

# FAMILY COUNCIL FRAMEWORK



**THRIVE**  
BIRTH TO FIVE

**READY**  
**REGION**

*Central*



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# 1. THRIVE BIRTH TO FIVE ORGANIZATION OVERVIEW

## Ready Region Central Overview

Thrive Birth to Five, formerly known as Smart Beginnings Greater Richmond, has been the early childhood systems building organization in the Richmond Region since 2007 and was designated Ready Region Central by the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation and the Virginia Department of Education in 2022. Thrive Birth to Five’s regional early childhood coalition convenes more than 125 diverse public and private organizations to work collectively so all children in our region will thrive, and race, place, and income will no longer determine success in school.

Thrive Birth to Five will continue our work in the early childhood systems and build upon our previous experience with the Preschool Development Grant and Mixed Delivery. Through our designation as Ready Region Central, we will expand Virginia Quality Birth to 5 and Family and Community Engagement within the Greater Richmond and Crater planning districts. We will be working closely with many partners, including Smart Beginnings Southeast, to create a regionally representative Family Council with opportunities for Family and Community Engagement.

## Thrive Birth to Five Organizational Mission, Vision, Values

### Vision 2022

All children in our region will thrive and race, place, and income will no longer determine success in school.

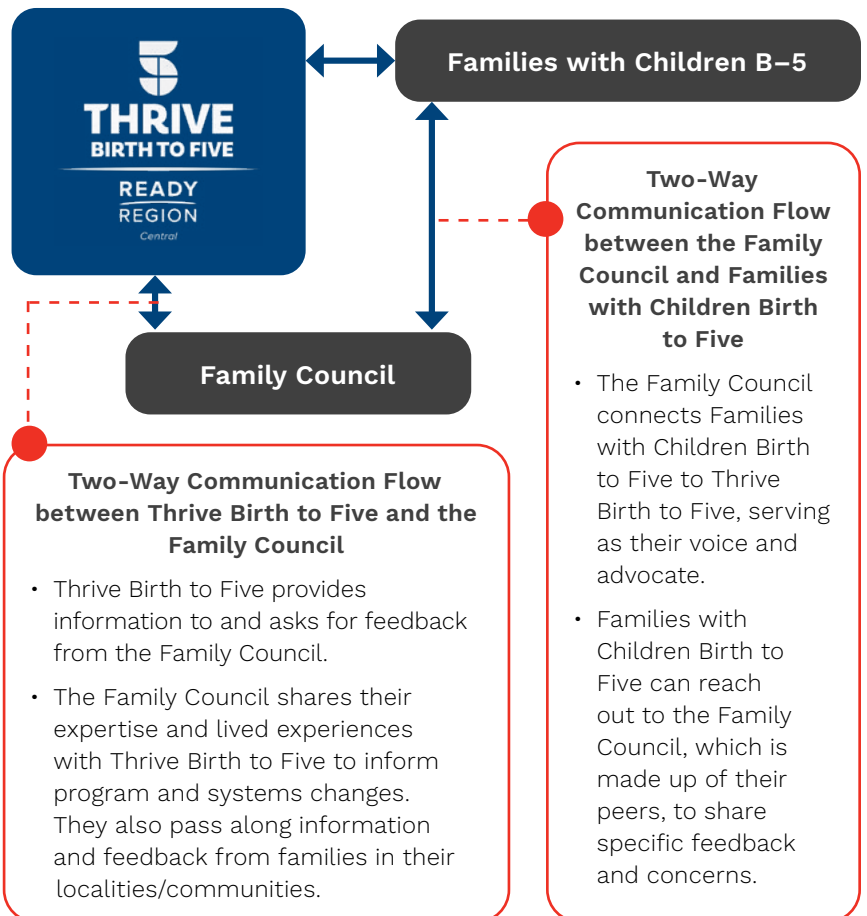
### Mission

We collaborate to build our region’s early childhood system and are a trusted steward of early childhood resources for families, providers and the ecosystem supporting them.

We will consciously and intentionally live our values:

- **Accountable** - We own the progress, outcomes, and consequences of our work
- **Bold** - We will be bold leaders in all we do on behalf of families and children
- **Equitable** - We believe that all children, families, and providers deserve the opportunity and resources to thrive
- **Inclusive** - We will be intentionally collaborative and inviting to all communities
- **Honest** - We will strive to say what we mean and do what we say

## Thrive Birth to Five ROLE





## 2. OUR FAMILY COUNCIL

### Overview

#### Goal

To engage families with children ages birth to five to utilize their expertise and lived experience in health, education and family well-being.



#### Purpose

Families are at the center of everything we do, and the purpose of our Family Council is to consistently get feedback and input from a diverse group of families to help inform our work. Family Councils are not meant to burden families with the primary responsibility of building and reforming the early childhood system. Instead, Councils serve to engage families with children (birth to age five) to utilize their expertise and lived experience in health, education, and family well-being. For example, a Family Council could help establish priorities for early childhood efforts by sharing valuable insights on challenges, opportunities, and experiences.

Understanding the experiences, preferences, and needs of families is critical to achieving our mission and the Family Council is one tool in our family engagement toolbox. While we will continue engaging families through surveys, focus groups, and events, the Family Council will help us build an ongoing partnership to better serve families within our region.

#### We believe in...

- **Collaboration** - We believe the best solutions come from working together.
- **Flexibility** - Change is constant, and we are willing to adapt and shift to meet our goals.
- **Inclusivity** - Every child and family is different, and we want all families in our region to have what they need.
- **Family-centeredness** - Children and families are at the center of everything we do.
- **Determination** - We believe real change is possible, so we will not give up on making life better for families in our region.

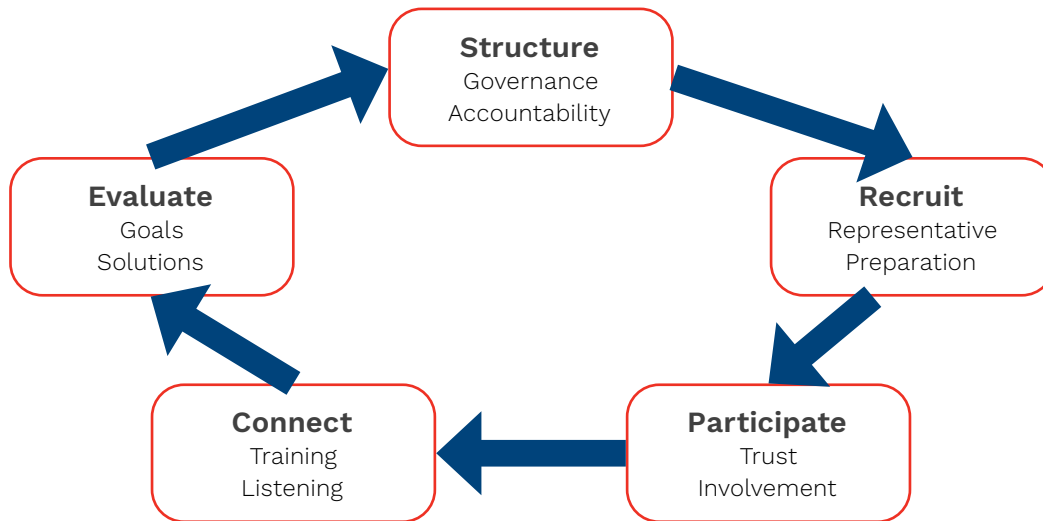
#### Core Functions

- Share the experiences and perspectives of your family and others you know
- Facilitate building relationships with families outside the council to serve as a representative for other family experiences
- Contribute ideas and suggestions to help improve families' experiences in the early childhood community
- Relay the information learned as a Family Council member to others in your community



**PARTNER PERSPECTIVE:**  
**“Families are pulled in a million directions. The work and structure of the Family Council must be compelling, or it won’t fly.”**

## FAMILY COUNCIL FLOWCHART



### Structure

#### Governance

The Family Council will operate as an advisory committee to Thrive Birth to Five. The Family Council’s charge is to advise on issues related to the region’s early childhood system and to identify early childhood resources needed by providing input, ideas, comments, and feedback that incorporate Council members’ lived experiences, knowledge, resources, and understanding of their communities.

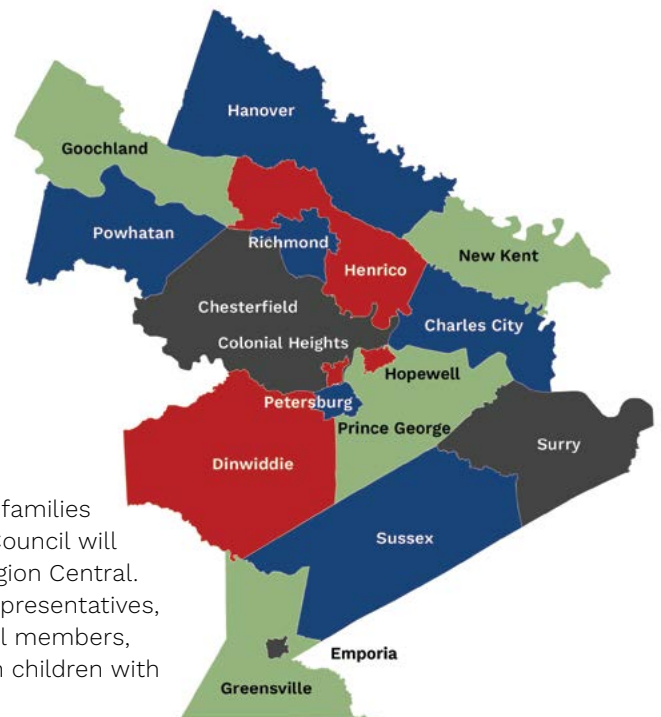
The level of engagement for the Family Council is Involve.

