

**SUMMARY INTERPRETATIONS AND OBSERVATIONS**  
**SCFS STUDY COMMITTEE FEBRUARY 2015 SURVEY OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS**  
**COMPILED BY RICK NOBLE AND COLLEAGUES**  
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**NOTING THE OBVIOUS:**

- 1) Summarizing this survey is very challenging. Interpreting it is equally difficult.
- 2) The Survey received an excellent response (78%) showing confidence in the Study Committee and trust in the confidentiality of ED responses.
- 3) The majority of the EDs who responded are veterans who have had a long term relationship with SCFS. There is a wide variety of skill levels and experiences of the ED's of local partnerships. This variability helps provide context for how and why the range of responses can vary so much regarding performance of the State Office. The 46 counties are like 46 children, each with its own uniqueness and needs. One size does not fit all.
- 4) Only 8 county partnerships receive less than 50% of their funding from SCFS. The rest are extremely dependent on state funding to survive, many below "subsistence levels."
- 5) Likert Scale (1-7) responses are averaged for a "score" which may be easier to understand but won't show the significance of the absolute number of negative vs. positive responses.
- 6) The numerous comments offered after each section seem to reveal more information than the actual questions asked. They are often difficult to summarize and must be read individually for context. This is especially apparent in the TA and Support section.

**MAJOR TAKEAWAYS/OBSERVATIONS:**

- 1) There was overwhelming sentiment that County Partnerships feel that they are competing with rather than collaborating with the State Office. Collaboration is a major role/function of the staff/people you have in any organization. The original mission and First Step model of delivering services through county partnerships can and does in many cases work. It is the implementation of the model that has struggled over time and in some counties. We may be confusing policy problems, with people problems. Issues with communication, trust, poor relationships, cannot be solved through policy changes.
- 2) The most prevalent problems exist in collaboration, especially as regards resource development. This area is clearly one of the most important functions of the State Office.
- 3) There are a variety of factors that color the relationship between the State Office and local partnerships. This is heavily influenced by each ED's relationship and interactions with the State Office personnel. The lack of strong proactive leadership at the State Office has contributed to the steady deterioration of communications and positive relationships with many local partnerships. This may magnify the passion and negative tone of many responses.
- 4) Regarding collaboration and partnerships, the highest rating went to CPs local efforts and one of the lowest ratings went to the State Office efforts/success.
- 5) *Technical Assistance and Support received the lowest scores and numerous negative comments.*

#### **BUDGET PLANNING:**

- 1) The majority of County Partnership EDs seemed to have a general level of satisfaction with the budget planning and fiscal management of funds functions at the State Office.
- 2) Decreases in annual fund allocations over time and uncertainty regarding future budget allocations reduce partnership visions and ambitions, fostering a bunker mentality regarding program expansion and growth toward meeting the actual needs identified by county partnerships.
- 3) Competition for funds, lack of TA support for resource development foster a negative atmosphere concerning budgeting.
- 4) Budget building, midyear reallocations and the RFM payment process could be significantly simplified without threatening the integrity of the overall fiscal system.
- 5) Some accommodations should be made for higher levels of financial management capacity of larger partnerships. Again one size does not fit all.

#### **FISCAL MANAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY:**

- 1) The system of fiscal management is complex and overly restrictive. I repeat.....one size fits all is not the most effective way to operate.
- 2) More staff are needed to increase the efficiency and effectiveness in support of county partnerships.
- 3) The theme of fund allocations and fund availability as well as a general level of distrust seems to color many responses given to this topic. There is a lack of basic understanding by some ED's regarding the process and the overall lack of transparency and trust with the leadership at the State Office does color attitudes. These are strongly entrenched and will not be reversed without significant change. There exists background sentiment that the State Office and larger Counties receive more than their fair share of funding, leaving the smaller Counties underfunded, when in fact everyone is underfunded to meet expectations and needs.

#### **TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND SUPPORT:**

- 1) There is inconsistency in the quantity, value and responsiveness of "customer service" provided by TAs.
- 2) Many EDs question the qualifications and expertise of state First Steps staff since none have managed a county partnership, yet are tasked with providing technical assistance to those partnerships.
- 3) There is a lack of a clear organizational structure that is well communicated to the local partnerships and which shows which staff member is responsible for what topic or technical assistance area.
- 4) To infuse a level of practical experience to the process of support for CPs, the State Office needs to tap into the skills and insights of the ED pool. The State Office lacks experience in running a First Steps office at the local level. This leads to circumstances where the direction and assistance being offered by the State Office is out of alignment with the practical situation being addressed.

#### **ONGOING DATA COLLECTION:**

- 1) Most everyone agrees that the data system is a necessary tool that needs additional attention and support in order to create a new, or modify the existing, system to meet the unique needs of First Steps programs. Priority should be given to hiring dedicated state data/evaluation staff and the subsequent training and development of county partnership staff in order to effectively use the data to inform strategic steps leading to continual improvement in our program outcomes.**
- 2) Data for all programs CPs operate is not collected in the existing system. Significant program data, from Nurse Family Partnership and Early Head Start is not collected within the SCFS system but rather in other systems more compatible to these programs.**

#### **COLLABORATION AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT:**

- 1) The issue of inadequate funding has exposed a fundamental weakness of the current First Steps organization. The concept of the public/private approach for the First Steps organization was a key step toward long term effectiveness and sustainability. However, several key tools to make this a reality were, and continue to be, missing from the equation. Not since the early years has any significant effort been given to private resource development that would support basic county partnership program delivery.**
- 2) Many local partnerships have very positive collaborations with sister agencies and organizations. In contrast they believe that collaboration at the State level is poor, which undermines local collaboration on important issues, hindering consistent support of local collaboration in critical programs.**
- 3) Partnerships feel unsupported in resource development and capacity building, and believe that the State Office is more of a competitor for funds and program delivery than as a partner.**

#### **FINAL THOUGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- 1. Agreement is needed on the service delivery mandate of SCFS to ensure that the Study Committee, legislature and key interested parties build a consensus on whether the priority for program and services delivery should be done at the state level, or through county partnerships and then commit to a policy consistent with that consensus.**
- 2. Trust and confidence in the leadership team at SCFS is very low.**
- 3. Performance of staff in support of partnerships (TA especially resource development) must improve if FS is to survive and thrive.**
- 4. The comments throughout, but especially on pages 19-26, are perhaps the most informative, but can't easily be summarized other than to say that many of the partnerships' needs are not being addressed and haven't been for a long time. There are proven methods to address this. Historically the inclusion of ED's in the review, modification, and establishment of operational policies and guidelines that are intended to be placed on the CP has produced very positive outcomes. Working together creates not only better policies but also hopefully will build a higher level of trust than now exists about how policies are developed and implemented in the future.**

