

Jan. 2, 2015

MEMORANDUM

TO: York ASD Partnership
FROM: Susan Taylor Simpson
RE: Recommendations for Future Structural Accountability and Sustainability

In August, 2014 the York ASD Partnership (YASDP) contracted with ProAct Ideas to document the YASDP Experience and to make recommendations for future structural accountability and sustainability. The documenting part of the contract will result in an interactive website that will be launched in the early spring of 2015. This memo fulfills the recommendations part of the contract.

The recommendations contained within this memo were informed by a Reflection Session held with members of the Partnership on November 19, 2014. As some key leaders were unable to attend on that date, a follow-up conference call was held on December 9, 2014 with additional opportunity for written input from others.

Reflection on What Have We Learned

As members of the Partnership discussed what has been learned through the YASDP journey, five major themes emerged:

1. Collaboration Works

- Collaboration puts people with ASD and their families in the centre of the system of support.
- Collaboration is a slow and hard process but it has brought benefits that could not have been realized by any one agency or partner on their own.

2. Measuring Matters

- Even though we know that the YASDP collaboration has helped families and service providers achieve their goals, it is more important than ever to be able to measure positive impacts of collaboration and a system-wide approach.

3. Funding and Supporting the Work

- Working together in a collaborative way requires resources and infrastructure.
- YASDP needs to explore and focus on securing sustainable funding and support for the long-term.

4. Streamlining for Success

- Much has been accomplished in the past five years and now YASDP is entering into a phase of sustaining and renewing.
- YASDP must not, however, rest on its laurels – now is the time to streamline for success.

5. Sharing the Learnings

- YASDP has been a successful model for improving the system of support for people with ASD and their families in York Region. Where and how can these learnings be transferred to other systems?

Implications for the Future

The following section discusses the implications of each of the five themes for the future structural accountability and sustainability of the Partnership:

1. Collaboration Works

Collaboration is not just a new way of working together, as a system-wide approach it is absolutely critical to ensure people with ASD and their families have access to seamless, integrated supports. Collaboration requires complex, multi-partner relationships which are made even more challenging by diverse and frequently competing priorities and constantly changing policy and funding demands.

The success of YASDP is largely attributed to the commitment by all partners to work collaboratively together. When asked about collaboration, partners repeatedly mentioned the importance of trust and communication. These are indeed the foundations for successful collaboration but, as research has shown¹, successful collaboration also requires process and structure. The results of a collaboration survey completed by partners in 2010 and again 2014, indicated the same three lowest collaboration scores: i) adequate funding to support the process and structure; ii) adequate people power; and iii) people able to speak on behalf of their organizations.

Collaboration requires intentional and deliberate efforts to sustain its successes. As YASDP moves forward into the future, it will need to consider the following questions:

- How can we resource and support our collaborative process and structure?
- How can we maintain trust and communication between all partners?

2. Measuring Matters

While there is consensus among all partners that YASDP has increased overall satisfaction for families and service providers, there are different perspectives on the specific impact of YASDP. Generally-speaking families feel YASDP is very effective at giving a voice to their concerns and being a vehicle for influencing the provision of services and supports in York Region. Service provider agencies are not as consistent in their assessment of the positive impacts of YASDP. Many ask questions along the lines of: “How do we know that we are making a difference?”; “How are we changing the system of support?” and “Are we achieving the outcomes we think we are achieving?”

As YASDP moves into the future, it will need to pay attention to measurement. Measuring effectiveness (what works and why?) will provide evidence to sustain the collaborative partnership – which, as discussed above, requires resources to support its process and structure. Measurement also helps to guide strategies and priorities so that people with ASD and their families continue to have access to the services and supports they need.

¹ The Amherst H. Wilder Foundation www.wilder.org has been conducting research on the successful elements of collaboration since 1992.

There are several challenges around measurement for YASDP. The first challenge is to find a balance between what matters to children, youth, and adults with ASD and their families and what matters to service providers. Another way to think about this is to consider measurement in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Quantitative measurement suggests a more rigorous approach to measuring and reporting effectiveness of a collaborative, systems approach. For participating partners that are asked to allocate funding from their agency's budget to support the work of YASDP, this is of critical importance. Qualitative measurement suggests more effective ways of telling stories and communicating the positive impact derived from working collaboratively together. It is important to recognize that both forms of measurement are of value and, in fact, a healthy assessment of collaborative efforts such as YASDP requires aspects of both quantitative and qualitative measurements.