At Thrive Birth to Five, we identify the levels of engagement based on the International Association of Public Participation’s (IAP2) [Spectrum of Public Participation](#). The Involve level of engagement sees Thrive Birth to Five work directly with the Family Council throughout the process to ensure that families’ concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered. This level goes beyond just one meeting.

Learn more about how Thrive Birth to Five engages with families in our Family Engagement Plan

We will work with the Family Council to ensure that, wherever possible, their concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the solutions developed and provide feedback on how their input influenced the decision. While strong collaboration with the Family Council is foreseen, there are limits to the scope of the involvement within the larger work of Thrive Birth to Five. In this role, the Family Council operates in an advisory capacity and does not have decision-making authority. Its advisory role, however, will shape the region’s early childhood system and the resources provided to families.

The composition of the Family Council is designed to reflect the diverse perspectives necessary to advise on issues related to the region’s early childhood system and to represent the varied interests and values of the families and communities Thrive Birth to Five serves. Our goal is that the Family Council will be made up of at least one representative from each locality in Ready Region Central. We will also strive to reflect the region in terms of the gender of family representatives, number of families who qualify for subsidies, race and ethnicity of council members, native languages of council members, and representation by families with children with a disability.



Council members will serve for a one-year term with the option of extending to two years at the agreement of Thrive Birth to Five and the council member. The Family Council will meet monthly, and members will be compensated for their time and expertise. Compensation details will be shared during Orientation.

In this document, we talk about commitments to illustrate that there are certain things both Family Council members and Thrive Birth to Five commit to doing in support of a successful and reciprocal relationship.

## Accountability

Family Council members commit to:

- Collaboratively developing a shared set of council standards with Thrive Birth to Five.
- Contribute input based on knowledge and lived experience, while also considering a region-wide perspective.
- Seek opportunities for a unified vision balanced with recognition of the diversity in goals and needs of Ready Region Central's communities.
- Partner with Thrive Birth to Five in promoting family engagement activities and generating involvement that represents the range and diversity of the region's communities.
- Represent perspectives from your specific locality, but also consider broader community input and input from other members during Family Council meeting discussions.
- Relay the information learned as a Family Council member to others in your community.

Thrive Birth to Five commits to:

- Collaboratively developing a shared set of council standards with the Family Council.
- Providing all background resources and meeting materials to Family Council members in a timely manner to ensure successful participation.
- Listening deeply to and learning from families, with the expectation that the work will evolve in response to that learning.
- Respecting the time, energy, and knowledge of participants by fairly compensating Family Council members.
- Ensuring all Family Council members feel safe and secure in meetings and in their ability to share information.

## Recruitment



### Representative Selection

We believe the recruiting process works best when we are thoughtfully and collaboratively connected to families through the partners and providers we serve; when our team is representative of and accessible to the individuals whose very lives are affected in our region.

While some roles may benefit more directly from specific education or professional experience, we're interested in Family Council member candidates whose lived experiences and personal understanding of aspirations and challenges related to the early childhood system are most important to the success of our work and the region overall.

Family Council members commit to:

- Collaboratively developing a Family Council recruitment plan and activities with Thrive Birth to Five (Year One only).
- Providing feedback on Thrive Birth to Five's existing or proposed council recruitment policies, practices, and efforts to ensure they are as reflective as possible of the needs of families and communities (Year Two and beyond).
- Contributing input based on knowledge and lived experience, while also considering a region-wide perspective.
- Partner with Thrive Birth to Five to promote recruitment efforts for the following year to generate involvement that represents the range and diversity of the region's communities.

Thrive Birth to Five commits to:

- Prioritizing diversity and inclusion with particular focus on historically underserved populations, those who may not always be heard or have had access to opportunities to have their voices elevated.
- Developing and implementing recruiting efforts that mirror the racial, linguistic, economic, educational, geographic and cultural diversity of Ready Region Central.
  - Using data to determine diversity targets and clearly defining what a fully diverse council looks like for Ready Region Central.
  - Using regional demographic data to set targets for recruitment. (For example: percent male parents, percent families who qualify for subsidy, percent people of color, percent in family day homes, percent families with children with a disability, etc.)
- Including Family Council members in the design of recruitment efforts, such as:
  - Preparing the Recruitment Plan, Interview Structure, and Selection Team.
  - Identifying and communicating expectations for success from the outset of the recruitment process to ensure effective collaboration between Family Council members, Thrive Birth to Five staff, and partners and providers.
  - Looking at a Family Council member journey from every angle to ensure the process—from recruitment to transition off the council—is clear, compassionate, and rewarding.
  - Identifying relevant inbound (i.e., website/interest submission form, staff, and current council member referrals) and outbound (i.e., through partners and/or providers) efforts to ensure Family Council membership opportunities reach families across Ready Region Central.



**PARTNER PERSPECTIVE:**  
“A Family Council could contribute to increasingly family-centered decision-making. Families would also have a different perspective on data and experiences to inform strategies and action steps.”



## Transparency

We understand that families are more likely to take and sustain a role within the council if they feel equipped to fulfill its responsibilities. Family Council members can and should believe that they have an impact on early education and that change and improvement is possible as a result of their contributions.

Even when progress stalls or challenges arrive, Thrive Birth to Five will ensure families are kept in the loop and invited to support problem solving.

Family Council members commit to:

- Being transparent and direct about their ability to commit to the council—roles, responsibilities, and expectations.
- Being willing to share feedback as openly and honestly as possible in the spirit of continuous improvement, accuracy, and accountability.
- Respecting the input of other council members and protecting their privacy when sharing outside of council meetings.
- Celebrating successes and acknowledging challenges.
- Contributing input based on knowledge and lived experience, while also considering a region-wide perspective.
- Seeking opportunities for a unified vision balanced with recognition of the diversity in goals and needs of Ready Region Central’s communities.

Thrive Birth to Five Commits to:

- Being transparent and direct about the purpose of the council and members’ roles, responsibilities, and expectations, so that everyone understands what is being requested of them.
- Being open to feedback in the spirit of continuous improvement.
- Celebrating successes and acknowledging challenges.

- Ensuring feedback loops are effective and practical so that Family Council members can understand how and where their knowledge, feedback, and insights are being utilized and the impact they are having.
- Creating opportunities for collaboration and connection with other council participants, organizations and/or family engagement opportunities.
- Collaborating with community organizations and leaders with expertise to support Family Council efforts, where appropriate.



**PARTNER PERSPECTIVE:**  
**“Family Council members can provide information to guide the work of Thrive Birth to Five and other organizations. In turn, the members become more knowledgeable about work in this space and take information back to their friends and family.”**

## Participation



**PARTNER PERSPECTIVE:**  
**“A significant benefit to families is to give them voice in the decisions being made instead of relying on the good intentions and best judgments of well-meaning people. For providers, having a space to co-create solutions could save time and resources as opposed to waiting for feedback after a strategy has been implemented.”**

### Building Trust

A crucial step in building trust with and between the Family Council is to develop shared expectations and collaboration standards for how the group will work together. While Thrive Birth to Five may develop and present initial ideas for expectations and collaboration standards among the council (see Appendix A. Sample Council Standards), these are best lived out when developed collaboratively with council members.

Meetings will be conducted by a Thrive Birth to Five staff member. The facilitator holds an impartial stance. Collaboration work is most successful when facilitators remain impartial on the subject matter, the participants, and their interests and positions. These meetings will focus exclusively on information quality, exchange, and the decision-making process.

Setting expectations will also be critical to establishing a common understanding of project goals and objectives. Thrive Birth to Five will establish objectives for each meeting and engagement that keep Council members informed of shared expectations and group commitments. Meeting objectives will be shared at the beginning of each meeting and be documented on the meeting agendas and summaries.

Thrive Birth to Five will be transparent with the Family Council to the greatest extent possible and will take extra care to close the feedback loops, whether that means disclosing challenges or celebrating wins. Thrive Birth to Five will share how information provided by the Family Council members has been shared, used, how their voice has made a difference or to identify areas where a new approach or solution is needed.

### Overcoming Barriers to Involvement

As the membership of the Family Council shifts from year to year, the barriers to participation and involvement will need to be continuously re-evaluated. Thrive Birth to Five will honor the needs and preferences of the Family Council members and adjust as new information is gathered. Families will have an opportunity to share what type of information, training, and resources they need in order to feel equipped and prepared to participate, collaborate, and lead. Thrive Birth to Five will also need to ask:

- When are they typically available to meet? – The meeting schedule for the year should be developed in tandem with the Family Council and not dictated by Thrive Birth to Five staff preferences. This may mean holding meetings outside of traditional work hours or on weekends.
- What types of communications (text, email, phone call, social media groups, etc.) are preferred? – This will determine the best way to share meeting agendas, notes, and necessary information.
- What languages do they speak and/or are any accommodations needed? – Thrive Birth to Five needs to be prepared to provide accommodations, including translation services and interpreters as necessary.

While we understand that life happens, Family Council members should plan to attend as many meetings as possible because meetings will build on one another and consistent involvement is key to the success of the work of the Family Council.

Family Council members commit to:

- Sharing preferences and barriers to participation with Thrive Birth to Five as openly and transparently as possible.
- Fully participate in meetings attended during your tenure.

