MISSISSIPPI

Teen Advisory Board

Path to Progress

Practice Guide

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to describe the practice model utilized for the Mississippi Teen Advisory Board, titled "Path to Progress". Many of the methods described by this document are derived from research, general principles, experience, and a bit of trial and error. The Teen Advisory Board (TAB) began under another name, the HOPE Forum (HOPE = Helping Others Prosper Equally). The HOPE Forum was essentially an event held annually as part of a larger event, and provided youth in the foster care system an opportunity to provide feedback about the care they were receiving. Initially, the TAB experienced a rocky start, including a lack of clear direction and gaps in activity. In 2014, new leadership and direction placed the TAB on a path of achievement, and these young people have since made significant contributions to the Mississippi foster care system. In an effort to ensure that these contributions, and the benefits to young people through the TAB program, continue, this practice model was developed and formalized. It is my hope that the lessons learned while working with the TAB will be of some use to other child welfare professionals, as we seek to engage our greatest resource, our youth, to tackle our most daunting challenges.

Contents

Teen Advisory Board Structure

The Teen Advisory Board, in its current form, consists of a state-wide group of foster teens, typically ages 16 and older, divided into regional teams, or chapters if you prefer. Each team consists of a maximum of 5 young people, with an employed facilitator from that region. In our case, facilitators are employed by a state contractor and fulfill a variety of duties related to the state's Independent Living program. Each team adopts a Regional Initiative, which is some goal designed to improve the foster care experience of all youth in the care of the state. These goals are collected in the 2014 Mississippi Youth Voice Document, a product of the TAB, which is available upon request. The production of this document will be described in a later section. Using these goals as a guide ensures that accomplishing them will meet the needs of the larger foster care population. These regional teams meet at least once per month, and all the teams gather at quarterly statewide meetings to report on progress and receive intensive leadership training. The efforts of the various teams are coordinated centrally through the TAB Coordinator, who coaches the meeting facilitators, acts as a liaison with the state agency, and provides coherent direction for the group as a whole. The guiding principles, vision, and core values of the TAB are detailed below.

Vision

A Mississippi where youth are equal partners in the foster care system.

Mission

To provide our youth with the tools and training they need to become active partners with the Mississippi Department of Human Services through hands-on leadership and advocacy training and opportunities.

Core Values

- Justice: Young people in foster care deserve the same opportunities as their peers. They deserve the chance to grow into healthy, productive, and fulfilled adults, regardless of the circumstances that placed them into foster care.
- Respect: Young people have a lot to offer their families, communities, and the foster care system. We should acknowledge their ability to contribute and treat them as partners in providing their own services.
- Responsibility: Young people cannot grow without being allowed to take responsibility for themselves and their situations. Learning to be an adult includes learning how to effectively be responsible for yourself and others.

- Leadership: We recognize that not all young people have the advantages that TAB members possess, and as a result, we have an obligation to provide example and guidance to our peers.
- Perseverance: No system as large as the foster care system will change quickly. We recognize this and are dedicated to continuing the work of improving the lives of young people despite the sometimes slow pace of change.

Strategic Focus Areas

- Personal Development: We will help youth to understand themselves as individuals, building on their strengths and overcoming their challenges in order to become more successful.
- Networking: We will establish collaborations with strategic stakeholders in order to leverage each other's resources and capabilities to improve outcomes for youth.
- Advocacy Training: We will work to develop the skills necessary to serve as an authentic voice for all youth in the custody of the state of Mississippi.
- Creating Opportunity: We aim to capitalize on any and all available opportunities to help Mississippi youth grow into successful adults.

Scheduling Meetings

Consistency is key, here. Young people are busy, and Teen Advisory Board members tend to be busier than most. Extracurricular activities and social functions take up a lot of a young person's time, but thankfully these tend to be fairly scheduled. A consistent day and week tends to be very helpful in finding a time when the most Board members will be able to attend. Holding a meeting on the first Thursday of every month, for example, is convenient for both the facilitator and Board members. For one, it helps make sure no one forgets that a meeting is scheduled. And there are a lot of people who need to remember these meetings, from Board members to facilitators to social workers to foster parents to Independent Living Specialists. Likewise, all of these parties should be involved in determining the meeting time, as they will all have a stake in ensuring that the meetings are well-attended and organized. This brings us to our next point, communication.

