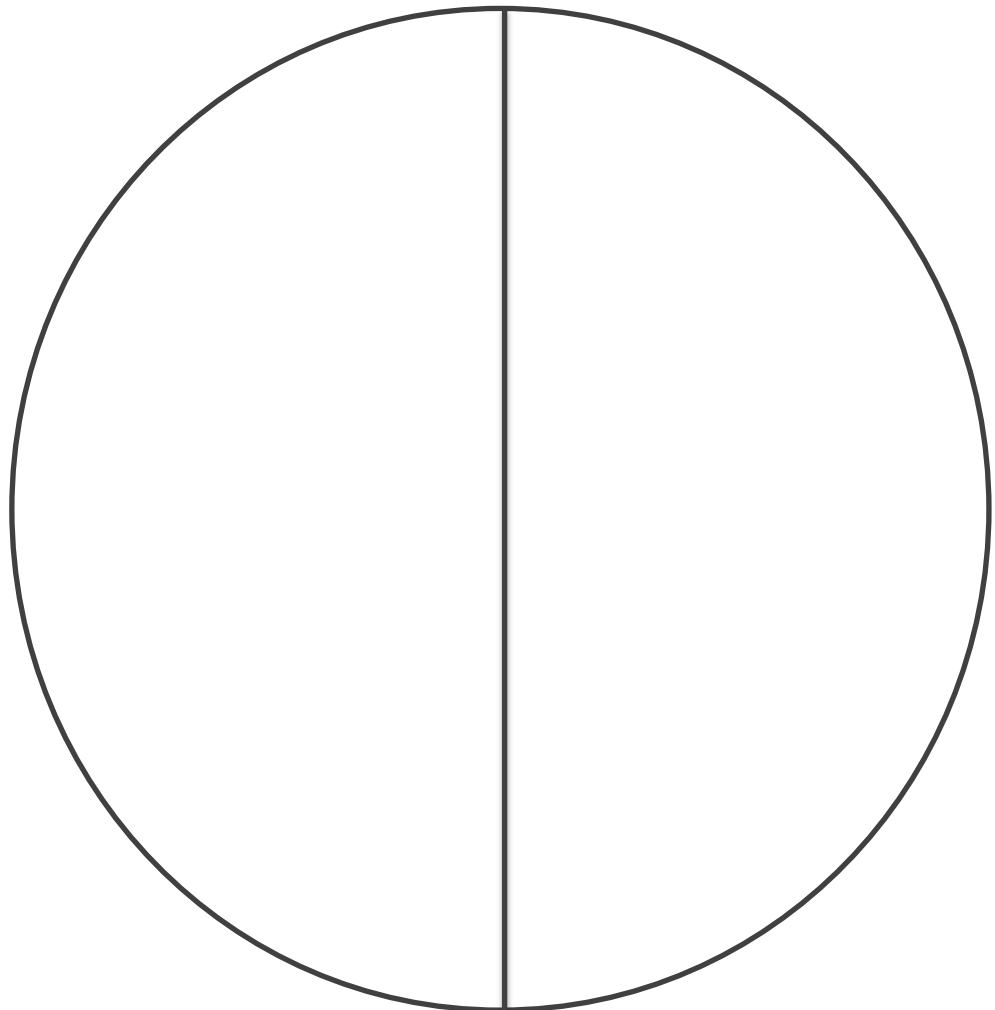Who is currently engaged in understanding and prioritizing local problems?

Who is currently *NOT* engaged?

Experiencing

Providing

Supporting

Decision-Makers

System Characteristics

System Characteristics	Examples
Mindsets Attitudes, values, and beliefs that shape behavior	**Aligned** • Stakeholders believe early life experiences influences children's readiness for school and future outcomes **Unaligned** • Stakeholders believe early life experiences are really not that important

Important Mindset Tips:

- Mindsets are one of the most powerful levers to shift within a system.
- Mindsets filter what we see, hear, and believe.
- Our mindsets often define what we believe to be the "truth". Things that don't fit within our mindsets are considered "lies" "untruths" and "false".
- All mindsets are flawed – no one can know everything!
- We tend to see the flaws in other's mindsets but not our own.

