

RESEARCH ABSTRACT

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Benchmarking in Treatment Foster Care: Lessons Learned from the Past and Implications for Future Practice

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Introduction

Benchmarking is not a new idea in the field of child welfare. A recent review of child welfare initiatives uncovers several local, regional and national Benchmarking projects: Odyssey, SUM one for Kids; National Child Welfare Outcomes and the Annie E Casey “Kids Count” analysis of social indicators. The purpose of this presentation was to highlight findings from these efforts and to review what this group of collaborators has learned in the process of implementing the Quality Outcome Leadership Alliance (QOLA) benchmarking project.

A critical lesson learned from QOLA as well as other benchmarking efforts is to **be clear about your purpose – Is it just research? Or is it also about.....**

- Standardized evaluation for agency benchmarking?
- Market evaluation?
- Policy change through more powerful findings because of large numbers and follow-up data?

Knowing how you are going to use the information is critical when benchmarking: the type of information needed to create policy changes will be different from the type of information that you will need to evaluate the market. In other words, in benchmarking, one purpose does **not** serve all.

Building the foundation for benchmarking

Benchmarking does not need to be a national effort—a group of providers or service systems can join together to create benchmarks. However, the QOLA collaborators found the following to be essential in beginning their benchmarking project.

- Sharpen your research questions
 - Be clear about what questions are the most powerful for accomplishing your goals. What kinds of data would most help you...
 - Know how your youth and families are REALLY doing?
 - Refine your program?
 - Celebrate success?

- Determine how many agencies or systems should be involved and how decisions are made.
 - The group should be large enough to have within group homogeneity but also allow for between group heterogeneity. That is, have sufficient number of similar programs in order to be able to compare like programs to like programs, but enough diversity in order to make outside group comparisons.
 - In a benchmarking project, it is important that final decisions rest with a management team or individual that is empowered to act for the larger group.

- Define your comparison groups
 - It is important to determine what the common aspects of the different collaborators are so that you can do “apples to apples” comparisons. For example, in QOLA, we were profiling agencies based on the populations that they served (regular foster care, treatment foster care), training requirements, accreditation status etc. Creating taxonomy or a decision structure for which organizations are grouped together is a critical step.

- Have a process that creates group consensus and respect.
 - Sharing information requires that you develop an understanding of, and respect for, the other organizations in the benchmarking group. Benchmarking is not competition (are we doing “better” or “worse”) but it can become competitive if trust and respect is missing in the group. A process of developing a shared mission and values will help to create a productive rather than competitive atmosphere.

- Identify domains and determine what data elements you are interested in collecting and comparing.
 - A good guideline is to identify common domains and elements that most of the members already collect. Some domains in child welfare include youth education and employment, satisfaction, placement stability, discharge placement.
 - In writing questions, build on previous efforts by identifying questions from national surveys, other benchmarking efforts and keep a detailed record of why questions were chosen.

- Decide on methods of data collection and how to store the data and report it.

- Each agency may decide to collect information in the same way using a call center, or they may decide to collect it individually and then store it in a “data warehouse”. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches. The QOLA group has decided to use a call center to obtain the information using a telephone interview. Data will then be stored in a common warehouse.
 - For the user, the most important aspect of benchmarking is the reporting. The members of the benchmarking project will need to agree upon a common reporting format. While ad hoc reporting is possible, it is expensive and so having a set of “canned” reports that meet the information needs of the group will be necessary.
- Develop a business plan
- A business plan precisely identifies your goals and helps you to allocate resources properly and handle unforeseen complications. A business plan includes the following:
 - Rationale
 - Mission and Objectives
 - Key Project Phases
 - Target Customers and Marketing Plan
 - Data Management
 - Budget and Staffing
 - Action Steps and Timeline

Benchmarking and Quality Improvement

Using benchmarks can help improve the quality of the services. Benchmark data can identify opportunities for improvement by providing a point of reference. It can also identify what might be areas of priority for the organization. However, there are some organizational prerequisites that will enhance the use of this information.

- A quality improvement infrastructure
 - Having a system in which information is moved both up and down the organization is a critical prerequisite. Without an infrastructure, and procedures for looking at data, benchmarking information will not be used or if used, applied without a context in order that it makes sense.
- Management culture & support
 - The organization needs to have a culture that supports learning, making mistakes, learning from others and letting others see data. Without this kind of support, benchmarking efforts will languish and die.
- Focal point to coach & teach
 - Benchmarking takes time—it is not something that is done without resources. The QOLA group devoted at least one part time equivalent from each agency doing in-kind support to get the project going and to

collect and analyze pilot data. Each agency should have a point person to direct the efforts.

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