Communication is vital to ensuring meeting attendance, as young people are often not responsible for their own transportation. The individuals who should be made aware of every TAB meeting are: the Board members, their COR workers, their COS workers (if any), their supervisors, their foster parents or group home staff, and the Independent Living Specialist for that area. Collecting contact information for these folks will be necessary, as will establishing a rapport. The suggested strategy for communicating with all parties is to send an e-mail (or a letter to those who don't have/use e-mail) as soon as possible after the meeting is scheduled, followed up by a second e-mail/letter a week out, then a phone call two business days before. This helps ensure maximum participation, and accounts for any individual being away from work or on a compressed day/holiday leading up to the meeting. These communications should be documented, to safeguard transparency and the work you have done. If you have a means of texting the Board members and are comfortable doing so, I would encourage you to use this method as well. Technology tools such as Google Voice can be used to provide a number you can text from separate from your personal cell number. If you need assistance setting these up, please contact the TAB Coordinator.

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Be consistent: set a day and time to regularly hold meetings

Communicate widely: Send an initial letter/e-mail early, follow-up letter/e-mail a week out, and a call two business days before.

Effective Note-Taking

Once the meeting is convened, as a facilitator your job gets focused on two main areas: retrieving and recording information. Of the two, retrieval is more complex and a subsequent section will be dedicated to techniques for pulling the thoughts and ideas out of meeting participants. The theme of this section is taking those ideas and organizing them into a sensible record, useful for setting the stage for the next meeting. There are a variety of note-taking systems such as the Cornell Method and Smart Wisdom (of which a quick Google search will give you more information than you would ever want). Many of these methods, however, are aimed at understanding information and assisting recall in a classroom, which is not our typical meeting environment. Whichever system you use (if any), you will be best served by focusing on three key categories of discourse: questions, perspectives, and strategies.

By questions, we mean questions that are focused on the topic at hand. For example, if you are discussing the issue of siblings being placed too far apart for a reasonable level of visitation, some questions raised might be: "How far is too far?", "Why do they need to be placed somewhere else?", "How are we supposed to get back and forth for visits?". These are the questions that need to be written down, as they will be topics for research outside of the meetings.

By perspectives, we mean any information provided by meeting participants that gives insight into the scope or meaning of the issue being discussed. A great example of this relates to hygiene products for youth in care. It turns out, that often youth in group homes are being provided a standard product for hair care, but we know that different races, genders, and even individuals have different needs in this area. For young people, being able to feel clean and present themselves well is very important. As adults who purchase our own products, this may not be an issue that is immediately apparent.

By strategies, we mean any suggestions or plans for methods by which the current issue can be addressed. This can be by calling a meeting, changing policy, writing a letter, etc. Notes on strategies should not only include the type of strategy, but also specific content. What should the letter say?

Finally, notes should be organized after meetings. It may be necessary to re-write notes to make them more readable and understandable by individuals who did not participate in the meeting.

Section Summary

Take notes on questions, perspectives, and strategies

Be sure to organize notes after meetings

Getting the Full Story

One of the major activities of TAB is to identify and articulate the difficulties experienced by foster youth, and to begin the process of moving the system toward a resolution for those issues. However, in order to ensure that effective solutions are being sought and that the problems we address are in fact the problems that youth are facing, it is often necessary to engage in a probing interview style. We know that teens and young adults are often very intuitive, but they may not yet be adept in the self-reflection needed to really articulate their frustrations or ideas. In order to get at the meaning behind a muttered phrase or almost anything that precedes "never mind", a probing interview style must be employed. A great model for this is what is known as Socratic questioning, and using this model is a fantastic skill for anyone in the social service field. This model includes six aims, which are: clarifying, challenging, proving, perspective-taking, concluding, and question questioning.

