1. UNDERSTAND ECE PROVIDER NEEDS

The first step is to understand the key and common issues in the local ECE community.

☐ Are there too few high-quality child care “slots” available?
☐ Is slot availability uneven – with ample supply for preschoolers but supply gaps among more costly services for infants and toddlers?
☐ Are too many ECE providers, especially of high quality, closing?
☐ Are providers concerned about reporting/administrative burdens, particularly associated with higher levels of quality?
☐ Is there a lack of sufficiently qualified staff and/or high staff turnover, driven by poor compensation and benefits?
☐ Do providers lack capacity in business and administrative practices that could help increase revenues and reduce costs?
☐ What are the root causes of these pressing problems?

While communities often cite too-low subsidy and/or private tuition rates as the key source of problems, the reality is often more complicated. It is important to sort out those capacity issues that providers face for which Shared Services can provide a solution, and begin to explore what specific needs could be addressed. Likewise, there may be other issues such as rates best addressed via advocacy for policy refinements; those activities can take place simultaneously with development of Shared Services, but are not addressed here.

As part of understanding provider needs and SSA goals, it is important to assess how well providers employ the financial management principles of the Iron Triangle of ECE Finance. What are providers’ typical vacancy rates, the level of bad debt, and the gap between costs and revenues per slot? These are key financial and operational levers that can make the difference between viable and non-viable businesses, and which Shared Services can help address.

There are a variety of ways to learn about the needs of providers, including structured interviews and online surveys. Conducting a broad survey early in the process can generate interest in Shared Services, and perhaps invite providers to participate in further steps.

Download a copy of Provider Needs Survey from the website

A few tips for effective surveys:

- Make it short. The easier the survey is to take, the more likely a high response rate.
- Make the questions very clear and easy to understand, preferably with a rating scale.
- Minimize the number of open-ended questions, since they can be time-consuming to analyze.

A combination of research tools, in addition to the survey discussed above, may be useful to identify attractive services from the provider’s perspective, including the following:
Focus Groups – Focus groups can be effective for a smaller group that shares common interests – such as a group of family care providers, or a group of providers in a particular geographic area – to explore ideas together. When possible, focus groups should be led by a facilitator skilled at managing a group and shepherding a discussion to get the desired information.

Site visits – There is no substitute for the level of detail and depth of exploration that can be gained from a face-to-face discussion at a site visit. This allows issues to be explored in more depth than in surveys or focus groups, respondents can speak freely and confidentially about sensitive subjects, and it provides an opportunity to observe the program and its management “in action.”

Based on the data gathered through the needs assessment, what are the goals of the Alliance? What are the desired outcomes that providers could not achieve by acting alone? Some possible examples may include:

Overall Goal
- Reduce stress on center directors by enabling access to a team of experts in both business and pedagogical leadership, so that they are better able to provide sustainable, high-quality early care and education services

Program Quality Goals
- More relevant/higher quality professional development
- Consistent, sustained support for classroom teachers, e.g. coaching and mentoring from site directors or embedded, shared staff
- More qualified and consistent staff and substitutes, including substitutes for paid planning time for teachers
- Opportunities for peer learning and leadership via a Community of Practice within and among staff participating in the Alliance
- Successful participation in quality improvement endeavors such as a state Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) or Head Start/Early Head Start

Business and Financial Goals
- Access to skilled financial management services
- Improve fiscal health by increasing revenues and reducing costs
- Improve and simplify regulatory and standards compliance
- Access valuable services typically unavailable without size and scale, e.g., facilities management, Human Resources and employee benefits, and accounting services
- Improve wages and benefits by shifting spending from administration to classroom staff

Articulating clear goals will help determine which strategies to pursue, and how to prioritize what to pursue initially vs. over the longer term.