Using a Systems Lens to Evaluate Early Childhood Efforts

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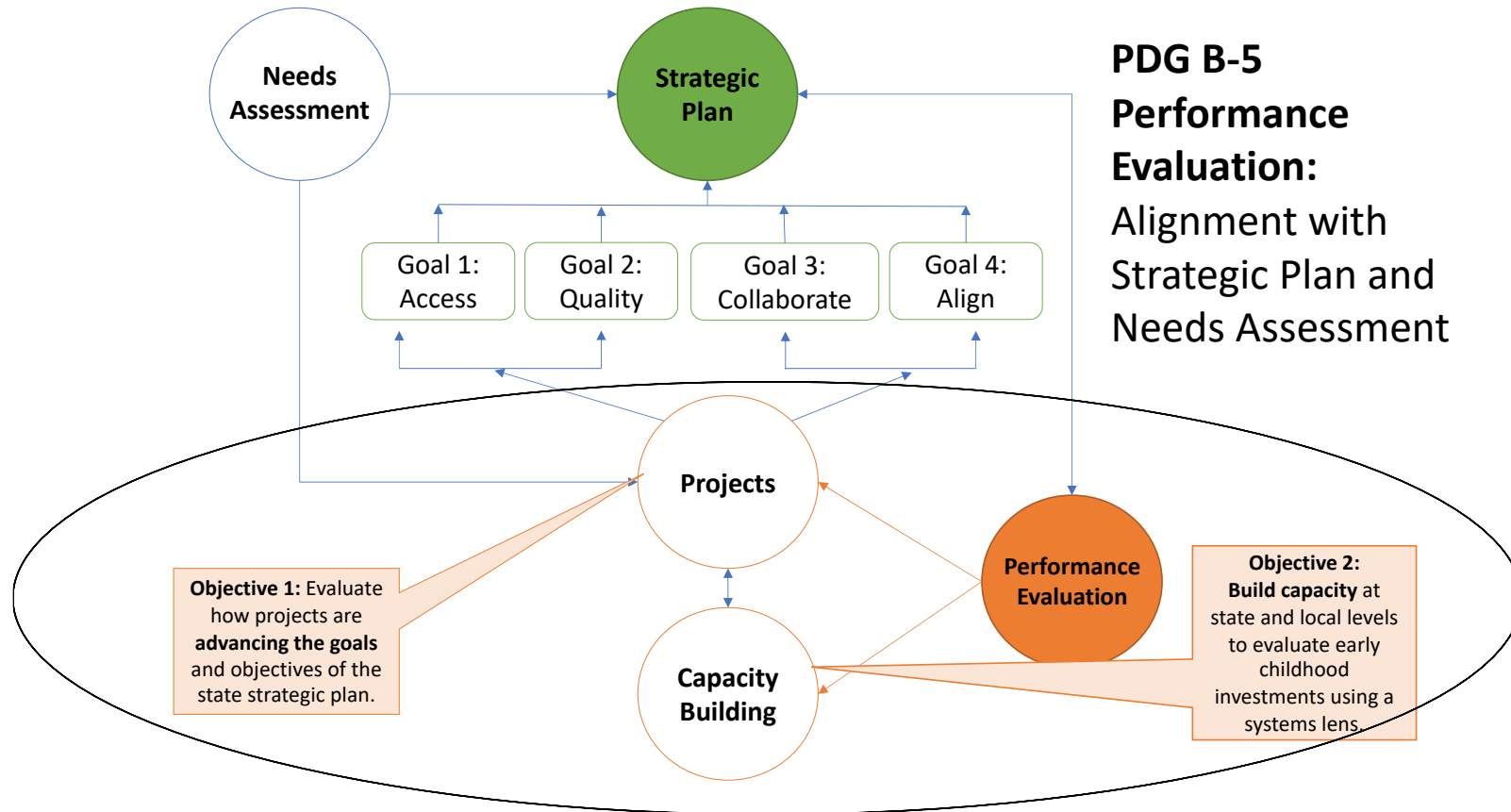Jolene Johnson, Ph.D.
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Start early. Start well.

PDG B-5 Performance Evaluation Goals

PDG B-5 Performance Evaluation: Alignment with Strategic Plan and Needs Assessment

Needs Assessment

Strategic Plan

Goal 1: Access
Goal 2: Quality
Goal 3: Collaborate
Goal 4: Align

Projects

Performance Evaluation

Capacity Building

Objective 1: Evaluate how projects are **advancing the goals** and objectives of the state strategic plan.

Objective 2: Build capacity at state and local levels to evaluate early childhood investments using a systems lens.

Relational Systems Evaluation
Urban, et al. (2021)

- Framework for program planning and evaluation
- Grounded in developmental systems (e.g. Lerner, 2006)
- and systems theory (e.g. Midgley, 2003)
- Embedded Practices: Partnership Model, Evaluative Thinking
- Process: Systems Evaluation Protocol, Capacity Building Facilitation

Key Informant & Project Lead Interviews

	Timeline	Topics	Informants	N
Key Informant Interviews (Planning year)	June-July 2019	•What state does well in EC •Programs/initiatives in place to promote collaboration •Systemic barriers to high quality ECCE •Data for decision making	Key Informants	7
Mid-term Interviews Project Lead (planning year)	August-October of 2019	•Successes •Critical moments that have pushed the work forward •Implementation challenges	Project Leads	11
End of grant Interviews (planning year)	January-February 2020	•Role of communication •Collaborations/partnerships •Lessons learned •Future hopes and priorities •Progress on aligning state systems	Project Leads	16
Key Informant and Project Leads (year 1 continuation)	March-April of 2021	•Strategic Plan Alignment •Covid-19 impacts •Data use and sharing Sustainability	Project Leads Key Informants	8 KI 19 PL 3 both
Key Informant	February – April 2022	•Sustainability •Data Use •Aligning state systems	Proje	

Evaluative Thinking:

Critical thinking applied in the context of evaluation, motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness and a belief in the value of evidence, that involves:

Identify Assumptions

Pose Thoughtful Questions

Pursue Understanding through perspective taking

Make informed decisions

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Identify Assumptions

- Systems change is sometimes systems level and other times program specific

- Content about assumptions was largely about quality and access; not much about equity or collaboration

- Importance of family engagement and workforce engagement

Posing Thoughtful Questions

- What is happening in the strategic planning that influences what we are going to do?

- How well is it working? Do we need to go back and tweak what we are doing?

- How are we staying engaged with families, and what really is a powerful incentive for them?

Perspective Taking

- Collaboration

- Elevating family & provider voices

- Recognition of needing broad array of voices

- Head Start and EDN have some established practices around evaluative thinking that systems could learn & benefit from

Making Informed Decisions

- Structured evaluation plans and accountability requirements may lead to increased data utilization for continuous improvement processes and data-based decisions

- Individually funded projects used data to inform programs but rarely made connections to the larger system

- Access and quality most frequent content mentioned

Next Steps

- Share out the data collected – at the systems and project levels

- Indicate where the four pieces of evaluative thinking have played a role in shifting the system

- Build capacity for evaluative thinking through the ENT, technical assistance, and an online repository

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Thank you!

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