- Clarifying: Getting meeting participants to explain their thoughts more fully
  - Why do you say that?
  - How does this relate to our topic?
  - Are you saying ... or ...?
- Challenging: Getting meeting participants to question their assumptions
  - Is this always the case?
  - Why do you thing that is?
  - Is there a good reason for that?
- Proving: Getting meeting participants to provide evidence for their perceptions
  - Why do you say that?
  - How would someone argue against you?
  - How could we prove this?
- Perspective-taking: Seeing the issue from another point of view
  - Why would someone believe differently than you?
  - How would ... see this issue?
  - Is there another way of looking at this?
- Concluding: Discovering the implications and consequences of this line of thought
  - If we did ... , what would happen?
  - Who would be affected by our solution?
  - What is the cost?
- Question questioning: Examine the questions you are asking
  - Why did I ask that question?
  - What else should I ask?
  - Does this question make sense?

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Use the Socratic Questioning style to get at what meeting participants really think about an issue

Setting Goals

Setting goals for TAB is very much like setting a goal for anything else. We encourage using the SMART goal framework; that is, making goals Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-Bound. The major consideration for setting TAB goals is ensuring that the team has a clear picture of what specific changes will need to be made. It is good for large, long-term goals to be somewhat vague, but these visionary goals need to be supported by goals that include specific changes. For example, if part of the long-term goal is to provide better hygiene product selection to youth in groups homes, then a supporting goal may be to interview the head of licensure at DFCS to determine what changes need to be introduced to the group home contract model. Short-term goals should always be actionable, and attainment should be measured by completion of tasks, not outcomes. Goals should also be broken down into time increments. A partial example of a goal is:

- 1 year - Ensure that all youth who enter foster care after the age of 14 are given a Foster Care Handbook and understand how to use it
    - 6 months – Prepare an updated Foster Care Handbook
    - 6 months – Prepare an educational campaign to educate worker on how to present the Foster Care Handbook
        - 1 month – Prepare an outline for the updated Foster Care Handbook
        - 1 month – Identify key personal resources in your own county
        - 1 month – Speak with each supervisor in your county and ask them to support the new Foster Care Handbook

It might be wise to keep time increments to no shorter than a month, as meetings are typically held on a monthly basis. However, if you team is meeting more often, shorter time frames might be in order. It would also be prudent to make deadlines out of the meeting dates, so assignments can be collected and new assignments can be issued in person. The highest level of goal for a TAB team is their Regional Initiative, which most teams will already have. If your team does not have their first Regional Initiative, the TAB Coordinator will work with you and your team to develop one. The Initiative will be chosen by the Board members in your region.

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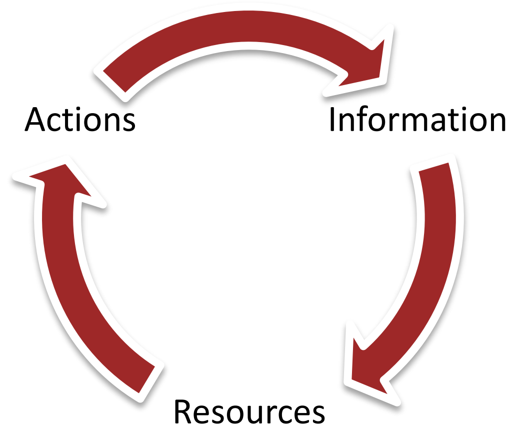
Set SMART goals with vague long-term goals and actionable short-term goals

Making Plans



Planning for TAB consists of a cycle of gathering information, identifying resources, and developing action steps. Once an Initiative is established, a plan needs to be developed. The starting point is Information, which needs to be gathered before any concrete action steps can be identified. Your team will need to understand their issue before tackling it. Information can come from a variety of sources, including DFCS policy, published articles, policy briefs, research journals, etc. If you need help identifying sources for research, please contact the TAB Coordinator. Once your team has a good baseline understanding of the issue, potential resource needs should be identified. These come in three categories: financial resources, material resources, personal resources. Again, your team may not have a clear understanding of what is available to start with, but your TAB Coordinator can help arrange meetings for your group to investigate available options. Finally, once the background information has been reviewed and potential resources have been identified, action steps need to be formulated. These action steps should constitute your shortest-term goals, and by definition should be actionable. The components of an action step consist of <u>who</u> will do <u>what</u> by <u>when</u>. You should be realistic about your and your team's capabilities. It should never be the case that a Board member is placed into a situation in which they are not prepared to perform. If your team needs additional training or preparation for an event or activity beyond what you are comfortable providing, please contact your TAB Coordinator. The TAB Coordinator should also be contacted for any preparation of documents or presentations that your team needs. Board members are best used for their perspectives, energy, and presence, not for their typing, editorial, or graphic design skills. After formulation of action steps has been completed, these steps should, in conjunction with information gathered in the first two phases, be synthesized into a cohesive plan of action. This plan should be implemented, and then

