

FGP Panel Discussion Transcript

Angela: Welcome to the Foster Grandparent performance measure discussion, in preparation for the Senior Corps virtual conference. My name is Angela Roberts and I'm the Associate Director of Senior Corps. I will serve as the moderator for our panel.

I would like to introduce our panelists. Amanda Bryans is with us, she is the Director of Education and Comprehensive Services Division at the Administration for Children and Families, in the Office of Head Start.

We're also joined by Elson Nash. Elson is team leader for Promise Neighborhoods at the Department of Education.

What we would like to do on our panel today is set some context around performance measures for the Foster Grandparent Program as we move forward, and have a discussion about those measures and your own areas of expertise as the Foster Grandparent Program may intersect.

We believe that education is definitely a sweet spot for our Foster Grandparent grantees. They have a long history of working in Head Start Centers and in K-12 schools and other settings with education, and bring a tremendous capacity of numbers and talent all around the country. So we believe that the education performance measures are exactly where the Foster Grandparent grantees need to be, and have been for a long time.

What I hope we can do as we prepare our grantees for the real operational pieces, is to help set some context. So from your expertise we're going to learn more about why performance measures are important for federal programs. How school readiness is expressed through the Office of Head Start, and through K-12 in the Department of Education, and can be very good sites for Foster Grandparents to demonstrate outcomes for the children they serve.

So Amanda and Elson, I think we'll start by just talking about performance measures in a framework. Here at CNCS, in Senior Corps and in our other programs, we have a very intentional approach that is new to some of our grantees and will actually standardize our measures across all of our programs as makes sense, so we can aggregate, understand, analyze, evaluate and tell a national narrative about the outcomes and effectiveness of the Foster Grandparent program.

So through the lenses of your own agencies, I wonder if you would speak a little bit to how you see performance measure and their importance.

Amanda: Well, Head Start of course has school readiness as its authorizing purpose. We have for a number of years been really working hard to articulate what that means for children, and how programs can better understand the progress of individual children and groups of children toward the goals they've established related to school readiness.

So programs have requirements to collect various data, not just child data. Information about the quality of classroom, teacher-child interactions, information about the community and the strengths and needs in the community, information about staff professional development, and of course the child progress information—and to be able to analyze that and use the information together. Again, to make sure that both the individual children are progressing and that the program is meeting their needs, and that the program as a whole is improving continuously. We think Head Start is the nation's laboratory in many ways for early childhood, and we want to make sure that we are in a pattern of continuous improvement and growth.

Angela: Thank you. Elson?

Elson: Sure, as the Department of Education is the lead federal agency around education issues, performance measurement and being accountable for those measures is critical. And academic success is something that we track and actually require our grantees to track as well, whether it be through state education agencies, higher education institutions, or non-profit organizations that actually administer the programs. The whole idea of tracking progress for academic success is key to what we do.

We also have a number of data sets. So if you go to data.ed.gov you have the opportunity to view data related to academic success. And then a number of our initiatives-- things like Race to the Top, Promise Neighborhoods, the program I'm with—we require our grantees to report on these measures. So we think you're spot-on in terms of getting grantees to think about common measures, because it's something where we are all going from a national perspective.

Angela: Very good. So it does sound like across our programs, across our missions, and into our networks and the children they touch—we do have this alignment. And I think that's important to reinforce because sometimes it can feel like we're doing things in isolation. And I don't think, in the performance measures world in particular, that's the case. Thank you for having set that context.

What I'd like to do now is move more to some of the examples and underlying rationales for the measures we've chosen, and how you might be able to help reinforce with our grantees that these are indeed significant areas to focus on.

What we'd like to do now Amanda, is talk a little bit about our school readiness performance measures. We have selected for the Foster Grandparent Program: social/emotional development, literacy, and math. If you could help us understand the importance of those pieces to being ready for school, and anything you want to reflect on how the FGP volunteers in particular can be assets to helping children achieve.

Amanda: I will be happy to. I think that you've picked three really important areas. Head Start serves nearly a million children, and they are enrolled from birth to five years of age. So that's quite a range in terms of developmental readiness and experiences. I think

that many people don't realize that even the youngest babies are beginning to learn about literacy, language and math.

