

Program Administrators' Voices

Reflections on the NAEYC Accreditation Process

Early childhood education professionals work in environments that require them to respond quickly to the day's events. They learn to expect the unexpected and are ready for whatever surprises the young children in their care might present. But early childhood teachers and directors must also know how to slow down and think about their work. Engaging in reflective practice is essential for improving all aspects of early childhood program quality.

Reflecting on practice

NAEYC's accreditation of programs serving young children helps program staff strengthen their reflective skills. The Self-Study process, Self-Assessment process, and preparation of Annual Reports are all steps that encourage teachers and program administrators to think about how far they have come in improving their programs and what they need to focus on next.

"I sincerely believe that going through Self-Study does improve programs, as it should," says Lela Messick, the director of the Children's Achievement Center in Tucson, Arizona (part of the Easter Seals Blake Foundation). Messick and other administrators across the country say that preparing for NAEYC Accreditation has helped them gain a clearer under-

standing of the activities and routines that they followed every day but perhaps hadn't realized could be improved.

For example, Children's Achievement Center formed a Self-Study team to examine how teachers interact with families. By keeping communication journals, the staff discovered it is easier to connect with some parents on a daily basis than with others. "It took some creativity and commitment to answer the question, 'If we can't meet face-to-face with some parents every day, in what other ways can we communicate with and include these families in program decision making?'" Messick adds. These discussions led to new strategies for involving and informing busy parents, such as sending home photographs and notes about what the children were doing, as well as calling or e-mailing parents every few days.

Communication with families is an area that has also received more attention at Friendship House, a child care center in the north Georgia city of Dalton. Program manager Tracy Defore says that teachers now think more strategically about correspondence and other items sent home to parents. As a result, she notes, turnout at parent gatherings has been strong.

Learning through portfolios

Program staff at Friendship House have found that in compiling classroom and program portfolios—two elements of the NAEYC Accreditation process—they delve more deeply into document-

ing daily activities and curriculum implementation. When NAEYC assessors visit programs, they review the portfolios as evidence of what takes place in the program over time. This information supplements the observations that occur during the site visit.

At Little Meadows Learning Center (part of Hildebrandt Learning Centers) in Dallas, Pennsylvania, the staff have learned to focus classroom portfolios on the essential elements of their program. "I used to have a portfolio that you needed a truck to move," says Mary Lou Donahue, the director of the employer-sponsored center, which serves about 100 families. She adds that now teachers have a better understanding of which materials they should include as evidence of their communication with families about the children's experiences.

Preparing the portfolios also helps program staff explain to families what takes place in the classroom each day, directors say. "We needed to think both about how we are meeting the criteria and how we can show that to the outside world," says Jeannette Corey, the assistant executive director for youth services at the Phipps Community Development Corporation, a nonprofit agency serving families in New York City.

At the agency's Phipps Head Start Center in the Bronx, program leaders created a staff handbook to make sure everyone interpreted the programs' practices and regulations the same way. The handbook served as the foundation for the program portfolio. As staff members examined the program's relation-

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Benefits for the entire community

At the Scottdale Child Development and Family Center, outside Atlanta, Georgia, the team relationship that developed as part of the reaccreditation process last year extended beyond the staff to include the program's board of directors, families, and other community partners, according to director Barbara Clay.

"It aligned all of us to go for this common goal," Clay claims, adding that strategies that were used during that period, such as focus groups with parents and weekly administrative meetings, are still being followed in order to work on the organization's strategic plan and annual reports for NAEYC. She adds that another benefit of the reaccreditation process was that the entire staff learned about the NAEYC standards for programs serving young children: "Sometimes just the education specialist or the teachers know that information about child development."

Because the 10 NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards cover all aspects of an early childhood program, directors and teachers take a

thorough look at their work instead of focusing on particular areas in which the need to improve may be more obvious. Everything from hand-washing frequency to professional development support receives attention.

At the Phipps Head Start program, teachers already received reimbursement for tuition when they earned a bachelor's or master's degree. But reviewing the educational goals for the entire staff motivated several assistant teachers to seek more training as well, Corey reports. Five of them are currently working toward a Child Development Associate credential.

Even though enrolling in Self-Study is the first step toward earning accreditation, programs don't have to work on reaching that goal in order to benefit from the process. The tools and the process can improve all programs, even those that don't intend to seek NAEYC Accreditation.

At Little Meadows, Donahue explained that she won't be working toward reaccreditation for at least another year, but she is already using the Self-Study process to set goals for the future. "It keeps you trying to attain a higher level of quality," Donahue says. "Nobody knows it all in this industry."

ship with the community—a relationship covered in NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standard 8—they saw opportunities to conduct more outreach activities.

"We have always done some wonderful things with our children and parents," Corey says, "but the reaccreditation process led us to reflect on . . . how we advocate for their needs as well as ours." As part of the enhanced community outreach, the program's annual health fair this year will now be open to a diverse mix of organizations, including another child care center nearby, a senior citizen dance troupe, and a local youth drama program.

As teachers in her program prepared the portfolios, Corey noticed a greater degree of collaboration and sharing. Teachers now more frequently ask their colleagues about instructional materials and practices. "The portfolios are a huge amount of work," she said. "[but] they can be useful beyond just using them for accreditation."

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- Enrollment in Self-Study (Step 1)
- Application and Self-Assessment (Step 2)
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Programs may apply for NAEYC Accreditation Scholarships corresponding with different steps of the process, but must submit a new application and supporting documents for each step.

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