

Wake County SmartStart Sustainability of Practice and Practices Report Executive Summary

In spring 2013 Wake County SmartStart commissioned a study into the maintenance of high quality practices at local child care facilities, with a focus on centers. Wake County SmartStart contracted with Compass Evaluation and Research, Ms. Linda Leonard, and Ms. Gloria Cook to develop and conduct the study. The study team proposed one focal and five supportive questions to guide its efforts. The focal question was “*why do some child care sites sustain high quality practices while others struggle*”? For this study, “sustaining high quality” was interpreted as the daily provision of high quality classroom and educational services.

The focal question was further developed through the identification of five supportive questions:

1. To what extent is sustainability a function of budgeting and financial operations?
2. To what extent is sustainability a function of leadership and management (leader qualifications, experience, training, technical assistance)?
3. To what extent is sustainability affected by provision of high quality services? In other words, does a commitment to high quality services jeopardize facility sustainability?
4. What level of quality is sustainable given current resources? What level of quality is sustainable if current resources decrease?
5. What opportunities, if any, exist to assist facilities in promoting and achieving sustainability?

The supportive questions, together with the focal question, grounded the study’s approach and ensuing methodology.

The study team collaborated with Wake County SmartStart to identify local, Wake County, child care sites that could be considered to have achieved and sustained very high quality care (Group 1) and sites that had not achieved and sustained this level of very high quality care (Group 2). In this, the team relied upon both quantitative and qualitative metrics of sustained practice: program standard scores from the state’s Star Rating System and local consultant input. Group 1 sites were those five star facilities that achieved high program standard scores over multiple assessment periods and/or were five star facilities identified by multiple local consultants. Group 2 sites were those four star facilities that had not achieved high program standard scores over multiple assessment periods.

The study team developed a framework for investigating the factors that might allow sites to sustain high quality practices. The scarcity of existing research and literature regarding sustainability of high quality practices in the child care industry led the team to review and adopt a framework developed for non-profits and grassroots organizations. This framework, developed and published by The Finance Project, contains eight “elements” of interest for sustaining practices; these elements were modified for use in the study and are presented in Table ES1.

Table ES1. Elements of Interest for Sustaining High Quality Practices

Element	Finance Project definition	Interpretation for Child Care
Key Champions	Rallying leaders from businesses, faith-based institutions, government and other parts of the community who are committed to an initiative's vision and are willing to use their power and prestige to generate support for that program will help to ensure long-term stability	The practice's key leader (owner, director, etc.) is committed to the vision and mission with regard to high quality practices and will use the power of his or her position as leader to ensure maintenance of effort.
Strong Internal Systems	Building strong internal systems, such as fiscal management, accounting, information, personnel systems and governance structures, enables an initiative to work effectively and efficiently.	The practice has strong internal systems (such as fiscal management, accounting, information, personnel systems and monitoring, professional development planning and follow through) that enable the practice to efficiently and effectively maintain high quality practices.
Vision	A clear-cut objective that articulates how an initiative's programs or activities will improve the lives of children, families and communities.	A clear-cut objective that articulates how the child care practice will contribute to/ improve the lives of young children.
Results Orientation	Demonstrating program success through measurable results (e.g., established indicators and performance measures)	Demonstrating the practice's success with measurable child-level results (e.g., developmental progress)
Strategic Financing Orientation	Identify the resources they need to sustain their activities and then develop strategies to bring these resources together to achieve their goals.	Practice identifies resources needed to maintain the business at a high-level of quality services (i.e., high maintenance of effort) and develops and uses strategies to acquire these resources.
Adaptability to Changing Conditions	Adjusting to changing social, economic, and political trends in the community enables initiatives to take advantage of various opportunities that can help to achieve sustainability.	Practice recognizes changing social, economic, and political trends in the community and takes advantage of opportunities that promote sustainability of high quality practices.
Broad Base of (Community) Support	Determining who within the community loves an initiative, who needs it and who would care if it were gone.	Practice has community-advocates who encourage and support high quality practices and can assist the practice in acquiring resources that aid the maintenance of effort with regard to high quality practices.
Sustainability Plan	Creating sustainability plans helps initiative developers and managers clarify where they want their initiatives to go in the future. They provide benchmarks for determining whether initiatives are successfully reaching their goals.	The practice has plans that allow for continuous improvement, training, and staff oversight. The plans clarify practice vision, mission, goals, and benchmarks as a function of staff-specific tasks and objectives.

The team used this framework, along with local consultant survey-based input and subject-matter expert interview data to develop an interview and on-site visit protocol and a rating rubric for interpreting participant responses and data. The team solicited individual site participation and completed 25 on-site visits and interviews, including interviews with two teachers from each site, where applicable. Of the 25 sites, 12 were considered Group 1 sites and 13 were considered Group 2 sites.