Components Range, quality, effectiveness, and location of services, supports, and opportunities in the community	**Aligned** • All early education settings offer quality curriculum that meets the social/emotional needs of all children **Unaligned** • Early education settings most used by low income families do not have quality social/emotional curriculum in place

Important Components Tips:

- A system's components include the programs, supports, services, informal opportunities, and other resources available within a community to meet a resident's needs and aspirations.
- The quality and availability of a system's components are rarely distributed equitability across a community.

Connections Relationships and exchanges between and across different actors, organizations and system characteristics (e.g. information, referrals, resources and learning)	**Aligned** • Public Health Department refers young mothers to play groups run by local school district **Unaligned** • Play groups receive few referrals

Important Connections Tips:

- Connections serve as the bridges linking different parts of a system together. When assessing connections think about what needs to flow into and out of a particular setting to help a program or effort operate effectively.

System Characteristics	Examples
Regulations Policies, practices, procedures, and daily routines that shape the behavior patterns of individuals, groups, and organizations)	**Aligned** • Shared consent form created to promote info sharing across orgs **Unaligned** • Policies impede information sharing across orgs
Important Regulations Tips: • Sometimes the most powerful regulations within a community are the informal ones – those that peers, co-workers, neighbors, and family members use to guide each other's behaviors.	
Resources Human, financial, and social resources that are used within the system	**Aligned** • Excess county money invested into 0-3 prevention efforts • Staff understand local early childhood system and all of the resources available **Unaligned** • 0-3 prevention money cut in proposed budget • Staff unaware of different programs in town or how to refer their families
Important Resources Tips: • Systems always have resources that are unknown, untapped, or underutilized. These resources are often located within people and settings that are undervalued within the current context. • Effective systems work to discover and leverage these important underutilized resources.	
Power How decisions are made, who participates in decision-making, whose voice matters, and the structures available to support inclusive voice	**Aligned** • Families authentically engaged in decision-making processes **Unaligned** • Families asked for input, but ideas not used
Important Power Tips: • It is important to consider stakeholders' capacity to value and incorporate all types of information and perspectives brought into a decision-making processes to prevent any participants from becoming marginalized.	

System Scan Worksheet
Foster-Fishman & Watson, Michigan State University

Targeted Problem: High rates of obesity among young children in our community

System Characteristic	Key Questions	Aligned Examples	Unaligned Examples
Mindsets **Definition:** Attitudes, values, and beliefs that shape behavior.	• What do stakeholders think about the targeted problem? To what extent do they see it as a priority to address? • What beliefs do people have about why things are done as they currently are? • What are the "theories" people use to explain why the targeted problem exists? • What current beliefs and attitudes support the desired change? Which ones might get in the way? • What attitudes do people hold towards others in the system, including the targeted population? How are these influencing our ability to address this problem? • What are the values guiding current programs, policies, and practices within the system? What are the values guiding the proposed change? How compatible are these with each other?		

System Characteristic	Key Questions	Aligned Examples	Unaligned Examples
Components **Definition:** Range, quality, effectiveness, and location of services, supports, and opportunities	• Are there gaps in available formal and informal services and supports in the community? How are these gaps influencing the targeted problem? • To what extent are current services and supports designed to meet the stated needs of families? • Are current services and supports of high quality? How does the current level of quality affect the targeted problem? • How well are services and supports aligned with the cultural traditions of families in the community? How do service providers' values and beliefs affect this? • How accessible are services and supports to the community? Do they effectively reach the most vulnerable of families? What could shift (e.g., location, timing, intake process) to increase this accessibility and reach?		

System Characteristic	Key Questions	Aligned Examples	Unaligned Examples
Connections **Definition:** Relationships and connections across people, organizations, settings, and programs. Includes information referrals, data sharing, learning, and resource exchanges.	• How are current relationships and connections among organizations and other key individuals in the community affecting the targeted problem? • To what extent do organizations and other key stakeholders exchange information, learning, resources, or referrals related to the targeted problem/situation? • What types of relationships and connections are needed to support the desired change?		

System Characteristic	Key Questions	Aligned Examples	Unaligned Examples
Regulations **Definition:** Policies, practices, procedures, and daily routines that shape system behavior.	• What policies, practices and procedures are making the targeted problem worse? Which ones are helping to address the problem? • Are there policies/procedures in place that guide and encourage collaborative relationships and coordination? That get in the way of better connections? • What new policies, practices or procedures are needed to support the desired change? • Is there a gap between stated policies, practices, and procedures and stakeholders' actual practices? If so, why?		

