

# COLLABORATION BUILDING TO ADDRESS EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

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## Perspectives from the Kansas Partnership for Educating Kids in Care Taskforce

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January 2014

Practice Brief

[www.cpapr.ku.edu](http://www.cpapr.ku.edu)

Nationally, only about 50% of children in foster care graduate from high school. In Kansas, about one in three (29.6 percent) youth who exited state custody in 2013 had completed the 12th grade. Many reasons exist for these low rates: frequent school moves, behavioral problems, and limited awareness of the impact of trauma. Regardless of the reasons, the solutions require the work of more than one child serving system.

“Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals” (Mattessich, 2001). This brief shares process highlights for developing a collaborative cross systems group and provides insights for building successful collaborations using examples from a group called KPEKC.

## Establishing the KPEKC

Against the backdrop of the 2008 *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* requiring increased levels of collaboration, the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) and the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) committed to exploring new and enhancing existing partnership opportunities. They recognized that the barriers to educational stability for youth in foster care were complex and required coordination not only within agencies but also across systems. To help raise the profile of this issue and obtain additional resources, the University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research (KU) and the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare (SSW) with the support of DCF, KSDE and the Office of Judicial Administration (OJA), submitted a funding proposal to the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. The goal was to address educational outcomes for youth in care through improved collaboration between the child welfare, education, and judicial agencies. The proposal was funded in late 2011.

A key feature of the proposal was the establishment of a state level collaborative body that assumed the name of the overall project –Kansas Partnership for Educating Kids in Care Taskforce. The Taskforce was formed with a specific interest in identifying and addressing barriers to the educational stability of youth in care and sharing data across systems. DCF, KSDE, OJA, SSW, and KU are the lead partners. KU acts as the convener and facilitator and provides research support.

Taskforce core membership is comprised of state-level “decision makers” with knowledge of state foster care and education policy, data and data systems. Because pilot activities in a local school district were another key piece of the overall project plan, local school district administrators, child welfare case management staff and a district court judge were added as members. Care was also taken to ensure representation from both urban and rural areas of the state as well as youth and foster parent representatives.

## KPEKC:

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To formalize the Taskforce, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed by the primary partners. The MOU documented the roles and responsibilities of all partners (see Table 1), identified time and resource commitments of the lead partners and established a framework for meetings and communication.

Taskforce Roles and Responsibilities		
Lead Partners DCF/KSDE/OJA	Convener KU	All Partners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· act as co-leaders</li> <li>· commit time, resources, and data</li> <li>· commit to data sharing agreements</li> <li>· participate in infrastructure building</li> <li>· engage in policy development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· facilitate</li> <li>· schedule meetings</li> <li>· develop agendas</li> <li>· ensure a record of each meeting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· meet three times/year</li> <li>· share information w/in your agency</li> <li>· engage in decision making</li> <li>· ensure sustainability of KPEKC</li> <li>· collaborate with other partners</li> <li>· hold confidential any sensitive information</li> </ul>

The infrastructure of the Taskforce was developed in the group’s initial meetings. The first meeting was organizational in nature. As the convener, KU developed an agenda that included introduction of members, a proposed organizational structure, and a plan to address educational outcomes for youth in care. The proposed organizational structure included roles and responsibilities similar to those noted above, formalizing the partnership with a MOU, and a communications protocol. The project plan proposed an assessment process, development of a common vision and goals, cross systems data sharing, and a parallel process at the local level. Initial members reviewed and approved the organizational structure and the project plan. The group also reviewed membership to ensure appropriate stakeholders had been invited. A date was selected for the next meeting and members were asked to block an entire day.

In between the first two meetings, KU conducted a statewide survey and focus groups to collect information on barriers across systems from a variety of stakeholders. Survey results were used to draft a shared vision statement and goals for review at the second meeting. Using a consensus-agreement process the Taskforce discussed and edited the proposed framework, eventually approving the vision and selecting five goals. Members then identified and joined cross-systems work teams related to policy, data sharing, youth engagement, and strategic communication to address each of the goals. The work teams meet as necessary to accomplish assigned tasks.

The Taskforce continues to meet three times a year to monitor progress and identify next steps. Each meeting includes a brief discussion on sustaining the partnership by ensuring appropriate membership and identifying necessary resources.

## Lessons Learned

**Collaboration building is hard work.** It takes commitment to work on a shared vision and to develop and maintain the partnership. This commitment is reflected through:

“The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails.”

*Continuous Engagement.* Attending meetings regularly results in a better understanding of partner programs and services and provides the opportunity to establish personal relationships across systems. Participating in decision making reflects a shared responsibility for the partnership.

It was difficult to maintain the attendance of “decision makers” due to conflicting priorities. As the Taskforce matured, mid-level (often rotating) managers replaced decision makers. The commitment to participate remains, but establishing personal relationships across systems is more difficult with fluctuating membership.

To maximize participation, the Taskforce was intentional in setting meetings just three times a year to minimize the time commitment for members. A strategy to keep “decision makers” engaged, when they cannot attend meetings is to keep them on the mailing list for meeting reminders, notes and other communications. Decision makers from lead agencies that could not attend meetings were provided individual project briefings to encourage continued involvement.

*Contributing Resources.* In the face of competing priorities, sharing resources such as time, expertise, data or funding is a challenge. Members contribute resources as they become available, often impacting momentum and timeliness of outcomes. As an example, IT staff were ready to share data across systems only to have momentum halted by a delay in finalizing a data sharing agreement.

*Establishing Trust.* Trust between partners is perhaps the most important characteristic of a successful collaboration. Trust is earned through the establishment of personal relationships, honoring commitments, joint sharing of responsibility, and open communication.

Sometimes the effort to honor busy schedules through a structured meeting process impedes the development of personal relationships. Time for personal connections is lost in the rush to efficiency. Making time within the agenda for personal interaction is one solution. Another option is asking key members to reach out to their counterpart in another agency on a specific issue. For some, this manner of contact is more comfortable and may be more conducive to establishing open communications.

**Collaboration building takes time.** Relationships between partners take time to develop and are impacted by meeting frequency, a history of disagreement between agencies or individuals, and a lack of knowledge or understanding across programs. Stability of membership and attendance increases the likelihood of establishing personal relationships and building trust.

Funding for this project ended with the Taskforce still in its infancy. Efforts to facilitate participation and establish personal relationships continue. The Taskforce organizational structure, along with a commitment to a common vision and goals, and increased knowledge across programs has established a solid foundation to build a robust collaboration.

**Collaboration building requires a “convener.”** The convener provides the organizational structure around the collaboration by scheduling meetings, developing agendas, ensuring a record of each meeting and facilitation. “Coordination takes time, which collaboration members don’t have. “The expectation that collaboration can

occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails” (Kania and Kramer, 2011).

Taskforce members readily agree that in the face of competing priorities and reduced resources, the partnership would not have been established or continued without KU acting as the convener.

Successful collaborations include a commitment to collaborating, common goals, and shared responsibility, resources and accountability (Mattessich, 2001). Perhaps the greatest testament to the strength of the KPEKC collaboration is that it has continued after project funding has ended. Timelines for achieving goals are not always met, but progress continues and the KPEKC collaboration continues to develop.

## References

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This research was supported by funding from the Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families: Child Welfare – Education System Collaborations to Increase Educational Stability – 90CO1069.

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