Section Summary

Follow the Information-Resource-Action cycle for developing an action plan. Actions steps should include **who** will do **what** by **when**.

monitored for effect and opportunities for improvement. At this stage, regional teams should be looking for strategies for transitioning evaluation and maintenance of the initiative to DHS staff for permanent implementation into DHS practice. A timeline for a regional initiative is included on the next page.

1. Choose a Regional Initiative
2. Gather Information
3. Identify Resources
4. Formulate Action Steps
5. - Action Phase 1
   - Putting all the pieces together
6. - Action Phase 2
   - Implementing the plan
7. - Action Phase 3
   - Monitoring and Improving
8. Transition to DHS Staff for Permanent Implementation

Advocacy Strategy

When pursuing a Regional Initiative, it is often necessary to approach DHS staff or outside agencies in an effort to garner support and resources. There are a variety of ways to go about this, and creativity here is welcome. A few strategies that have proven effective are:

- Panel Discussions: An individual speech or presentation is often a daunting and stressful task, but a panel discussion allows Board members to support each other with information and presence. This lowers the barrier to participation for Board Members, and gives potential supporters an impression of solidarity.
- Letters of Support: Having individual regional or county staff sign a carefully worded letter of support can prove to be both a useful and relatively straightforward approach. While it involves a lot of man-hours to pitch the Initiative to each staff member, one-on-one conversations may be the particular skill of one or more of your Board members.
- Policy Sub-Team Meetings: These meetings involve discussions of policies in place and allow for the presentation of new policy. Once a team has identified a particular policy goal, they may present it at one of these meetings to push for adoption.
- Regional Implementation Team Meetings: These meetings are great places to seek out resources or to have one or more youth speak on their Initiative.

If your team's Initiative doesn't seem to line up with one of these options, please contact your TAB Coordinator for more ideas. Don't be afraid to rely on your Board members for ideas, either. Their creativity is a great boon to the efforts of the Teen Advisory Board.

Perfecting your Practice

As we pursue the objectives of the Teen Advisory Board, we need to ensure that we are doing all that we can to keep our practice to the highest possible standards. In terms of TAB plans, we are in the second Information phase, Evaluation. To that end, we will be pursuing an aggressive Continuous Quality Improvement policy, consisting of monthly surveys, conference calls, work plans, and in-person supervision. The necessary forms are included in the back of this practice guide. Please keep in mind, the purpose of CQI is not to micro-manage, but to provide the best service we can to our TAB members.

Facilitator Duties

Thus far, this guide has covered the basic methods for facilitating TAB meetings. This section will list the responsibilities of TAB facilitators. These include:

- Schedule monthly TAB meetings in their area in coordination with the local regional TAB team(s)
    - Inform the TAB Coordinator of all scheduled meetings and events
- Attend monthly TAB meetings on behalf of the TAB Coordinator
    - Facilitate meetings based on the agenda provided by the TAB Coordinator
    - Take notes of the proceedings
    - Take notes of specific action steps identified by the regional TAB team
    - Collect Regional Meeting Feedback Surveys at the end of each monthly meeting
    - Provide notes and surveys to the TAB coordinator within one week of each monthly meeting
- Communicate with local regional TAB team(s) regarding upcoming regional and statewide TAB events/meetings
- Assist with identifying potential TAB candidates in their local regions
- Attend TAB staff meetings for continuing training
- If necessary, assist with providing transportation to regional/statewide TAB events/meetings for local TAB members

Forms

The following pages will consist of the forms to be used for TAB Continuous Quality Improvement. These forms should be submitted to the TAB Coordinator in the time frames specified.