Thrive Birth to Five commits to:

- Starting all meetings by closing the feedback loop from the previous meeting and reporting out on the steps and decisions made because of the Family Council's feedback. Ex. "By you sharing your experiences, we were able to share it with leadership, and therefore..."
- Listening to all barriers to participation and making every effort to address them in a timely manner
- Communicating frequently to keep Family Council members informed and included, using methods and means grounded in their specific preferences (text, phone calls, email, social media, etc.). This includes distributing agendas and materials at least one week before the meetings and providing recordings of virtual meetings and meeting notes within one week of the event.
- Ensuring the staff member facilitating the meeting remains impartial on the subject matter, the participants, and their interests and positions.
- Developing ways for council members to participate effectively in training, collaboration and connection, and decision-making even when they can't attend a scheduled meeting. For example, providing additional days for council members to provide feedback or accepting input via email.

## Connection

### Training

Successful Family Council implementation begins with establishing orientation and training plans that make information about early childhood education systems, processes, and the many stakeholders involved easily accessible and understandable. It's also critical that Family Council members understand the role they play within those systems and the importance their perspectives have on influencing positive systems change.

Family Council members commit to:

- Actively participating in orientation and training opportunities, especially early in their engagement with the Family Council.
- Sharing learning preferences and barriers to participation in orientation and training with Thrive Birth to Five openly and transparently.
- Providing feedback on education and training needs and opportunities.
- Supporting each other by cultivating a safe space to learn, ask questions, and share thoughts, concerns, and ideas.

Thrive Birth to Five commits to:

- Providing a safe space to learn, ask questions, and share thoughts, concerns, and ideas.
- Developing and adapting training and engagement practices in a way that considers language, culture, and context in such a way that is compatible with cultural patterns, meaning, and values for families across Ready Region Central.
- Establishing trust and positive rapport through providing educational opportunities for families to better understand, examine, and provide feedback on services and the educational systems their children are participating in.
- Creating an environment where families are supported through coaching, mentorship, collective training, and shared decision-making.
- Hosting training(s) for staff on culturally competent, trauma-informed best practices to help equip staff to thoughtfully engage with families.



#### **PARTNER PERSPECTIVE:**

**"It would be great to ask a Family Council to review the 'Learn the Signs. Act Early' resources and to identify ways they can be shared with other families. The council could also be a valuable source of information about how to support families in the process of accessing services for their children with developmental delays or disabilities."**

## Listening



**PARTNER PERSPECTIVE:**  
“[The Family Council] gives a voice to families to make important decisions and gives an opportunity to listen and value their input.”

There is always room for Thrive Birth to Five staff, partners, and providers to improve their listening and relational skills with families and in the broader communities within Ready Region Central, for that reason, listening is a key component to the success of the Family Council. It is something that must be reciprocated among all parties involved in, supported by, and who benefit from the knowledge and experience of the Family Council.

Family Council members commit to:

- Being welcoming to other council members, accessible, and available to minimize barriers to family participation.
- Sharing preferences and barriers to participation with Thrive Birth to Five as openly and transparently as possible.
- Providing feedback on listening and engagement improvement opportunities.
- Actively and respectfully listening to each other and Thrive Birth to Five staff.
- Avoiding exclusionary language.
- Understanding the importance of culture for all families served and the need to build trust and communicate respect in a culturally responsive manner.

Thrive Birth to Five commits to:

- Recognizing families' expertise about their children and cultivating reciprocal, respectful relationships with council members.
- Listening actively and seeking to understand the unique perspectives council members have to share.
- Eliminating or reducing jargon from Family Council communications, meeting materials, and especially when requesting feedback on a particular initiative, process, or policy; Defining commonly used terminology.
- Avoiding exclusionary language.
- Understanding the importance of culture for all families served and the need to build trust and communicate respect in a culturally responsive manner.
- Providing resources and communication materials that reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of all families served.
- Providing accommodations, translation resources, and interpreters whenever needed and/or possible.
- Being welcoming, accessible, and available to minimize barriers to family participation.
- Training staff in family engagement, as well as in topics that support inclusive engagement activities within and outside of the council.



**PARTNER PERSPECTIVE:**  
“In my experience, programs and services often have an opinion on what parents want and need and it's hard to deviate. I'm hoping the Family Council will help programs and services listen and address the challenges families face.”



## Evaluation

Successful implementation of the Family Council begins with intentionally setting and repeating the strategies and goals to ensure we live out what we commit to in this document.

We also acknowledge that successful implementation depends on the ongoing evaluation of and adjustment to our plans, based on a variety of benchmarks and data-driven insights sourced from the valuable members of our Family Council.

The following are potential evaluation criteria—and sample benchmarks—to determine the success of the Family Council:

- Participation
  - Meeting attendance average (e.g., number and percentage of all council members who attend)
  - Increased accessibility (in-person, virtual, and hybrid) options
- Engagement
  - Response rate to emails and responses to feedback requests (e.g., number and percentage of council members who respond)
  - Peer support across all families, connecting them to each other
- Recruitment & Retention
  - Number and percentage of council members who complete their full term
  - Council alumni families and current families are empowered to develop relationships and work together as advocates [for improved services and increased access in their communities, and the strength of deep familial bonds and social networking is thereby leveraged].
- Leadership
  - Number and percentage of council members who led a segment of the agenda within the last six months (i.e. icebreaker, committee update, shared story, etc.)
- Overall Experience
  - Insights from council members on what meeting materials/discussions are most valuable and/or effective; improvement opportunities for meetings, communications, topics, and connections to other council members. These can be collected informally during discussion or formally through an exit survey or interview at the end of the member's term.
- Representation, Diversity, and Inclusion
  - Recruitment goals accurately reflect regional data
  - Family Council membership is representative of Ready Region Central's demographic composition
  - Network of culturally and linguistically diverse partners has expanded
  - Number of localities represented on the Family Council
  - Number of Family Council meetings attended by members
  - Number of participation occurrences in family engagement activities
  - Existing family, partner, and/or provider relationships have been strengthened
- Training/Development
  - Number of coaching and training opportunities planned throughout a one-year term
  - Participation in training opportunities for Thrive Birth to Five staff and for Family Council members

While we have generated this initial list of possible evaluation criteria and success benchmarks based on our own experience and the insights from our partners and providers, Thrive Birth to Five is committed to collaborating with Family Council members to ensure this list is accurate and aligned with what they hope to achieve as part of this process and adjusting our evaluation criteria and benchmarks accordingly.

In Year One, we will be setting the baseline benchmarks for future evaluation. This framework does not include specific outcomes but will be updated in future years once Year One data has been collected.



### **PARTNER PERSPECTIVE:**

**“A Family Council can give parents a voice but only if feedback is utilized to drive change. The provider community is really great at getting parental perspectives on barriers. We’re not so great about using that feedback to drive change.”**



## 3. LOOKING AHEAD

### Organizational Shifts to Support the Family Council

Meaningful engagement with Thrive Birth to Five’s Family Council will require a shift in Thrive Birth to Five’s culture to ensure the relationship between the Family Council and Thrive Birth to Five staff is not simply an engagement checkbox or a one-way flow of information.

The Family Council Model Guide (Appendix B) poses the following question for councils with a committee structure: What is the relationship of this council to the other governing leadership team, and how will perspectives of the council be represented/translated?

This will be essential for Thrive Birth to Five to answer. Thrive Birth to Five should also consider training staff members who will interface directly with the Family Council on cultural competency and neutral facilitation to support this work.

In engagement and facilitation work, there can be tension between progress and process. As such, it is important to not only measure specific benchmarks for success (Section 2, Evaluation), but to also define success by how our Family Council collaborators and our organization emerges from the process.

We will consider this work a success if:

- Family Council members feel heard, safe, and respected.
- Partnerships are developed and new connections are made.
- The groundwork for implementation of the council’s recommendations is laid.

### Resources Needed

Thrive Birth to Five should ensure they have the resources needed to meet the commitments outlined in this framework. A few considerations as you plan for the future:

- A dedicated Thrive Birth to Five staff person, trained in neutral facilitation, who manages the relationship with the Family Council and serves as a liaison between the council and other Thrive Birth to Five leadership. Neutral facilitation ensures the facilitator holds an impartial stance. When hearing feedback from families on the work your own organization does, it can be easy to feel defensive or to not be open to the information shared. This must not be an additional task for a staffer, but instead should be a primary responsibility.
- Budgeting for flexible and fair compensation for Family Council members. Line items to consider beyond staffing include stipends/compensation, meals, training, transportation, child care, and other materials and supplies.
- Future technology needs. The Family Council will need a dedicated presence on Thrive Birth to Five’s website that includes information about getting involved, as well as a way for families to share information with the Council member representing their locality. It would also be worthwhile to create a private, cloud-based, shared space for council members to converse and easily share resources and information with each other, such as a Google Drive or Slack channel.

**“**  
**PARTNER PERSPECTIVE:**  
**“It will be important to build the council in an action-oriented manner so family needs can translate to organizational changes when possible.”**  
**”**

**“**  
**PARTNER PERSPECTIVE:**  
**“A Family Council is an essential component in authentic engagement work. Having designated staff to coordinate and maintain the Family Council relationships and efforts is a must have.”**  
**”**

## Closing Thoughts

The Family Council will be a powerful tool in Thrive Birth to Five's family engagement toolbox. Its establishment will help us build an ongoing partnership to better serve families within our region.