Another challenge around quantitative measurement is the lack of retrospective measures to form a base against which change can be measured. For this challenge YASDP could seek assistance from evaluation experts who can help to identify historical indicators and determine current indicators that can be used as "base" measures.

A final challenge for measurement is to actually resource and fund the work of measurement. In a classic "catch 22" dilemma, without evidence of positive impact it is difficult to justify the additional resources needed to measure impact. And yet, unless YASDP finds a way through this classic dilemma and increases its attention to measurement in the future, it will undermine its continued success by failing to demonstrate positive impact.

3. Funding and Supporting the Work

As previously mentioned under the *Collaboration Works* heading, it takes deliberate and intentional efforts to support the work of a collaboration. YASDP has been fortunate in having an abundance of strong leaders from both the family and the service provider communities. As the collaboration moves forward it will need to pay attention to the continued recruitment of new members and the development of strong leaders.

Funding the work of the Partnership will also be important and, as discussed under the *Measuring Matters* heading, will be much easier to secure with good quantitative and qualitative measures of success to demonstrate impact.

4. Streamlining for Success

The challenging early years of establishing the Partnership, creating its first strategic plan and developing the structure to support its work are now in the past. The new challenges are about sustaining the current work while also reviewing, renewing and sustaining its future structure and goals.

As YASDP undertakes this review, it will want to reflect on its past success at "chunking" the work (i.e. sequencing doable tasks). Going forward, YASDP will need to be ruthlessly strategic in order to avoid the mistake of adding more new and improved goals to those that they have already embraced. A critical analysis of what the Partnership can let go of and what will help to really "move the needle" will be required. A logical starting point for this analysis is a review of the workplan and achievements of the working groups with a view to those that can be closed out and tasks that can be consolidated under a different working group and/or terms of reference.

5. Sharing the Learnings

YASDP has been a successful model for improving the system of support for people with ASD and their families in York Region. In looking at where and how these learnings can be transferred to other systems, YASDP partners have suggested using this approach for adults with ASD and for adult developmental services. Also, YASDP has been asked to share its journey and success with other communities seeking to replicate the collaborative, systems-wide approach to services for children, youth and adults with ASD and their families.

Members of the Partnership have noted that, as much as they would like to share their learnings with others through presentations and workshops, it is time-consuming and a demand on resources that is difficult to sustain. The launch of the interactive website in April, 2015 will help to alleviate that pressure but the YASDP might also want to consider sharing its expertise through a consulting fee model, which would address the resource requirement and quite possibly become a fund-raiser.

Recommendations

There is a long list of recommendations suggested by this reflection and review of implications for the future. However, as previously mentioned, it is important to be focussed and strategic as YASDP moves into a phase of sustaining and renewing. As a result, the following three recommendations are proposed as the starting point for the future:

1. Measuring Matters

YASDP should seek a partnership with researchers from post-secondary institutions, participating partner agencies and parent advocacy representatives to develop an Evaluation and Measurement Strategy. The first step could be the establishment of an ad hoc working group to develop terms of reference, goals and outcomes.

2. Funding and Supporting the Work

YASDP should develop a succession plan for recruiting and orienting new members and supporting the development of a cadre of leaders who can build on the foundation of past successes.

3. Streamlining for Success

YASDP should move into a new strategic planning process with an eye to identifying future priorities and reviewing how the existing committee and working group structure needs to change to support those priorities. This strategic plan needs to build off existing efforts and, ideally, would be rolled out in a way that allows current priorities to gradually “shift” shift towards new priorities.

Conclusion

When the members of YASDP gathered for their Reflection Session in November, they developed a shared aspiration statement. They said: “We want a community where there is respect and appreciation for all, where there is a sense of belongingness and where everyone can be happy and safe and live a fulfilling life.”

With this shared aspiration as the guiding light and follow-through on the recommendations proposed in this memo, I have no doubt that all children, youth and adults with ASD in York Region will have real hope of living in a community that achieves those aspirations.

Respectfully submitted,

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