System Scan Worksheet
Foster-Fishman & Watson, Michigan State University

System Characteristic	Key Questions	Aligned Examples	Unaligned Examples
Resources **Definition:** Human (skills, knowledge, etc.), financial, and community (transportation, living-wage jobs, etc.) resources that are used or available within the system.	• How will people be expected to behave if your change efforts are successful? Do they have the necessary skills and knowledge for these behaviors? • Whose needs are prioritized by how resources are currently distributed? Whose needs are ignored? How does this impact the problem? • Are all available resources being used? What resources are typically ignored? How does that impact the problem? • How do resources need to be used differently to support the change goals? Who might see this shift as a loss? • What additional resources are needed to support the desired change? • Who are the local champions for your change efforts? Do they know how to navigate and influence the system to make change?		

System Characteristic	Key Questions	Aligned Examples	Unaligned Examples
Power **Definition:** How decisions are made, who participates in decision-making, and the structures in place to support inclusive voice.	• What types of decisions have the most influence over how the system functions? Who has the authority to make these decisions? Who is excluded from this decision-making process? How does this affect the problem? • What types of information and resources are most important to the system? Who controls access to these resources? How does this affect the problem? • Who are the social "movers and shakers" of the system? Do these individuals support the desired change? • What new decision-making structures will need to be developed to support the desired change? • How do the change efforts challenge the existing power and decision-making structures?		

ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS

A **root cause analysis** helps you look beyond surface level reasons to understand the deeper underlying causes for why problems happen.

A root cause analysis can be used to examine any type of problem, from **community and population level problems** (e.g. lack of jobs, crime, racial inequities, or % of families in poverty, % of kids not ready for school) to **service system or organizational problems** (e.g. lack of coordination or low employee morale).

A root cause analysis can be done in groups or as an individual, and can use many types of data and information.

There is no single prescribed way to conduct a root cause analysis. We have outlined one approach below that involves asking a series of "Why?" questions. We often call this "the two year old approach" – as young children love asking the question "Why?"

1	2	3	4
IDENTIFY THE TARGETED PROBLEM or SYSTEM SCAN CONDITION	**START DIGGING**	**KEEP DIGGING**	**GET LOCAL**
• What is your targeted problem? Who is experiencing it, where, and in what ways? • What system conditions are influencing this problem? Where are they happening? Who is involved?	For this problem or system scan condition, ask… • Why are these conditions in place? • What is causing these conditions to occur? • Could this condition have been prevented? If so, what should have in place but wasn't?	For each of the ideas generated from step 2, ask… • Why is *this* happening? • What is causing this to occur? • Could this have been prevented? If so, what should have in place but wasn't?	Think about the *local* causes of the problem. For *each* idea generated in step 3, ask: • Why is this happening *here*? • Why is *this* happening in our setting specifically?

Adapted from CADCA http://www.cadca.org/

POWERFUL STRATEGIES TO TARGET ROOT CAUSES

A strategy is POWERFUL when it:
- Directly targets root causes and will cause them to shift
- Promotes change in multiple settings across the community
- Will likely trigger a chain reaction of changes influencing the targeted problem.

POTENTIAL STRATEGY TYPES FOR TARGETING ROOT CAUSES

Below are some common strategy types used to target change within each of the six system characteristics. Please note that the strategy types are listed generically to help you apply this information to your particular setting and problem area. To develop strategies that target root causes:

- Identify the system characteristic your root cause represents (e.g., Mindsets, Connections) and consider if any of the broad systems changes might work to trigger your root cause chain reaction.
- Look at the other root causes related to your targeted problem to identify other relevant system characteristics that need to shift - identify additional strategy types you might want to incorporate related to these additional root causes.