It's important for our partners, providers, and families to understand that this Family Council Framework is a living document, meaning there is information here that may get updated from time to time. We are excited for and committed to continuous learning and growth through the establishment of our council. As we engage with and learn from each other, our hope is that our efforts will adjust accordingly to reflect the real needs of families across Ready Region Central.

If you are interested or know someone who might be interested in joining the Family Council, please contact Chanel Bea at [cbea@ThriveB5.org](mailto:cbea@ThriveB5.org).





# APPENDIX A. SAMPLE COUNCIL STANDARDS

The Family Council is a collaborative group whereby members choose to cooperate to achieve shared and/or overlapping objectives in support of the process. By agreeing to serve on the Family Council, members commit together to the following:

- Commit to a good faith effort, be open to the process.
- Interact respectfully with all other members, valuing all perspectives.
- Share perspectives and values.
- Family Council members wear many hats but, in this space, you are representing your locality and community in addition to yourself.
- Participate in an active and focused manner – commit to the success of the process.
- Be prepared for meetings.
- Help involve all members. Seek solutions for all – help to integrate each other’s interests into creative solutions that address individual and community needs.
- Share relevant information.
- Meetings build on one another. Family Council members commit to attend all meetings or ensure your identified alternate can attend in your place and to start meetings on time.
- Participate effectively, using open communications within the Family Council meetings.
- When sharing reports of Family Council discussions, take learnings and refrain from sharing another individual’s comments, stories, and experiences.

Meetings will be conducted by a Thrive Birth to Five staff member who has been trained in neutral facilitation. In this role, the Thrive Birth to Five staff member will:

- Maintain a neutral position during Family Council discussions.
- Work to ensure that all Family Council members can participate equally. This includes:
  - Facilitate activities that allow for multiple methods of participation (i.e., virtual, hands-on, or phone-only).
  - Ensuring that no sidebar conversations take place between Thrive Birth to Five and Family Council members relating to the process without equal opportunity for other Family Council members to have input.
- Guide meeting discussions per the agenda and manage time.
- Provide dialogue activities as needed for productive outcomes.
- Enforce the Family Council collaboration standards stated above.
- Track actions, next steps, and deadlines.



# APPENDIX B. FAMILY COUNCIL PLANNING GUIDE

## FAMILY COUNCIL MODEL GUIDE

*Building Systems That Work for Families*





## Glossary of Terms

**Parent(s):** Any adult who is responsible for caring for or parenting a child in their life. Examples include biological, foster or adoptive mothers, fathers, grandfathers, grandmothers, uncles, aunts; stepparents, and guardians and custodial caregivers.

**Family:** Parents (as defined above) and their children.

**Engagement:** The intentional and systematic inclusion of parents in programs and activities that have an impact on the development, learning, and wellness of their children and other children in their communities.

**Parent/Family Voice:** The unique and valuable perspectives, informed by beliefs, experiences, and cultural backgrounds of parents and families, that are integral to designing a system that works for families.

## Process and Acknowledgments

Early childhood partners around the state have worked faithfully to engage families, and Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) heard the requests from partners for more support and resources – especially in sustained, systemic family engagement. In response, VECF collaborated with parents, partners, thought leaders, and practitioners to develop this guide to provide a framework for Ready Regions as you support family engagement at the systems level.

This guide reflects the work of a team of committed stakeholders, including VECF, JMI, Smart Beginnings Greater Richmond, Smart Beginnings Southeast, and Virginia Community Voice. Invaluable input and guidance was provided by Virginia Promise Partnership's Parent Advisory and other national early childhood partners with Family Councils and advisors from Michigan, Illinois, and Oregon. Forty six parents from around the Commonwealth participated in [SEEQ](#) sessions (focus groups) that informed the development of this guide and consideration of the inventory of best practices, assembled by the research of other state and national family engagement models. The development team expresses appreciation for the funding provided primarily by the Robins Foundation based in Richmond, Virginia.

## Outline

Family Engagement Vision Statement Family Council Model Introduction Section 1: Principles

Section 2: Family Council Structure Section 3: Recruitment

Section 4: Participation and Engagement Section 5: Sustaining Family Participation Section 6: Evaluation

Continuous Quality Improvement Statement References

Appendix (Resources and Sample Documents)

“This (focus group) is the first time since becoming a parent that I felt like I was among people who were experiencing similarities in parenting and life. Thank you, everyone!”



# Family Engagement Vision Statement and Values

VECF's vision: Every Ready Region creating opportunities for families to offer guidance and input in early childhood decisions that matter most to them.

## Our values affirm that:

- Families are the building blocks of Virginia's communities, and parents are a child's first and most important teachers. The parent/family perspective is essential to identify barriers to and solutions for obstacles families face when trying to access equitable and high-quality early childhood services.
- Parents have a unique understanding of what's best for their children and have the right to participate in every decision that directly affects them, their families, and their communities. Parents are essential and valued partners at every level of the early childhood system — in programs and systems development work at the community and state levels.
- Family time is valuable; families should be included and involved in ways that are purposeful, results-oriented, and respectful of family needs, schedules, and circumstances.
- Family engagement must represent the diverse perspectives across communities and regions, especially those families who may not always be heard or have access to opportunity. Engagement will reflect understanding that accessing resources to support early childhood experiences, such as childcare subsidy, WIC, TANF, Medicaid, etc., shows resilience and should be destigmatized.



**“It’s a relief to see initiatives finally include the people that it’s meant to help. This feels like the future and a step in the right direction.”**

## Family Council Model Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to equip Ready Regions with a high-level framework designed to activate family voice and choice through Family Councils. While the structure of Family Councils may vary across regions, the intention is to have a council in every Ready Region.

This guide affirms VECF's vision to support Ready Regions in creating opportunities for families to offer input in the early childhood decisions that matter most to them. Ready Regions have a unique opportunity to support inclusion of parents as co-creators and decision makers in regional efforts to serve all families.

Amplifying family voice is not simple. There is no demonstrated “one-size-fits-all” model for family engagement in early childhood systems work. VECF's hope is that this guide, combined with the experience and knowledge of Ready Regions partners, will fast-track efforts to lift up and integrate family voice in each Ready Region through a network of Family Councils.

This guide offers practical guidance on elevating family voice; however, Family Councils are not meant to burden families with the primary responsibility of building and reforming the early childhood system. Instead, councils invite parents to participate as partners in the decisions that matter most to them. For example, your Family Council may not be tasked with making hiring decisions for every Virginia Quality Birth-5 position; however, they could help establish priorities for your early childhood efforts by sharing their challenges, opportunities, and experiences.

Keep in mind that Family Councils represent one form of family engagement, and there are many other tools (surveys, focus groups, events) that you will likely continue to use for a more comprehensive approach to family engagement. Councils are unique: they require higher levels of involvement than the traditional family engagement pathways; they are aimed at systems-level influence and change.

As Ready Regions connect with families to implement the best and most promising practices shared in this guide, we will collectively continue to shape a Virginia process with effective family-driven impact.

## What to Expect in this Resource

There are six sections in this document that each contain the following:

- **Best Practices:** Each section provides a set of best practice principles relevant to that focus area. These best practices have been identified through research and consultation with state and national organizations that have advanced success in engaging families in ways that elevate family needs and preferences.
- **Tips for Implementation:** With best practice insights in mind, tips for implementation offer ways to practically apply these insights and avoid common challenges.
- **Indicators of Success:** Each section provides a short checklist of results that signal progress. These lists are not exhaustive or prescriptive, but examples of growth and movement. Quotes captured directly from families engaged during the research phase of this process can be found throughout this document. Family quotes illustrate key perspectives from families relevant to key topic areas.

While unique best practices, tips, and success indicators are only emphasized in one section, you will find that many themes are relevant across multiple sections. For example, diversity, inclusion, responsiveness, active listening, feedback loops, compensation, and parent leadership show up as recurring themes in multiple sections. As you use this resource, be open to how best practices and tips are interrelated and complimentary. Although challenges can be persistent, remember to orient engagement efforts from a strength and assets-based approach.

## Section 1: Principles

A well-defined and impactful Family Council begins with clear principles that articulate your region's family engagement priorities, frame the council's purpose, and communicate the depth of commitment to family voice.

### Best Practices

- **Collaboration and inclusion:** Parents' participation in decisions that directly impact their families and communities is critical to a well-informed process, beginning with establishing family engagement principles. Trust families as experts regarding their own children and engage their partnership from the beginning.
- **Flexibility and humility:** As you engage families in clarifying principles, be willing to listen deeply to and learn from parents, and expect the work to evolve in response to that learning. Value their insights and be careful not to underestimate their ability to propose solutions.
- **Prioritization:** Principles should work together as a compass for Ready Regions work with families. While there may be a wide range of values and beliefs, work with parents to prioritize these into three to five core principles to serve as a guide for your staff.

### Tips for Implementation

- **Establishing principles with families (not for):** Principles work best when determined collaboratively with families. While you may begin work on drafting principles before you have a collective group of families participating, parents must actively and meaningfully contribute to finalizing principles. Consider adding a placeholder within the onboarding/ orientation agenda to collaborate with parents on editing/finalizing principles for the group.

- **Integrate principles transparently throughout decision-making:** Principles are meant to continuously guide decisions and practices. Add principles and values to any collateral related to family voice (structure and recruitment documents, web page, etc.). Keeping these principles and values front and center will help serve as a reminder to guide your work and ensure accessibility for everyone.
- **Align Family Council principles with your organizational values:** It can be helpful to start with your lead agency organization's principles and values. While these principles will evolve/shift based on parent input, it is also important to make sure that family engagement principles both influence and align with your organizational principles.

