

Cambridge Human Services Commission
Minutes of Meeting 10/11/2012
5:30 – 7:30pm
Citywide Senior Center
806 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge

Commissioners present: Ayse Atasoylu, Kati LaBraico, Claudia Hill, Rev. Lorraine Thornhill, Police Lieutenant Leonard DiPietro (in lieu of Christine Elow).

Regrets: Lori Likis, Nan Stone, Khari Milner, Christopher Hall, Katharine Emilie Thomas, Deputy Superintendent Christine Elow, Ellen Semonoff.

DHSP staff: Janice Alger, Jolyon Cowan, Jose Soares (recorder).

Presenter: Susan Richards, Co-Director of the Agenda for Children.

Susan Richards started her presentation by giving a brief introduction of the Agenda for Children, which was founded eleven years ago with a two pronged approach, focusing on both a Literacy Initiative and an Out of School Time (OST) Initiative. Susan co-directs the OST Initiative, the mission of which “is to ensure the highest quality OST opportunities and experiences for all Cambridge children, youth and families.” In short, it focuses on continual quality improvement for all OST programs in Cambridge whether they are City-run or private.

Susan went on to say that a key piece of improving OST programs is the focus on professional development of staff in those programs. As education practices have evolved, the Agenda for Children (AFC) has been a very successful intermediary and facilitator as it strives for excellence in OST for all children and youth. Notably, there has also been a renewed emphasis on improving programs for middle school youth.

In order to work with OST programs in Cambridge, the AFC in conjunction with the Department’s Youth Planner, developed an integrative program: the Integrated Self Assessment Support System (ISAS). ISAS is a professional development and quality improvement program that relies on partnering with participating OST programs in a four year process. Underpinning ISAS is the philosophy that our kids deserve the best, and this is achieved in the context of OST programs through peer accountability.

Agencies interested in the ISAS initiative, sign a Memorandum of Agreement and commit to a four year partnership to learn, take leadership of, and integrate the process and principles of the program into the organization. At least twice a year, the AFC meets with each site to discuss progress and reaffirm their commitment. At the end of the four years, the agency has to take ownership and sustain the ISAS principles and practices.

The ISAS principles of practice that guide this work are:

Striving for excellence, ongoing professional development, a culture of accountability, self assessment through observation and the use of research based assessment tools, integrating and sustaining

program improvements through the institutionalization of policies and practices, and building the OST community through peer leadership, mutual learning, and sharing of challenges and best practices.

The majority of the programs in the partnership participate in a process of quality improvement and organizational culture change. Program staff agree to take on added accountability and build trust. This creates a safe place for self assessment, and for positive changes to take place throughout the organization from front line staff to management level. While the AFC funds all the trainings that are part of the ISAS experience, organizations have to commit to provide the professional development time required, as this process involves an ongoing series of meetings, trainings, observations, coaching and peer review and self assessment. Coaching entails working with front line staff one on one, plus also working with supervisors and upper management to ensure that buy in exists throughout an OST organization. Managers, program directors and front line staff from each agency meet nine times in an academic year to have frank discussions on identifying best practices and how to implement them throughout their respective organizations.

Three times a year, coaches and program staff participate in two days of classroom observation using an assessment of the Afterschool Program Practices Tool (APT). Coaches and staff then participate in debriefing meetings to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Throughout this process, it is important for participants to buy in and define encouragement for front line staff. ISAS works with a cohort of 25 agencies in a year.

As peer review is part of the process, some programs involved in ISAS have started to include youths on observation teams. The AFC has found that including youths provides an added level of honesty and openness and has been so successful that all programs participating in ISAS will include youths from now on.

Equity issues are really critical for the AFC as throughout Cambridge there is a disparity in program resources and staff capability and access to training. One of the goals of AFC is to level the playing field by providing technical assistance and leads to resources. It also creates a continuing education environment creating a sense of a career for those working on the OST frontlines.

At the next Human Services Commission meeting, scheduled for November 8, Khari Milner and Lori Likis will give an update on the school department's Innovation Agenda and we will discuss possible topics for future presentations.

Meeting adjourned.