

THREE TOOLS TO DEVELOP YOUR ACTION PLAN

Researching Promising Practices, Programs and Practices Assessment, and Selecting Your Strategies

The following tools, **Researching Promising Practices, Programs and Practices Assessment** and **Selecting Your Strategies** will help you create an inventory of potential strategies for your action plan. The Researching Promising Practices tool will help you to develop questions to critically review and evaluate the information you gather. The Programs and Practices Assessment tool will allow you to describe the elements of each program or activity by compiling information such as location, population served and number of volunteers available. The Selecting Your Strategies tool will help you to determine what programs are already in existence and what programs and activities may be needed to address your results. Each of the worksheets would be focused on one particular result area. Develop a timeline to guide this research and either form a subcommittee or assign specific staff to conduct the research.

Researching Promising Practices

1. **SELECT** the result that you are starting with. For example: Result: Children Succeed in School
2. **DEVELOP** a set of research questions to guide the search. What are the most promising approaches or practices for achieving this result? What evidence exists that a particular approach or practice is effective?
3. **REVIEW** high-quality research and evaluation reports. Research does not need to be exhaustive but should include reputable sources. Sources for research on promising practices include the Internet, libraries, published literature, county-to-county information, the United Way, foundations, nationally known experts and organizations related to the priority area, and local programs that have conducted evaluations. Ask local “experts” in the particular field of interest what they think are key sources of research information. Take advantage of information that has already been collected and analyzed by other groups. Be sure to seek information about the experience of those receiving services, not just about program outcomes. For example, some agencies and service providers may have qualitative data of community members’ own evaluation services.
4. **NARROW** the search. The more specific you are, the more effective your research will be. For example, a general search for programs to enhance student success in school will yield an enormous number of programs, activities, opinions and speculations. Narrowing your search to focus on the issues you identified through your data collection will help you focus your search.
5. **SUMMARIZE** the findings.

Tip: Examining Evidence-Based Practice

Increasing attention to “evidence-based practice” can have a significant impact on the way communities select interventions or programs. Evidence-based practice typically refers to programs, services and policies that have empirical evidence through randomized control studies. Focusing on interventions with a strong evidence base has helped many communities achieve better results while also attracting the support of public and private funders and key community stakeholders like local businesses. However, while it is always important to consider the evidence that supports particular programs or practices, remember that a comprehensive action plan should contain comprehensive strategies that reflect the unique needs and resources in your community.

Communities should therefore feel comfortable using the best research available when making the case for why certain strategies and interventions could improve outcomes. In many cases, it has not been possible to do a large scale evaluation of a program using a randomized control group and you may find that one of your proposed programs is not “evidence-based” as typically defined. However, there might be other data that demonstrates its effectiveness. For example, data from pre- and post-program evaluations is one way of showing whether or not a program has effectively produced positive outcomes for participants. Looking at what the research says about how to impact child and family outcomes could also inform your decision-making.

As you evaluate at different interventions, keep in mind the following:

- What gaps in services and resources were revealed through your needs assessment and asset mapping?
- What existing strategies, if expanded or further resourced, could fill those gaps?
- What interventions has the community identified as solutions?
- What does the research say about the challenges and opportunities that impact your results?
- Are there common themes and recommendations in the research that support your proposed interventions?
- What evidence-based practices have been proven to achieve the results you are seeking?
- Have those practices been shown to work with populations that are similar to those in your community?
- Have they been shown to work in neighborhoods that have characteristics like yours?
- Are there common elements that have made these practices successful? How would your interventions incorporate those elements?
- What kind of community infrastructure and capacity does the research suggest needs to be in place to ensure success?
- What resources would be needed to replicate the practice, bring it to scale in the community and sustain it over time?

How Do We Choose the Best Strategies?

As you begin to develop a comprehensive mix of potential strategies, each program or activity should be examined for its potential contribution to improving overall results. As you think about what might work in your community, keep in mind that putting in place new programs is not enough. Community partners need to work together to develop an array of services, supports and opportunities that are tailored to the needs of their communities.

In order to evaluate your strategies, we suggest coming up with selection criteria. Your criteria will allow you to prioritize the list of strategies that work best for you. In *Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough*, Mark Friedman suggests that the best strategies have four main criteria:

Specificity. Is the strategy about a specific action? For example, “everyone should have housing” is vague and not specific. Instead, “build 10 new units of low-income housing” is a specific action that can be implemented.

Leverage. Will it make a big or little difference? All strategies are not created equal. Some strategies will have a higher yield or a greater impact on your result. Evaluating the type of impact a strategy will have will be important.

Values. Is it consistent with your community's values? Your community may have come up with actions that are specific and have high leverage, but are not actually consistent with other values. Making sure that you select strategies that align with your desired results will be important.

Reach. Is it feasible to do it this year, next year or three to 10 years? Determining the reach of a particular strategy lets you know whether it can be done and by when. Your community should figure out a timeline for when a strategy can be successfully achieved.

As we have already emphasized in this chapter, you will also want to ensure that all community partners have the chance to give feedback on what strategies might work. Seek out those who have expertise in the particular strategies you are investigating. Talk to families as well as frontline workers that provide services about what they think is feasible and desirable. Ask residents and neighborhood leaders who have been in the community for a long time whether your strategies have been attempted in the past, and if so, what the pitfalls or accomplishments were. Ask leaders in the school district or local government what they think are the opportunities and barriers to implementation.

Researching Promising Practices

Result			
Steps	Plan	Coordinators	Timeframe
Develop a set of research questions.			
Access high-quality research and evaluation reports.			
Narrow the search based on what issues you identified in your data collection.			
Summarize the findings. Use the Promising Practices Inventory, Parts I and 2.			

Programs and Practices Assessment

For each program and activity you identify with your data and research, complete a description using the assessment.

(Circle One)

Existing Formal Program or Informal Activity or Resource
Promising Practice Program or Approach

Description

Critical Program Components

Evidence of Effectiveness and Supporting Research

Implementing Organization

Location

Target Population

Maximum Service Capacity

Months/Days/Hours of Operation

Staff/Volunteers Involved

Funding Source

Years in Operation

Partnering Organizations

Program Contact

Other Notes

Selecting Your Strategies

This tool will help you inventory what you have currently, what promising practices you might add to your plan and what is missing. Write the result across the top of the inventory. The “What Works” column is used to list promising practices. Information about existing programs, activities and resources can be added to the “What We Have” column. This will help with an analysis of “What Is Missing.”

Result			
What Works–Promising Practices	What We Have		What Is Missing
	<i>Existing Formal Programs and Resources</i>	<i>Existing Informal Resources and Activities</i>	