#### Indicators of Success:

- ✓ 3-5 principles for Ready Region Family Engagement co-created with parents.
- ✓ Principles are highly visible, easy to understand, and readily accessible for all participants.
- ✓ All participants regularly reference principles within decision-making.

## Section 2: Family Council Structure

Establishing a strong Family Council will require Ready Regions to consider what structure and practices will work for all families in your region. Factors such as compensation norms, a clearly defined council purpose, responsibilities, and other infrastructure decisions are integral to cultivating an environment in which parents will contribute confidently. Options and considerations for this structure can be found on page seven.

### Best Practices

- **Parent influence and ownership:** Effective family engagement honors parents as owners, planners, and decision makers in aspects of the Ready Regions work that affects them and their children. Structure your council in ways that position all parents, and particularly those who are furthest from opportunity, as leaders with the power to influence and own decisions impacting their families.
- **Clarity of roles:** Clearly define the roles of all members of the Family Council. Be sure parents have a clear scope of where their/the council's decision-making authority lies, who determines meeting frequency, responsibilities, communication protocols, compensation, etc., to establish clear boundaries at the outset. Remember to also clarify roles of staff members supporting the council and prioritize cultural competence as an essential staff skill for building relationships that recognize the value of diverse family backgrounds and experiences. While much of this will evolve in response to balancing parent preference and organizational needs, remember to co-create change and update roles as responsibilities shift.
- **Resources:** Sustained family engagement requires resources. Consider the financial implications to properly support this work and ensure family engagement is adequately funded in the budget.

### Tips for Implementation

- **Co-create structure with parents:** Think of the types of parents you want to engage and determine how to connect with families in your region to help inform your structure. Consider holding focus groups, or having 3-5 parents serve as interim advisors until the council is in place, to create opportunities for shared learning at the outset. During the early stages of the Family Council, collaboratively edit role descriptions and expectations with council members to include their desired input on changes they want to see.
- **Determine mutually meaningful opportunities for joint decision-making:** Thoughtfully consider the level of power and influence parents will have to ensure family voice is heard and honored. Consider offering clear expectations and specific authority to integrate parents' contributions. Examples include: approval authority for budgets, strategic plans, annual work plans; parent stories and experience serving as data to inform organization priorities each year; parent assistance to draft/ finalize family surveys and focus groups; and having parents serve as leaders for broader community outreach to understand family preferences.

- Align aspirations of the work with the budget to promote realistic, achievable expectations: Engaging families well requires staff time and resources. Be sure to set realistic expectations based on your capacity and remember to factor your family engagement efforts into your budget. Line items to consider beyond staffing include stipends/compensation, meals, training, transportation, child care, and other materials and supplies.
- Honor the needs/preferences of diverse families within the structure: As you continuously learn from the types of parents you want to engage, consider the type of structured engagement that would best serve them. For example: What languages do they speak? When are they typically available to meet? What types of communications (text, email) are preferred? What type of barriers would they encounter to participation? Take a human-centered approach to determine the best model, and use a continuous cycle of inquiry with parents to confirm understanding.

**Indicators of Success:**

- ☑ Family Council structure has been identified: purpose, responsibilities, role descriptions, meeting frequency, term limits, etc.
- ☑ Job descriptions have been created for organization staff supporting the Family Council.
- ☑ Compensation/Stipend Policy has been established and implemented.

## Family Council Structure: Bonus Insights

### Options for building the Family Council Structure and key considerations of each model

Structure Options	Benefits	Primary Risk	Outstanding Considerations
<b>Option A:</b> Make a percentage of your governance leadership team parents	Integrates families into the existing decision-making infrastructure.	Family voice becomes diluted with minimal power within the existing infrastructure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ How will we manage power dynamics to create a brave space for families?</li> <li>■ How will we determine the appropriate number of family participants to ensure family voice is not diluted?</li> <li>■ How will we keep the governing board size from becoming unwieldy while simultaneously representing a diverse range of family experiences?</li> </ul>
<b>Option B:</b> Create a separate Family Council with authority independent from the governing leadership team	Freedom to operate independently without needing to compromise on structure (meeting frequency and times, number of people, culture of the group, etc.).	Imbalance in decision-making power—Family voice lacks meaningful power and influence in governance and decision-making; duplication of governing teams without clear, interdependent roles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ What decision-making power will the independent council have, and what is an appropriate balance of power with the other leadership team?</li> <li>■ What is the relationship of this council to the other governing leadership team, and how will perspectives of the council be represented/translated?</li> </ul>

Structure Options	Benefits	Primary Risk	Outstanding Considerations
<p><b>Option C:</b> Combination. Have a separate Family Council with representatives that serve on the governing leadership team</p>	<p>Get all the benefits of the other two models.</p>	<p>Family voice is diluted within the existing governance leadership team; only a favored subgroup of families truly gain access to decision-making and influencing governance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How many/what percent of Family Council representatives will also serve on the governance leadership team, and how will they be selected?</li> <li>Will power remain housed with the governance leadership team, or will power still be shared between the Family Council and the other governing leadership team?</li> </ul>

### Tips for Compensating Families:

These tips are intended to support honoring the needs and preferences of families. However, some of the suggestions will fall outside the boundaries of what is allowed through federal funds. State or private funding may have a different set of allowable expenses, so as you determine your compensation structure, be sure to consult your financial team to find ways to honor the needs and preferences of families while remaining fiscally responsible.

- **Barrier removal:** For many families, it actually costs them to participate. Consider the cost of child care during meetings; meals; transportation; potential lost wages whether meeting during the day, night, or weekends. Consider language barriers and the costs associated with translation and interpretation services. Factor in these costs when determining compensation to ensure that barriers do not block engagement.
- **Honoring family expertise:** Honor the expertise of families as critically important to your organization’s work and provide compensation for their contributions. Participating parents will be sharing their experiences, personal stories, challenges, dreams for their children, etc. While no monetary sum can truly compensate parents for their vulnerability, factoring in payment to honor this unique expertise is critical.
  - ☐ Consider setting an hourly rate that aligns with the region’s median income as a baseline for determining an appropriate amount.
- **Diversify compensation options to match parent preference:** Public benefits are income-based, and some families may have limits as to how much cash compensation they can receive without jeopardizing access to benefits needed to support their family. Other families with greater socioeconomic means may also prefer not to be compensated for their participation through traditional methods. Consider giving parents options that allow flexibility (e.g., cash payments, donations) to mirror their preferences and to avoid causing harm.
  - ☐ Make the process and timeline for accessing compensation clear and upfront to support family financial planning.

## Section 3: Recruitment

Once principles and the Family Council structure are in place, a recruitment plan that confirms strategies that engage a variety of parents is essential in order to ensure that a diversity of backgrounds and experiences are being represented in the Family Council.

### Best Practices

**Prioritize diversity:** With particular focus on historically underserved populations, strive to recruit families representative of the racial, linguistic, economic, educational, geographic and cultural diversity of your region. This should include nontraditional family types (e.g., foster parents, children raised by other family members). Think of the families whose voices are traditionally left out, and consider over-representing their perspective on the council.

**Transparency:** Parents are more likely to take and keep a role within the council if they feel equipped to fulfill its responsibilities. When recruiting, be transparent and direct about the purpose of the council and roles, responsibilities, and expectations, so that everyone

understands what is being requested. Be open to feedback during recruitment, and affirm the participants' ability to continue shaping their role while also setting realistic expectations for participation.

- **Thoughtful onboarding:** As part of your recruitment process, share your plans for onboarding parent participants, highlight the impact they can make, and affirm collaboration and connection with other parent participants. Convey how parents will be supported through training and compensation to contribute confidently. Consider internal training on how to implement trauma-informed best practices to help equip staff to carefully engage with families.

### Tips for Implementation

- **Use data to determine diversity targets:** Clearly define what a fully diverse council looks like for your region, with an emphasis on including families who experience the most barriers to quality, affordable early childhood experiences. Use regional demographic data to set targets for recruitment. Examples: percent male parents, percent families who qualify for subsidy, percent people of color, percent in family day homes, percent families with children with a disability, etc.
- **Continue working to connect with parents not yet engaged in your work:** Many communities have a core group of “go-to” parents actively engaged in multiple areas of early childhood. Continue to engage these parents but stretch beyond your comfort zone and engage a diverse range of families truly reflective of the demographics of your community.
- **Collaborate with community organizations and leaders with population expertise:** Consider partnering with other organizations to better reach all families within your community, particularly those who are overburdened and/or underserved. Partner with these organizations to learn how to best engage all families. Seek the organization's guidance on communications and outreach, and adapt your recruitment plan based on their input.
- **Lead recruitment efforts with the invitation to make a difference; stipends/compensation can follow:** Family Council participation will not be of interest to every parent, so focus on recruiting families who need the system to evolve in order to better meet their needs. While compensation is key, your primary ask of parents is partnership in systems change. The role of compensation is to remediate barriers and honor their time. Leading with compensation can devalue the true potential impact of their voice and de-emphasize the value of making an impact.

### Indicators of Success:

- ✓ Recruitment goals reflect diverse family experiences.
- ✓ Network of culturally and linguistically diverse partners has expanded, and existing relationships have been strengthened.
- ✓ Thoughtful support for parent participation has been determined: onboarding plans, compensation, ongoing leadership development, connection to a network of other families, etc.

