CATAWBA COUNTY
NORTH CAROLINA

QIC•AG

IMPLEMENTING
REACH FOR SUCCESS
LESSONS LEARNED
IN CATAWBA COUNTY, NC

OVERVIEW OF THE QIC-AG

The National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation (QIC-AG) is a 5-year project working with eight sites, each of which is either implementing an evidence-based intervention or developing and testing a promising practice, which if proven effective, can be replicated or adapted in other child welfare jurisdictions. Effective interventions are expected to achieve long-term, stable permanence in adoptive and guardianship homes for waiting children as well as children and families whose adoption or guardianship has been finalized.

The QIC-AG is funded through a 5-year cooperative agreement between the Children's Bureau, Spaulding for Children, and its three university partners: the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

OVERVIEW OF THE INTERVENTION

In Catawba County, North Carolina the QIC-AG site team tested the theory that proactive outreach could identify families who might need post-adoption services. The team launched the *Reach for Success* project to identify adoptive families in Catawba County with potential interest in Success Coach services. Success Coach is a free post-adoption support program available to families in Catawba's post-permanency service region. Prior to the QIC-AG project, Success Coach services were available to qualified families who requested services. However, the QIC-AG project partnership enabled Catawba to test a proactive outreach intervention called *Reach for Success*.

The two-part *Reach for Success* intervention began with a tailored survey to gather information about the experiences and needs of the families and their children. Survey responses were reviewed to determine if the families (a) had unmet service needs, or (b) reported difficulties with child behavior issues. Families who met these criteria were randomly assigned to either an intervention group, which received additional outreach, or to a comparison group, which received services-as-usual without additional outreach. Families assigned to the additional outreach group moved to the second phase of the *Reach for Success* project, which introduced the Success Coach services. In this phase, a Success Coach called the family to explain the program and ask the parents if they were interested in services. However, it is important to note that all families in the Catawba service region were eligible for Success Coach services regardless of their project outreach status; that is, a family assigned to the comparison group remained eligible to request and receive Success Coach services.

Catawba County Social Services worked with the QIC-AG evaluation team and contracted with the Survey Research Laboratory at the University of Illinois at Chicago to design and implement the survey. A paper survey was mailed to 204 families who resided in Catawba County and met the following criteria: (a) adopted a child through the public child welfare system, (b) were receiving an adoption subsidy, and (c) had not previously received Success Coach services. The *Reach for Success* project also served families who had adopted children through a private domestic or intercountry process.

SNAPSHOT OF LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **DESIGN AN EFFECTIVE SURVEY GROUNDED IN BOTH SCIENCE AND PROVEN TECHNIQUES**

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Bring in consultants or organizations with research and evaluation expertise to create a survey that engages families and gathers useful, reliable data

Make strategic decisions about the survey delivery, follow-up, and data collection processes

2. **INVOLVE STAKEHOLDERS EARLY IN THE PROJECT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS TO DISCOVER OUTREACH TECHNIQUES THAT WORK WITH THE TARGET AUDIENCES**

3. **ANCHOR THE PLAN IN IMPLEMENTATION SCIENCE**

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Allow sufficient time to make the critical time investment in implementation science because this approach fosters sound project planning, implementation, and evaluation

A project that is well grounded in implementation science is better able to counter staff turnover and other inevitable complications because of the project continuity that imple-mentation science can provide

LESSON 1: DESIGN AN EFFECTIVE SURVEY GROUNDED IN BOTH SCIENCE AND PROVEN TECHNIQUES

Designing a survey is a multi-faceted process that goes far beyond creating a set of questions. There is a science behind how questions are worded, the flow of questions, and the use of existing scales and measures. Additionally, survey results can be affected by decisions regarding survey delivery, follow up, and marketing. Given the challenges of developing an effective, efficient survey, Catawba County Social Services sought out partners with expertise in survey design. The site team worked collaboratively with the QIC-AG site evaluator and the experts at the University of Illinois at Chicago Survey Research Lab (SRL). These collaborative partners developed the survey and the survey administration process to ensure the survey was scientifically sound and results were valid.

BRING IN EXPERTS FOR SURVEY DESIGN CONSULTATION

Child welfare agencies understand adoption and adoptive families but might not have in-house expertise in research and evaluation. To create and administer a survey that engages families and provides reliable data, the child welfare professionals might need to bring in consultants or other partners with such expertise. Working in conjunction with the site experts, the QIC-AG Evaluation and Catawba County Implementation Team had numerous discussions regarding the topic areas the survey should address and the measures that could be used for reliable predictions about post-adoption outcomes. These discussions generated a solid set of questions that were improved with additional expert guidance. The QIC-AG site evaluator worked with the SRL team to ensure the site Evaluation and Implementation Team was incorporating knowledge from the literature as well as identifying standardized measures that had been used successfully in published studies. The SRL team reviewed the final draft of the survey, giving special attention to question construction and flow. This professional review ensured that rather than gathering perceptions or anecdotes, the *Reach for Success* survey applied best scientific practices to help ensure the survey would yield reliable results based on data.

FOCUS ON THE DETAILS TO DELIVER RESULTS

Much of the actual success of a survey hinges on logistical and process factors, including the ways in which the survey is delivered or made available to the target audience, planned procedures for follow-up with slow/no responders, using appropriate incentives to encourage participation, and parameters for data consistency and accuracy.

The Catawba site team made initial decisions and some mid-course adjustments that had an impact on the survey outcomes:

» Following the recommendation of SRL, the site team sent hard copies of the survey via postal mail (rather than using an electronic survey). Mailings were staggered and divided into cohorts of about 50 families to allow the Catawba site team to keep up with planned follow-up calls.