MINDSETS: CHANGE THE NARRATIVE

- Use a Social Marketing Campaign to directly shift the local mindset
- Build Public Will by using a door-to-door outreach campaign and visits to local officials
- Promote Shared Goals across stakeholders and organizations
- Develop Local Champions who can encourage others to support change goals
- Engage Diverse Perspectives in problem understanding, solution development, decision-making, and feedback cycles

COMPONENTS: IMPROVE ACCESS & QUALITY

- Shift locations of and times when services and supports are available. Engage targeted conditions in identifying best locations and times.
- Expand the settings and stakeholders exposed to professional development and learning opportunities. For example, expose home-based early care providers to evidence based curriculum and early learning practices and resources.
- Integrate contextually relevant evidence-based or promising practices into local service and support settings.
- Expand the continuum of services, supports, and opportunities available.
- Expand and leverage informal sources of support and services
- Increase the number of slots available for critical services and supports
- Engage diverse perspectives in developing services and supports to ensure local components meet local needs and aspirations.

CONNECTIONS: STRENGTHEN NETWORKS

- Build trust and reciprocity between professionals and organizations
- Build trust between residents and local organizations
- Create venues or processes for expanding information sharing (e.g., about services, about shared clients) across organizations
- Co-locate cross-sector services, supports, and opportunities (e.g., mental health providers work in physician offices; DHS worker is located within the school)
- Expand service referrals between agencies
- Engage informal (e.g., beauty parlors, Mommy Groups) and neighborhood settings (faith based settings) as referral sources
- Ensure service referrals lead to service access
- Promote shared learning between settings
- Align core priorities across settings

REGULATIONS: CHANGE POLICY, PROCEDURES, AND SOCIAL NORMS

- Shift formal policies to better support change goals
- Create or adjust procedures in local organizations (more streamlined intake processes; shared applications or intake forms across agencies; shared information consent form) that that will promote service access and service coordination
- Shift social norms by changing the local or peer group narrative (see above) and providing incentives for adoption

RESOURCES: BUILD LOCAL CAPACITY

- Provide Professional Development to build professionals' skills and knowledge
- Promote Parent leadership development to build families' capacity to effectively engage the system and as act as change agents
- Create venues and information sharing opportunities for providers and families to develop their awareness and understanding of the local service system. Consider how to use informal and neighborhood-based settings as information hubs.
- Provide technical assistance to encourage effective use of new skills and knowledge
- Develop materials and supports (listings of available services, referral trees, intake processes) to support the use of new capacities
- Utilize existing community spaces, technology, and skilled stakeholders to support change goals
- Redistribute how local community resources are currently made available within the community (e.g., shift bus routes, build parks in low income neighborhoods)

POWER: EXPAND VOICE

- Engage diverse stakeholders in problem definition, solution design, and implementation processes
- Ask families about their needs and aspirations to inform decision-making
- Exchange information with other organizations gathering family input
- Expand the decision making table to become more inclusive of diverse perspectives

PRACTICE

What strategies can you design for your prioritized root causes? Fill out the following worksheet with potential strategies for one of your targeted root causes.

Root Cause:
Strategy Idea 1:
Strategy Idea 2:

ABLe TOOL
SHARED AGENDA

A shared agenda unites work across diverse stakeholder groups, workgroups, and collaboratives and focuses work on a shared set of targeted systems changes

- Stakeholder groups **target the same systems changes** but pursue unique action and learning from their particular system perspective
- **Common language** used to guide the work
- **Same agenda and similar meeting format** across all stakeholder groups

Targeted System Changes	Systems Change Strategies for 20??	Agenda Items

THE ACTION LEARNING PROCESS

Communities are able to adapt quickly when action learning processes are embedded into *all meetings and conversations*. An **Action Learning Process** is an ongoing problem-solving cycle where people understand what is causing the problems they see, design innovative strategies to address those problems, carry out actions, and then learn about whether those actions made a difference in solving the problem. This process creates capacity for effective ongoing problem solving

Major movers and shakers in the systems world say that in order to make transformative change, you need to shift the way the work is done. One key way of doing this is to create a systemic action learning process. **Systemic action learning** engages "parallel and interacting" teams across the system (Burns, 2007). Each team focuses on the same systems change targets and strategies using the shared agenda, but uses their unique perspective to design and implement creative actions to address the targeted problem. Over time the insights and actions emerging from the action learning teams are woven together into a cohesive systems change effort.

Understand Emerging Problems and Opportunities

Assess Impact & Respond Quickly to Feedback

Define

Action Learning

Learn

Design

Do

Design Strategies to Solve Problems and Leverage Opportunities

Implement Strategies Effectively