## Section 4 Participation and Engagement

An environment that is comfortable—with intentional planning that facilitates participation and engagement of participating families—is needed to assure that families speak up and participate. Consider the physical barriers that can hinder involvement and meet them with proactive solutions, so that your families feel they belong in the council and are prepared for the task at hand.

### Best Practices

- **Belonging and support:** Build community among parents to establish connections to the work and with each other. Create an environment where parents are supported—through coaching, mentorship, collective training, and shared decision-making. Design engagement opportunities in ways that consider the unique circumstances of families with young children.
- **Cultural awareness:** Consider culture when determining activities and types of engagement. Language and linguistic responsiveness, religion, food preference, ages of children, etc., should all be considered when building participation

opportunities with parents. Be sensitive to the group’s cultural preferences and build in opportunities for shared learning about different cultures within the council.

- **Communication and organization:** Communicate frequently to keep parents informed and included, using methods and means grounded in family preference (text, phone calls, email, social media, etc.). Calendars, agendas, meeting recordings and minutes, reminders, contact lists, and other key documents should be easily accessible and sent before or after meetings in a timely manner. Consider translation resources and interpreters; spell out acronyms; define commonly used terminology to avoid exclusionary language.

### Tips for Implementation

- Utilize fun and interactive meeting styles: Be creative and structure meetings to be interactive, fun, meaningful and aligned with the culture of the parents, instead of facilitating traditional, corporate-type meetings. Integrate music, activities with their children, small- and large-group exercises, and intentional and healthy meals that match what they would put on their dinner table.
- Leverage the power of community building and relational connectivity among families: Create space to see parents as human beings first, using icebreakers, trust-building exercises, buddy systems, etc. Create intentional opportunities for parents to get to know each other. Parents will be more deeply engaged when they feel a sense of connection to the work and each other.
- Have parents inform how they want to be engaged: During the first meeting, spend time asking parents what type of information, training, and resources they need in order to feel equipped and prepared to participate, collaborate, and lead. Find regular rhythms to check in with parents to reaffirm these preferences or shift when necessary. This could look like regularly creating meeting agendas that are informed by a representative group of families and partner organizations before sending to council participants ahead of time. To set ongoing parent participation goals, use tools like The Spectrum of Family Voice and Participation.
- Without supplanting the main purpose of the council, consider adding community building components: These could include icebreakers, group playdates, self-care packages, etc., that demonstrate an understanding of parents’ desires, and facilitate relationship building. If offering on-site child care, consider a location that allows space for the group to meet within view of the children, to increase parent comfort.

“Find out what interests parents and connect with them on their level. Make parents excited. Find out what parents like.”

### Indicators of Success:

- ✓ Agendas include structured opportunities for parents to build relationships and provide feedback.
- ✓ Consistent meeting attendance and participation from parents representing diverse family experiences.
- ✓ Strong relationships formed; council members and staff know each other.

## Section 5: Sustaining Family Participation

Every parent’s time is valuable. Retain council participation through well-planned meetings and processes, and by emphasizing the impact and value of parent contributions.

### Best Practices

- **Listen and respond:** Parents are more likely to remain engaged when they feel heard and can see how their voice is contributing to positive change. Build norms around actively listening to parents, reflecting back what they share to confirm understanding, and responding to what they share to demonstrate listening and responsiveness. This includes listening—and responding effectively—to barriers to participation, and confirming how parents would like to be compensated for their time, as mentioned on page 7 (Tips for Compensating Families).

- **Parent leadership development and deference:** Strive to have parents serve as leaders on the council. Consider having formal officers (chair, vice chair, secretary, treasurer), committee leads, and other leadership roles that create space for individual contributions to the group. Rotate assignments (e.g.: different parents responsible for the icebreaker each meeting) and aim for the agendas to be filled primarily with parent voices, not just staff voices.
- **Willingness to change:** Becoming stagnant can contribute to attrition in participation. While some issues in early childhood care and education may remain the same, the actual environment is constantly changing. The priorities and interests of families also change over time related to the age of their children and a number of other factors. Expect and embrace change to keep content and engagement relevant to parents.

“I’d like to see more insights from parents – and go from ‘This is an experience we had success in’ to teaching others how to have that same success.”

### Tips for Implementation

- Transparency and feedback loops: Celebrate every success, and acknowledge challenges: Parents want to know that their voice has made a difference. Creating rhythms of celebration and building in feedback loops can help keep parents engaged. Even when progress stalls or challenges arrive, keep parents in the loop and invite them to support problem solving.
- Beyond training in the beginning, invest in ongoing learning experiences with families: Continue to build in learning opportunities and experiences for parents, so they can grow individually and as a team. Continuously find ways to equip parents to confidently contribute to the council.
- Nurture individual relationships with parents: Relationships are the backbone of ongoing family engagement and family voice. Build in regular rhythms (monthly, quarterly, etc.) of individual check-ins with parents to gauge their experience with the council. Find ways to make them feel seen and known by the group and build in moments to cherish these relationships (birthdays, children’s birthdays, etc.).
- Expand participation opportunities beyond meetings: Develop ways for council members to participate effectively in training, collaboration and connection, and decision-making even when they can’t attend a scheduled meeting. For example, provide recordings of virtual meetings and meeting notes immediately after scheduled events, provide additional days for council members to provide feedback, reach out to other council members, or accept their votes via email.

“I want to see the results of my input and how I’m impacting my kids’ lives.”

### Indicators of Success:

- ☑ Parent perspectives and recommendations produce change.
- ☑ When council members complete a term of service, they recommend other parents to serve.
- ☑ Parent leadership in the Family Council evolves in response to parent interest, and there is a pipeline of parent leaders ready to serve in formal roles (chair, co-chair, secretary, treasurer, committee leader, etc.).

## Section 6: Evaluation

Lastly, evaluation clarifies outcomes. As you set your council into motion, incorporate regular evaluation to ensure you're on track to reach the goals set, course correct if needed, and articulate the impact of the council.

“I want to be able to see some goals or some milestones being hit because we're talking about big picture things, and it can take a while for these things to form.”

- **Results oriented through data:** In all phases of this work, track goals and outcomes and report data in real time for all stakeholders. Transparency and regular updates on both goals and their outcomes contribute to the overall success of the council. Be sure to collect data on the composition of the council (demographics, family size, intersections with the system — e.g., child care, benefits, subsidies); experience of participants (parent stories, documented experiences, challenges, successes); and impact of the group (influence on creation or reform of policy, program, resource distribution, etc.). Reflection and progress tracking should be an ongoing practice within the group.
- **Value and Impact:** Use qualitative and quantitative data to ensure the council participants continue to see value in the model and share that value broadly. To continue building value in and support for the council, share its impact with parent participants, organizational leadership and staff, other governing members, funders and stakeholders, and the broader community.
- **Accountability:** Define roles, stay true to the purpose of the council, and follow through on tasks and shared responsibilities. All goals may not be met, but success can be measured by how the council pivots to find new ways to meet their goals.



### Tips for Implementation

- Both parent experience on the council and impact matter: Evaluating both the impact of the family council and the experience of the family council are key. Be sure to measure how family voice made a difference in your evaluation plan alongside parents' satisfaction with their experience on the council.
- Each component of the change process can be evaluated: As council members, parents will influence decisions that impact policy, process, resource flows, and more. Remember to not only track when these shift or change, but to also evaluate whether that change caused the anticipated effect for families.
- Sharing evaluation results with both parents and staff: The results of your evaluation efforts should be easily accessible and shared with both staff and parents. Interpretation can be a helpful exercise with parents, followed by a process of using the results to help determine goals and plans for the next phase of work.

- Evaluate parent experience during each session: Create a check-in process/agenda item for each council meeting for reflection (e.g., what to keep doing [yellow light], start doing [green light], stop doing [red light]) to improve the experience and productivity of the council. Normalize receiving feedback freely and regularly.

**Indicators of Success:**

- ☑ Parents can articulate how their participation is making a difference.
- ☑ Feedback from parents is collected regularly, reviewed by staff, and results and subsequent shifts are shared with parents.
- ☑ Communication plans include sharing the impact of the council throughout the organization and community.

## **Continuous Quality Improvement Statement**

This first version of the Family Council Model Guide for Ready Regions has been developed in collaboration with several family voice and engagement professional organizations, based on best practices, and informed by parent perspectives, preferences and needs related to the design of system-level family engagement experiences. We expect that each region will use the guide in ways that meet their needs. We will continue to align it with the voices and choices of Virginia’s families, and update it based on feedback from Ready Regions on a regular basis.

We encourage all Ready Regions to also embrace continuous quality improvement. A successful Family Council is not defined by the perfect plan, but rather by its ability to remain nimble, responsive, and honor the diversity of family voice within their region. Expect your councils to evolve and change as you learn better ways to reach and engage parents and share what you are learning with your peer regions.

## References

[The Center for Family Voice Report](#) by Groundwork Ohio

[A Parent Engagement Handbook: The Parent Engagement Framework](#) by Illinois Action for Children

[A Framework for Assessing Family Engagement in Systems Change](#) by the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health

[International Association of Public Participation's Spectrum of Public Participation](#) from William Potapchuk

# Appendix

In this appendix, you will find applicable sample documents for elements of this work. These documents are meant to be supplementary resources for your region to reference and consider when creating your Family Councils.

Additional Resources for Principles:

The [Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health](#) identified four domains that are important for promoting and ensuring meaningful and sustainable family engagement at the systems level.

For each domain, you'll find proposed key criteria to help organizations support and enhance family engagement activities at the systems level. Organizations can use these criteria as an initial checklist or rephrase the criteria as questions to use as a self-assessment.