Two study team members reviewed each site's data and completed the rating rubric for each site. Team members completed ratings without consideration of a site's status as either Group 1 or Group 2. The rating rubric contained 50 indicators across the eight domains identified in Table ES1. Each domain contained at least four indicators; one domain (internal systems) contained 14 indicators. The team members reviewed both sets of ratings for each site; if

there were discrepancies, the team members reviewed applicable and available documents, discussed the differences in ratings, and reached a consensus on a rating score for each indicator and each site.

Once the ratings were completed, the team calculated average rating scores for each indicator and each domain for both Group 1 and Group 2 sites. Table ES2 presents these average rating scores, expressed as a percent score (average ratings summed across all indicators within a domain and divided by total available points for that domain).

Table ES2. Average Rating Scores across Eight Domains of Sustainability

	Key Champions	Internal Systems	Vision	Results Orientation	Strategic Financing	Adaptability	Support	Sustainability Plan	Total
Group 1	87.5%	78.6%	70%	93.3%	78.9%	84.7%	83.3%	72.7%	80.5%
Group 2	78.3%	75.5%	66.7%	87.2%	72.8%	79.3%	80.8%	70.7%	76.1%
Difference in Percent Scores	9.2	3.1	3.3	6.1	6.1	5.4	2.5	2	4.4

As shown in Table ES2, Group 1 sites received higher average scores in each domain. The greatest differences were achieved in (a) key champions; (b) results orientation; (c) strategic financing; and (d) adaptability.

As regards key champions, the team focused on the presence and perception of leadership for quality practices; both director or owner and teacher data were used to rate indicators in this domain. The higher average ratings achieved by Group 1 sites suggested that these centers (more often than Group 2 sites) have a team-based approach to quality, in which all staff report being champions for quality, as opposed to individual or selected staff.

As regards results orientation, the team focused on the presence and assessment of child and family outcomes and director (or owner) and staff fluency in discussing outcomes. The team identified differences between Group 1 and Group 2 sites that were tied to director fluency in discussing and using individual student outcomes and the use of planned and budgeted investments that were linked to quality standards. The findings from this domain speak to questions regarding the duality of sustainability (sustainability of high quality practices within a sustainable business environment), or the site's ability to plan to provide high quality services, by providing sufficient, budgeted support. Our findings suggest that Group 1 directors or owners have more skill or experience in planning to provide quality, which may be influenced by their access to budgets or ability to provide information to or influence the site's budget.

Strategic financing was assessed through concrete measures of financial viability, such as diversity in tuition sources, willingness to raise rates, and willingness to carry bad debt. Group 1 sites were more likely than Group 2 sites to avoid bad debt, have diverse tuition resources, have access to an operating budget, and have sites that were financially viable (meeting expenses, if not experiencing revenues in excess of expenses). These scores also speak to study questions regarding the duality of sustainability, or the extent to which the ability to consistently provide high quality practices is integrated with the ability to run a stable business.

Finally, the domain of adaptability contained measures of a director or owner's engagement in the larger professional community and willingness to use information from this community to inform changes. This domain also addressed site willingness to continuously assess and improve practices and a willingness to include staff in the change process. The greatest differences between Group 1 and Group 2 sites reflected a more continuous and integrated

process of change and quality improvements (more frequently a Group 1 practice) as well as greater participation by Group 1 sites in the professional community. Of interest, Group 1 sites were more likely to have quality- **or** business viability-related goals. In comparison, Group 2 sites were, on average, more likely to have both quality- **and** business viability-related goals. The finding from this indicator stands in contrast to earlier findings regarding the duality of quality and business practices at Group 1 sites although overall, Group 1 sites achieved higher average ratings in this domain.

Several summative findings emerge from the data collected and analyzed in this study. First, the difference between Group 1 and Group 2 sites may be one of degree rather than absolute differences in practices or mindset. Second, the difference in degree appears to reflect fluency and comfort with the language, expectations, and requirements of quality practices, more so than distinctly different strategies, tools, or knowledge. This being said, it is important that Group 1 sites achieved higher ratings on indicators such as teacher education, director ability to operationalize site vision, director ability to articulate child outcomes, absence of bad debt, and awareness of future challenges and opportunities.

Third, quality is not a function of site structure as for-profit, non-profit, corporate chain, or family-owned. High quality practices can be achieved wherever there is leadership that is committed to quality and positive outcomes for children and families. At the same time, quality costs more and the **ability to sustain** high quality educational practices may require more than the team's commitment. The ability of the director or owner to diversify resource streams and implement other business strategies to ensure financial viability may be critical for ensuring the site has the resources necessary to continuously provide high quality educational services.

From a practical approach, it may be that the ability to sustain quality practices is a result of many small practices and strategies that directors or owners implement on a daily (or very frequent) basis. The **habit of quality** can be born from these many small, daily, practices. What is harder to measure is the overall mindset and vision established for the site and the degree to which the director or owner can ensure this vision is pervasive in staff attitudes and practices. The ability to conceptualize success as more than business success, as child and family success and stability for example, may be a leading indicator of a qualitative difference between Group 1 and Group 2 sites.