» SRL developed a survey protocol with explicit descriptions of each step in the survey process, including the initial mailings and follow-up contacts with non-responders. In addition, the survey protocol set the survey open/close time frame to ensure a consistent survey period across cohorts.

» The incentive plan followed current best practices: a $5 gift card was attached to both the initial and follow-up surveys as an incentive to complete the survey. Families who returned a completed survey received an additional $25 gift card.

» The follow-up plan detailed five contact points:

› a first reminder telephone call made one week after the initial mailing;

› a first reminder letter, sent 2 weeks after the mailing;

› a second reminder phone call 3 weeks after the initial mailing;

› a second survey mailed 2 weeks after the second phone call; and

› a final follow-up call to non-responders to understand why they chose not to respond to the survey.

LESSON 2: INVOLVE STAKEHOLDERS EARLY IN THE PROJECT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS TO DISCOVER OUTREACH TECHNIQUES THAT WORK WITH THE TARGET AUDIENCES

Child welfare professionals are a rich source of knowledge about families, the needs of families and children, and the resources available to meet those needs. *Reach for Success* was carefully designed to be sensitive to the needs of adoptive families in Catawba County, and valuable insight gleaned from a stakeholder group during the planning helped the site team avoid missteps. From the beginning and throughout the project, the site team engaged with a Stakeholder Advisory Group, which consisted of adoptive parents and post-adoption service providers. The site team asked for stakeholders' input on every aspect of the survey project, ranging from topics that should be addressed in the survey to best protocols (i.e., what to avoid) for mailing materials to adoptive families.

For example, input from stakeholders helped the Catawba site team identify a strategy for increasing the likelihood that the targeted families would open the mailed surveys. Rather than mailing the surveys in envelopes showing the return address of the survey firm or QIC-AG, stakeholders indicated a familiar return address— in this case Catawba County Social Services (CCSS)—was more likely to prompt the recipients to open the survey. Parents in the stakeholder group said they would be more likely to open mail from their local social service agency rather than a third party. Therefore, the surveys were mailed by the CCSS team. In addition, CCSS staff suggested using follow-up letters rather than post cards because a sealed envelope would conceal any reference to adoption and protect the family's privacy. These insights helped avoid problems and roadblocks that could have made recruiting families more difficult.

LESSON 3: ANCHOR THE PLAN IN IMPLEMENTATION SCIENCE

In their work with families, child welfare professionals are often ready to jump in and start services immediately. However, to implement an intervention well requires discipline and a carefully designed framework. The National Implementation Research Network (2015) defines implementation science as the study of factors that influence the full and effective use of innovations in practice. When the principles of implementation science are applied to an evidence-based or informed program or practice, the result is a specific set of activities that helps put that practice or program into routine practice. Critical first steps in this scientific approach to translate knowledge into practice include thorough assessments to determine the actual needs of the target population. Once the needs are identified, then interventions are developed, tested, and implemented at scale to roll out a program that can address those needs. Last, rigorous program evaluation is carried out to measure the impact of the intervention on the well-being of the participants. The Catawba County site team discovered that the time invested on the core processes of implementation science not only gave them a head start on the intervention but also enabled them to successfully make mid-course adjustments for difficulties that emerged such as turnover among project staff.

SPEND TIME ON IMPLEMENTATION PLANNING TO CHART THE COURSE

Time spent on the "front end" of a project—planning the project and considering the myriad factors that must be addressed to get a program off the ground—is time well spent. The Catawba site team's commitment to implementing *Reach for Success* using implementation science provided a solid platform for executing and evaluating the project. In applying the principles of implementation science during the planning phase, the site team used the initial design and implementation plan (IDIP) to explore and document three core questions: What is being implemented? How will the system be prepared to support the intervention? Who is going to do the work? An IDIP is a tool that allows a project team to strategically plan for a successful implementation of an initiative and to ensure the initiative has intervention validity and implementation integrity.

This initial planning phase took months of meetings and discussions between the stakeholder group and the site team. However, using implementation science in planning the project came with a big payoff: a well-developed, logical approach to the project's implementation and evaluation, as well as strategies to address ongoing implementation issues. The planning activities provided a path for not only thinking through the intervention's critical components but also considering how

to develop the infrastructure needed to support service delivery. This careful, scientific planning process allowed the team to anticipate possible barriers and then develop strategies to address obstacles as they arose. In addition, the final implementation plan can be a useful tool to communicate with leadership to promote buy-in and sustain support.

STAY ON TRACK WITH IMPLEMENTATION SCIENCE

Implementing a new intervention is a dynamic process. Because the Catawba site team and staff adhered to the carefully constructed implementation plan, and used tools from implementation science such as a detailed work plan, and the usability testing and tracking form, the team was well prepared to address complications that went beyond what could have been anticipated. For example, during the course of the project, almost 20 key project staff changed roles due to promotions, illnesses, and departures. However, even with significant staff changes, the project remained stable and on track. This project continuity was possible because both experienced and new staff had written tools and documents to which they could refer to (e.g., the project's IDIP). New staff had the advantage of having a clearly written survey and detailed outreach protocols for *Reach for Success* training and could follow the implementation standards necessary for evaluation. Therefore, even with staff changes, the survey cohorts were successfully rolled out on time as outlined in the protocol, and all QIC-AG products and materials were produced and submitted within the required time frames. Despite the extensive staff changes, the *Reach for Success* project remained on track due to the commitment to implementation science at the heart of the project and in the broader agency culture.

For more information about the QIC-AG visit **www.qic-ag.org**