## Four Domains of Family Engagement in Systems

### Representation

- Reflect the diversity of the community (race, ethnicity, language, income, education level, and geography)
- Partner with family-led and community based organizations

### Transparency

- Provide access to relevant knowledge
- Practice partnership in all parts of the process

### Impact

- Identify what has changed and what the organizations or system of care is doing differently because families were involved

### Commitment

- Promote engagement as a core value
- Establish engagement at all levels, in all systems of care

# Resources for Family Council Structure:

Organization Name:

Ready Region:

## Family Council Overview and Role Description

### Organization Overview

Insert an overview of your organization here and any other standard language used within your organization's job descriptions.

### Ready Regions Overview

[Organization Name] currently serves as the Ready Regions Lead for Ready Region <Insert Geographic Designation and name>. This means we are responsible for convening partners serving families with children from birth to age five within our region to increase coordination, collaboration, accountability, and family engagement to support families in accessing what they need and choose. We are working to help every community in our region be:

- **Accountable.** Virginia's early education system must prepare children for success.
- **Parent-centered.** Families must be engaged in designing a system that works for them.
- **Responsive.** Parents must be able to choose the child care they want and need.
- **Reliable.** Early education programs need consistent supports to deliver quality services.
- **Bold.** Every community in Virginia should be a place where families can thrive.

**If position is housed outside the Ready Regions Lead, adjust the language to represent that Ready Regions partner.**

### Purpose of the Family Council

Families are at the center of everything we do, and the purpose of the Family Council is to consistently get feedback and input from a diverse group of parents to help inform our work. Understanding the experiences, preferences, and needs of families is critical to achieving our mission, and while we will continue engaging families through surveys, focus groups, and events, the Family Council will help us build an ongoing partnership with parents to better serve families within our region.

The council will meet virtually every third Thursday night from 8:00 – 9:30 PM, where we will mutually share ideas and generate solutions to improve the experience of families with young children. Parents will also have the opportunity to build relationships with each other and serve as change makers in early childhood, making a difference for their own children and thousands of other families in their region. The feedback and input of council members will help build and reform policies, practices, resource flows, planning and priorities in early childhood for our region. Compensation is provided for participating council members to help offset the cost of participation on the council (child care, meals, transportation, lost wages, etc.) and to honor their contributions and service on the council.

### Family Council Guiding Principles

- **Collaboration.** We believe the best solutions come from working together.
- **Flexibility.** Change is constant, and we are willing to adapt and shift to meet our goals.
- **Inclusivity.** Every child, parent, and family is different, and we want all families in our region to have what they need.
- **Family-centeredness.** Children and parents are at the center of everything we do.
- **Determination.** We believe real change is possible, so we will not give up on making life better for families in our region.

## Roles and Responsibilities of Family Council Members

- Share the experiences and perspectives of your family and others you know
- Participate in monthly council meetings
- Build relationships with other council members and <Organization Name> staff
- Contribute ideas and suggestions to help improve families' experiences in the early childhood community
- Offer insights and suggestions to plan the work of the Family Council
- Provide feedback on your experience on the council
- Communicate regularly with [Organization Name] staff, other council members, and others within your community about the work of the council
- Serve as an ambassador, championing access to the services and supporting families' desires
- Join relevant trainings, meetings, and events that support the work of the Family Council
- Facilitate building relationships with families outside the council to serve as a representative for other family experiences
- Serve a minimum of two years on the council and participate in at least 70 percent of monthly meetings

### [Organization Name] Commits to:

- Provide onboarding and ongoing training for all council members
- Solicit input and feedback from the council to finalize principles, responsibilities, and policies related to the council
- Offer administrative, technical, and operations support for the council
- Value the experiences of all council members, and actively listen to the experiences and preferences of families
- Honor the input of council members by being responsive and transparent on how council feedback is used
- Collect feedback on the experience of council members and make adjustments where needed
- Celebrate the success of the council, and work collaboratively to address challenges

## Compensation

All Family Council members will be provided with an annual stipend of \$1,800 to be paid in quarterly installments of \$450 on March 15, June 15, September 15, and December 15 during the term of service. Payment options include:

- Direct cash payments (mailed checks)
- Donations to the organization of their choosing

If you have questions, additional considerations around payment, or need more information, please contact [Organization Name's] Family Engagement Specialist, [first name/last name], at [email address, phone number, social media where appropriate (FB, IG, What's App, etc.)]

# Engagement Coordinator Job Description Sample Text

## Roles and Responsibilities

- Lead the creation and management of a regional family council.
  - ▣ Build the structure of the family council collaboratively with parents and community partners (council principles, recruitment plans, meeting frequency, stipend policy etc.)
  - ▣ Build relationships with families and organizations serving families within your region to support recruitment and culturally and linguistically responsive management of the council
  - ▣ Develop onboarding and ongoing training opportunities for council members
  - ▣ Create opportunities for feedback from parents, and honor that feedback through advocating for responsive integration of their input
  - ▣ Provide administrative, technical, and operational support of the council by co-creating agendas, sending reminders, activating parent-centered communication strategies, etc.
- Support equity-centered family engagement across community partners.
  - ▣ Coordinate/Provide training and TA to support internal capacity building and partner preparation for family voice (trauma-informed practices, implicit bias training, etc.)
  - ▣ Ensure the inclusion of diverse family perspectives reflective of those underserved and historically marginalized on the family council and throughout engagement activities
  - ▣ Coordinate outreach activities to broaden the impact of family engagement activities
  - ▣ Collaborate with the Virginia Department of Education regarding state and the Preschool Development Birth-5 grant specific family engagement initiatives, and participate in a community of practice with other Ready Regions family engagement leaders
- Utilize family engagement data to inform regional priorities and planning
  - ▣ Use Virginia Department of Education's Preschool Development Grant Family Engagement self-assessments and plans and other regional data as applicable to establish baseline regionally collaborative family engagement plans and goals
  - ▣ Collect and track data on family engagement efforts, including the family council
  - ▣ Track and co-analyze data on the experience of family council members and the impact of family engagement efforts
  - ▣ Establish plans to evaluate engagement activities, then steward changes based on the results

## Skills

- Proven relationship-building skills, with exceptional ability to collaborate within and across diverse teams
- Demonstrated ability to handle multiple projects concurrently
- Proficient computer and technological skills

## Experience

- Experience working with families with children (preferably ages 0-5) from historically and currently underserved communities
- Knowledge of the early childhood landscape (child care, Head Start, Virginia Preschool Initiative, home-based providers etc.)
- Project management experience with administrators
- Spanish-language proficiency desired but not required
- Computer and internet access from home

# Additional Resources for Participation and Engagement:

## Spectrum of Family Voice and Participation

Note that the intention for the Family Councils is to build an infrastructure that meets the basis for the levels of “engage, collaborate, and empower” mentioned below.

It should be a signal that the Family Council is not fully functioning or structured appropriately if it is operating at the “involve, inform, or consult” levels described below.

	Involve	Inform	Consult	Engage	Collaborate	Empower
Parent Participation Goal:	Parents are enrolled and receive a service	To provide parents with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and/or solutions	To obtain parent feedback on analysis alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with parents throughout the process to ensure that parent concerns and aspiration are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with parents in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of parents.
Promise to Parents:	The system will design policies and programs for you and other parent participants	The system will keep you informed.	The system will keep you informed, acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how parent feedback influenced the decision.	The system will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how parent input influenced the decision.	The system will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	The system will implement what you decide.

[The Center for Family Voice at Groundwork Ohio Report \(June 2021\)](#)

# Additional Resources for Evaluation:

## Sample goals and metrics for evaluation

- Experience: participation and engagement
  - ▣ Meeting attendance average (number and percentage of all council members who attend)
  - ▣ Response rate to emails and surveys soliciting feedback (number and percentage of all council members who respond)
  - ▣ Retention (number and percentage of council members who complete their full term)
  - ▣ Leadership (e.g., number and percentage of council members who led a segment of the agenda within the last six months: icebreaker, committee update, shared their story, etc.)
  - ▣ Experience: Include questions in a survey (quarterly, after each meeting, bimonthly, etc.), such as:
    - » Open-ended: What did you value most about today's meeting?; How can we improve our next meeting?; What questions, concerns or topics would you like to be discussed?
    - » Scale/rate (Strongly disagree—strongly agree): I had an opportunity to contribute to today's meeting; Today's meeting was a good use of my time; My voice is being heard; I can see how my participation on this council is making a difference; I feel connected to the other parents on this council, etc.
- Impact
  - ▣ Track progress on goals of the council; examples below:
    - » Approval: If your Family Council has approval authority (budgets, strategic plans, annual work plans, etc.), track versions of the document and how parent input contributed to shifts and changes.
    - » Organizational Priorities: If parent stories and experience serve as data to inform organization priorities each year, create a story bank or inventory of the stories shared as qualitative evidence, connect family stories to the final priorities, and record how those experiences influenced organizational priorities and the process.
    - » Engaging other families: If parents on the Family Council help draft/finalize family surveys and focus groups and serve as leaders for broader community outreach to understand family preferences, track the process, engagement strategies, numbers of families engaged, survey results, and qualitatively track how the Family Council informed engagement with other families and how the data influenced decision-making.
  - ▣ Track changes to policy, practices and resource flows influenced by families

# PDG Resources

Remember to utilize existing data within your region on family engagement. PDG's Family Engagement Self-Assessment Tool and Information Sheet are included below and can serve as a reference for the type of data you can access for planning, evaluating, and informing priorities within your community.

