Framework for Managing with Data to Achieve Outcomes in Child Welfare: An Overview

Developed by the National Resource Center for Child Welfare Data and Technology (NRC-CWDT), the Framework for Managing with Data is a tool to assist agencies in using data, at all levels, to improve outcomes for children.

Across the country and throughout disciplines, the field of child welfare is becoming much more data-oriented, leading to increased opportunities to improve outcomes for children and families. Agencies and partners are collecting and sharing more accurate information, leading to better insight on practice and performance.
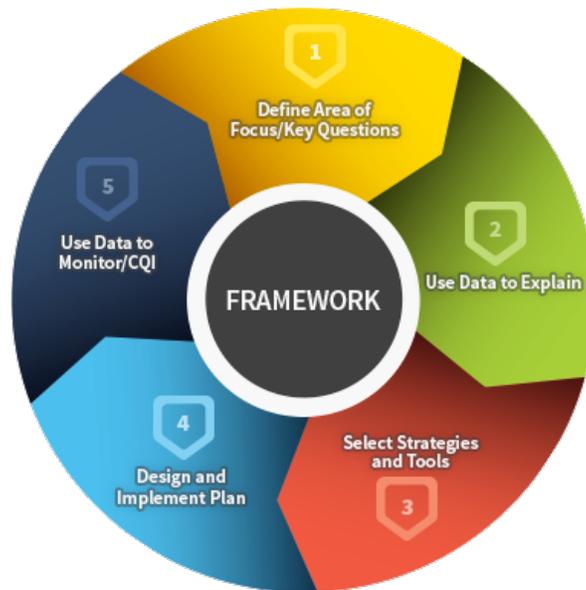
With this evolution come new challenges. Many agencies are overloaded with data reports that aren't being used to their full potential while others are just starting to use data to drive practice and performance and not quite sure where to start. The NRC-CWDT, with the help of practicing child welfare data and program managers, has developed the Framework for Managing with Data to Achieve Outcomes in Child Welfare (the Framework) to address these challenges.

Child welfare staff and stakeholders are generally familiar with planning for program change, but are not as skilled at making data and data reports an integral part of their planning. The framework provides a way for keeping data a focus in all phases of the planning process.

The Framework will help you:

- Engage staff at all levels and community partners throughout the process
- Clarify and focus on an area or issue of interest;
- Consider key questions within your focus that you want to answer with data
- Identify and select the appropriate and most useful data to examine the issue and answer your questions.
- Analyze data to explain what might be driving practice;
- Select appropriate strategies/tools;
- Develop an implementation plan that includes data monitoring; and,
- Monitor and assess implementation of the plan in relation to the expected results.

Below you will find an overview of the Framework describing each step with a link to more detailed information and tools that are available through our website.

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Step 1: Define an Area of Focus and Key Questions. It begins with collaboration. This is the time to bring agency staff, community partners, and stakeholders together to define the issue of focus. It is important to share observations on what is taking place, see the issue from all sides, and ensure there is consensus on defining the issue. Time must be spent ensuring agreement on the terminology being used, whether data are available, and whether the purpose of this effort is consistent with the agency's practice model. This is also the time to discuss timelines and set initial expectations for change and improvement.

Once the area of focus is defined, then you'll move forward to use data to explain what might be taking place.

Step 2: Use Data to Explain. In this step you generate hypotheses as to why you are getting the results demonstrated by the data. Focus on what might be driving the performance before you decide how to fix it. It is important to have representation of those involved in the process and to generate multiple interpretations.

When considering your data, program and data/IT staff should meet to discuss the data available to measure the issue, whether the data are of sufficient quality and the analyses best for the job (e.g., trend vs. point-in-time data; prospective or retrospective data; using quantitative data, qualitative data, or both).

If you have done your analysis well, you can better select strategies/tools that speak directly to the needs of your system.

Step 3: Use Data to Select Strategies and Tools. Once you've finished the work of explaining what is taking place, that is, why you are getting the performance you observe, you develop the strategies/tools needed to support the work. For example, you might need a report tool that lets workers know of events coming up in their caseload, or a better assessment tool or a stronger family engagement strategy. The key is selecting strategies/tools that fit your situation. Just because a specific strategy or tool is evidence-based or has worked somewhere else does not necessarily mean it is the best tool for your agency. If it does not address the conditions in your jurisdiction, it will not help to improve outcomes.

Once strategies/tools have been selected, it is time to put a plan in place for implementing the strategies/tools into your system.

Step 4: Design and Implement Plan. Now that you have selected your strategies/tools to address the issue, it is important to create a plan for implementation. There should be two aspects to your plan:

- First, you must implement tasks needed to effectively change the business process in line with your strategies. This may involve providing new tools to staff, changes in policies, procedures and practice, and/or training. Your plan needs to be clear as to the intent of the changes in reference to the desired outcomes. Consider community partners, such as the courts or service providers, who may be needed to implement specific strategies.

- The second focus of your plan is measuring for the initial and intermediate outcomes expected. As implementation goes forward, you should have reports or tools to measure its effects on the system at all levels. It is important to develop a thorough plan for use so there is a clear understanding of the purpose of the report or tool and any user expectations.

To be successful, both of these plan components should be integrated rather than perceived as a "data" versus a "practice" initiative.

Once the plan is implemented, the next step is to monitor and evaluate.

Step 5: Use Data to Monitor/CQI. A critical step of the framework is incorporating a monitoring process after implementing the plan, so that ultimately, you can assess whether the new process is successful. It is important to have established criteria to assess whether the implementation demonstrates improvement. There should also be a plan in place to solicit, receive and analyze feedback from those implementing the plan. This will be important in assessing overall success.

Be prepared for unintended consequences or effects. Changes or improvements in one practice area can affect other areas of the system. There may also be outside forces that affect outcomes, such as media attention or legislative changes.

Finally, if you are not seeing the results you were seeking, be prepared to make adjustments and follow through with those adjustments in your business process.

We have defined and explained the five Steps of the Framework, but our work is not complete. The use of data to drive better outcomes for children is a continuous process that you will want to revisit and review in order to ensure that the data being used and the processes behind it are in fact improving both the services provided and outcomes for the children and families being served.

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