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Regional Meeting Sign-In Sheet

Region: ________________________________

Location: ________________________________

Date: ________________________________

Facilitator: ________________________________

Name	COR	Signature

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Regional Meeting Feedback Survey

Please rate the following items on a scale from 1-5, where 1 is Strongly Disagree and 5 is Strongly Agree

This survey should be submitted with the sign-in sheet

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
This meeting was very productive	1	2	3	4	5
The agenda was clear and easy to follow	1	2	3	4	5
We had clear objectives for our meeting	1	2	3	4	5
The facilitator kept the meeting on track	1	2	3	4	5
Our voices were heard in this meeting	1	2	3	4	5
The facilitator helped make this meeting a success	1	2	3	4	5
This meeting was the appropriate length of time	1	2	3	4	5
The meeting location was appropriate	1	2	3	4	5
The meeting time was appropriate	1	2	3	4	5

Comments

MS Teen Advisory Board

Notes Guide

Questions	
Strategies	
Perspectives	

MS Teen Advisory Board

Path to Progress

Initiative Goals Worksheet

Top Level Goal		Timeframe:	
Second Level Goal		Timeframe:	
Third Level Goal		Timeframe:	
Third Level Goal		Timeframe:	
Third Level Goal		Timeframe:	
Second Level Goal		Timeframe:	
Third Level Goal		Timeframe:	
Third Level Goal		Timeframe:	
Third Level Goal		Timeframe:	
Second Level Goal		Timeframe:	
Third Level Goal		Timeframe:	
Third Level Goal		Timeframe:	
Third Level Goal		Timeframe:	

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Specifying Your Message Worksheet

As you review your informational resources, you will want to think about how you will condense all that knowledge into an easily-digested package for your target audience. Answering the following questions will give you a great head-start on forging a solid and concise message.

What information does my audience need to know?

This is not the same as what you want to tell them. Identify what information is truly needed, and what can be left out without making your message confusing. Example: I can tell you everything you NEED to know about washing your hands without talking about different kinds of soaps and where to buy them. Use the space below to write the main topics or ideas that you want to inform your audience on. Hand washing is provided as an example.

Example	Your main ideas
Why you should wash your hands	
Effective techniques	
When to wash	
Soap or Sanitizer?	

What was hard to understand?

Anything that you had trouble understanding the first time you read it is a good candidate for inclusion. Complicated ideas may need additional explanation, pictures, or diagrams to help your audience really get the message. Below, write down any concepts that you needed to take a second look at to really understand

Tough Concepts

What important conclusion or connections did you draw?

In doing your research, were there any 'lightbulb' moments where you connected the dots to really understand something? Were there any concepts that only made sense after you read other resource? Write down these "Ah-hah!" concepts, as you may need to make these connections for your audience.

Ah-Hah! Moments

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Educational Campaign Development Worksheet

Define your audience	Decide who the campaign will be targeted towards. To help you, answer these questions: 1. Who needs this information? 2. What is their level of education? 3. Who are their support systems? 4. How do these individuals communicate? (e-mail, social media, letters, etc.)
Write Objectives	Decide what you want to accomplish with this campaign. To help you, answer these questions: 1. What knowledge do we need to communicate? 2. Do we need to convince our audience to do something? If so, what? 3. Does our audience understand this issue? 4. Are there resources our audience needs to be aware of? 5. Do we need to teach our audience a skill? If so, what?
Devise Strategies	What strategies will you use to accomplish your goals? Some examples include: • Posters with information • Events with speakers or trainers • Public Service announcements • Presentations at meetings • Op-ed pieces for local newspapers • Brochures with a response method • Electronic communications • Distribute a video
Develop Messages	What are the messages you will use to communicate? Will you be formal or informal? Will you use slang or proper form? Will you use a lot of statistics or broad, general information? In essence, what style of communication will you use?
Be Creative	Decide how you will design your materials. What colors will you use? What emotions do you want to invoke? What is the overall feel of the campaign? What should your fonts look like? Will you use photos or graphics, light colors or dark, bright colors or muted? How should your materials look?

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Educational Campaign Development Notes

Define your audience	
Write Objectives	
Devise Strategies	

Develop Messages	
Be Creative	

MS Teen Advisory Board

Path to Progress

Initiative Work Plan

Task	Who	When

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Six-Month Work Plan Worksheet

Deliverable	Lead	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
		☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
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