## Family Engagement Information Sheet

This information sheet provides an overview of the Family Engagement Self-Assessment and Community Planning process.

## Why Ask Communities to Focus on Family Engagement?

Families are children's first and forever teachers, and our early childhood system should honor them as such, giving them choice in where their children receive care and education, acknowledging their unique expertise on their children, and using their collective insights to shape the system.

## Why Ask Communities to Self-Assess Family Engagement?

While the state can signal importance, communities are best suited to strengthen collective family engagement, due to proximity, relationships, and trust. A delicate balance must be struck between placing the burden of leading family engagement on service providers (teachers and directors already tasked with heavy lifting in their roles) and making family engagement a collective responsibility at the community level.

Head Start has long led the way in pioneering family engagement strategies, thus Head Start frameworks (specifically the Parent, Family and Community Engagement or PFCE framework) and publications served as the basis for this tool.

## What Is the Family Engagement Self-Assessment Tool?

The goal of this tool is to encourage conversations at the community level to get a clearer picture of how family engagement is being effectively and equitably supported within programs across the community. This tool should not be used for precise data collection or for accountability purposes.

Note that this self-assessment process is similar to that for Coordinated Enrollment. Coordinated Enrollment is a subset of family engagement, but we have intentionally separated it out to allow for more in-depth conversations. For the purpose of this exercise, think of family engagement as everything except family experience in the enrollment process

## What Does the Family Engagement Self-Assessment Cover?

The Family Engagement Self-Assessment Tool will help the state understand how early childhood providers in your community coordinate effective and equitable family engagement across the following five areas:

- **Program Leadership.** Leaders guide staff to understand their unique contributions to family engagement and make resource decisions to promote it. Families see themselves represented in leadership and are invited into the process of ensuring leadership is diverse and representative of families served.
- **Program Environment.** Facilities are welcoming; staff understand, value and support family culture and trust. Systematic communication is family-centered and responsive.
- **Family Partnership.** Staff are responsive to the varied needs of the full diversity of families, and reciprocal and respectful relationships that acknowledge families' critical role in children's progress are developed. Two-generation efforts support families, deepen trust, and open doors to use of resources and services, including training and support for transitions.
- **Teaching and Learning.** Staff engage families as partners in their children's learning and development, building on a shared understanding of the assets of diverse family cultures and the challenges and unique circumstances families have that relate to care and instruction. Assessment data are shared regularly with families to create a more holistic picture of the child. Families and staff observe and learn from each other and work together to address challenges in positive ways.
- **Community Partnership.** Educators build diverse, collaborative relationships that support positive child and family outcomes while in their programs and through transitions. Family engagement moves into the community, as families mentor each other and advocate alongside staff to address obstacles to services. The strength of deep familial bonds and social networking is leveraged through the empowerment of families.

## How Should the Family Self-Engagement Tool Be Used?

Self-assessments occur during an annual winter cycle (December-February). There are no consequences associated with this self-assessment and there are no wrong answers. Rather, the state will use data from these self-assessments to help develop strategies for better supporting communities in meaningfully and equitably engaging families in their work.

Please note that the state is not prescribing any particular approach or intervention at this time, but rather the goal is to get a better understanding of what is happening across the Commonwealth. These results may also inform future funding opportunities and guide allocation of resources to support community needs.

Each community should submit one unified response to the Family Engagement Self-Assessment.

- Communities should convene a session (lasting approximately 90-120 minutes) with as many program partners as possible, including at least one family day home, child care director, Head Start director/regional coordinator, school-based (e.g., VPI) principal or coordinator, ECSE program representative, and a representative from a local department of social services office at minimum.
- Communities are encouraged to include other community partners, such as early intervention providers, family advocates, pediatricians, or other organizations as appropriate.

Any questions regarding family engagement coordination should be sent to [Tamilah.Richardson@doe.virginia.gov](mailto:Tamilah.Richardson@doe.virginia.gov). Additional guidance on convening the session and completing the self-assessment can be found in the tool.

## Family Engagement Self-Assessment Tool

This Family Engagement Self-Assessment Tool is designed to help evaluate the degree to which early childhood programs, providers in your community, and community-level leaders effectively and equitably involve families across the following five areas:

<b>Program Leadership</b>	Leaders guide staff to understand their unique contributions to parent, family, and community engagement, and make staffing and resource decisions to promote engagement. Families see themselves represented in leadership and are invited into the process of ensuring leadership is diverse and representative of families served.
<b>Program Environment</b>	The facility is welcoming and inviting, and space is used to support interactions and relationships. Staff understands cultures, builds trust, promotes engagement. Cultural and linguistic responsiveness are evident in materials and resources. Systematic, regular communication is increasingly family-centered and responsive.
<b>Family Partnership</b>	Staff build ongoing, reciprocal, and respectful relationships, acknowledging families' expertise about their children and contributions to their progress, and are responsive to the needs of the full diversity of families. Systematic mechanisms are in place to assess and identify familial challenges that may affect the child's access and/or success. Multigenerational efforts (e.g., home visits, family meetings), and staff seek opportunities to build peer support across families. With deepened trust, doors are opened to families' use of resources and services and staff assist with navigating pathways to access. Training and support are provided to families for transitions.
<b>Teaching and Learning</b>	Staff engage families as partners in their children's learning and development and as partners in planning classroom/home activities, building on a shared understanding of the assets of diverse family cultures and the challenges and unique circumstances families have that relate to care and instruction. Staff model specific learning strategies to promote learning during routines and play time, and families realize they are children's "forever" teachers. Families are informed about the purpose of assessment and staff regularly share data with families so as to create a picture of the child as a whole. Families and staff observe and learn from each other's interactions with the child and work together to address challenging child behaviors together in positive ways.
<b>Community Partnership</b>	Educators build diverse collaborative relationships that support positive child and family outcomes, including libraries, health centers, schools/divisions, sources of economic support, the workforce, higher ed, human services agencies, faith-based organizations, businesses, and others. The strength of deep familial bonds and social networking is leveraged through the empowerment of families, and family engagement moves into the community as families serve as mentors for one another and advocate together in their community. Staff and families participate in interagency coalitions to address obstacles to services. Program leadership provides support for transitions.
There are no consequences associated with the answers provided. Rather, the state will use data gathered from these self-assessments to inform efforts to improve the engagement of families at community and state levels.	

## Completion and Submission Guidance

Each community should submit one unified response to the Family Engagement Self-Assessment.

SCALE: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree

### Program Leadership

**1. All program leaders and teachers believe they have a role to play in parent, family, and community engagement.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**2. All community and program leaders make staffing and resource decisions to promote family engagement.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**3. Families see themselves represented in leadership and are invited into the process of ensuring leadership is diverse and representative of families served (e.g., included in hiring panels).**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

### What is happening? Who is doing what? What are we doing collectively?

Comments, Examples, or Evidence (optional):

### Program Environment

**4. All facilities are welcoming, inviting, and intentionally planned to support interactions and relationships.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**5. All leaders and teachers understand the importance of culture for all families served and the need to build trust and communicate respect in a culturally responsive manner.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**6. All resources and communication materials reflect the culture and linguistic diversity of all families served.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**7. All communication is frequent, responsive, and increasingly centers on the family.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

## What is happening? Who is doing what? What are we doing collectively?

Comments, Examples, or Evidence (optional):

### Family Partnership

**8. We all recognize families' expertise about their children and seek reciprocal, respectful relationships.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**9. Our community supports all families intergenerationally, working on goals for parents/caregivers and children.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**10. Mechanisms are in place to assess and identify the needs of the full diversity of all family cultures and challenges that may affect children's access/success. All leaders and teachers know where to refer families when they encounter challenges.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**11. Our community offers opportunities to build peer support across all families, connecting them to each other.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**12. All families feel safe accessing additional resources, services, and supports in our community.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**13. Mechanisms exist to help all families navigate pathways to accessing supplementary supports/services and regularly monitor all families' progress. Positive feedback loops, outlined by a strengths-based, affirmative inquiry approach, define the monitoring process.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**14. Training and support are provided to all families for transitions.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**What is happening? Who is doing what? What are we doing collectively?**

Comments, Examples, or Evidence (optional):

**Teaching and Learning**

**15. All leaders/teachers view families as their children's first and forever teachers, thus modeling specific learning strategies for all families to use during home routines and play.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**16. A shared understanding of the assets of diverse family cultures and the challenges and unique circumstances families have that relate to their educational experiences is built into care and instruction engagement strategies.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**17. All leaders/teachers regularly share data with all families and explain results to give parents/caregivers greater insight on their child's learning and development.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**18. All leaders/teachers share observations about their interactions with children and work together with all families to positively address challenges.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**What is happening? Who is doing what? What are we doing collectively?**

Comments, Examples, or Evidence (optional):

## Community Partnership

**19. All leaders/teachers build diverse partnerships and a patchwork of services in the community to serve families (e.g., libraries, health centers, human services agencies, faith-based organizations, businesses).**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**20. Alumni families and current families are empowered to develop mentoring relationships and work together as advocates for improved services and increased access in their communities, and the strength of deep familial bonds and social networking is thereby leveraged.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**21. Staff and families participate in interagency coalitions to address obstacles to services.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**22. Program leadership across agencies collaborate on and provide transition support to families.**

Strongly agree       Agree       Disagree       Strongly disagree

**What is happening? Who is doing what? What are we doing collectively?**

Comments, Examples, or Evidence (optional):