And we know that for all children, social and emotional development is critical to their ongoing success. If they acquire great academic skills and knowledge, but don't have social and emotional strengths, they will be unable to really benefit maximally from the school environments that they are in later.

And we know also for the younger children, certainly infants and toddlers but preschoolers as well, they learn best in the context of relationships. They need safe harbors. They need a place where they are recognized and where their strengths are supported, and from which they can venture when are starting to be ready for more challenges and when we want to support their continued development. All of that speaks to the importance of social/emotional development.

We talk a lot now in early childhood about terms like executive function, which really means that children are able to manage themselves well enough to be successful. That they can control an impulse, that they can follow a direction. And that in many ways has been this new way of thinking for some folks, but it's something we've known in early childhood for a long time, and again it's really rooted in children's social/emotional as well as their cognitive development.

And again, certainly language and literacy are really important. We know that as children go on in school the gap widens for children of lower socio-economic status. And one of the largest areas of gap that starts appearing by age two is in vocabulary development. So we want to make sure that in our Head Start programs that children are exposed to rich vocabulary, over-time and with repetition and in different situations-- so that they can really learn and make new vocabulary words part of their own lexicon. That is the beginning of literacy skills. Rhyming, beginning to recognize letters, thinking about letter sounds and beginning to form words. All of those things are really critical foundations for early literacy.

And again, mathematics is an area where many adults don't feel really comfortable about what they've learned and they are unsure about supporting children. But math occurs throughout the day for people. We have a term at Head Start we call "mathematize", which is recognizing the math learning opportunities for children. Being really intentional about expectations about what children can do in math and how we can support their emerging conceptual knowledge in mathematics. So I think those are terrific areas and certainly worthy of paying attention to and thinking intentionally about what Foster Grandparents do and how it can support children's development in those areas.

Angela: Thank you so much. Because the Foster Grandparents have an intensive level of service, they are assigned to children, they are in the classrooms and they can bring that extra step of that relationship and the safe harbor you talked about. And they can facilitate a nurturing environment of learning enrichment. And we know this from the

very beginning, when Foster Grandparents started many years ago, being in Head Start centers.

Elson, if you can help us on the education side, K-12, for the Foster Grandparent Program for our performance measures. It's academic performance in literacy and math, academic engagement and school attendance. So if you can speak about the importance of those elements in the Foster Grandparent program and what the volunteers may do to assist.

Elson: So, with the Foster Grandparents providing that stability and support in the classroom, being that safe harbor, the additional support or individual that can make the children comfortable. They can support the curriculum that has been set by the school or center. Foster Grandparents I think are critical to providing that type of academic success and engagement.

The key thing here is being able to separate where that actually occurs. So, how will we measure the direct support from Foster Grandparents? Intuitively we know that it is an important issue. We know that Foster Grandparents provide that type of support. But being able to drill down and say "this is as a result of Foster Grandparents" will be the next best step for the initiative.

We love Foster Grandparents. We've heard from grantees that the support of our elders is important. We have signature initiative called the Promise Neighborhoods initiative. As a part of that, this whole idea of early learning is a critical element within the initiative. It's modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone. Once again, early academic success, early onset success for young people in this setting, can provide that stable environment it is something that Foster Grandparents can do.

Angela: You've provided the perfect segue into the next question. We'd like to explore the idea that FGP volunteers often live in the volunteers they serve. Amanda and Elson, if you could address why it is so important to involve communities when you are trying to create a learning environment for children.

Amanda: Well I formerly worked in Head Start program where we had Foster Grandparents in many of our classrooms. We wanted them in all of our classrooms, but we couldn't always recruit enough. There was one Foster Grandparent I'm thinking of particular who worked with us for years. She was an icon in the community. She was a powerful. She was much respected, and a little bit feared sometimes. She was a leader. And when she read to children in the classroom where she worked, they felt like they were being read to by a famous person. She had community status, and conferred that to the children when she worked with them. That was incredibly important. Many of the children in that Head Start program-- they were all very low-income. Often their parents had very negative experiences themselves with the school system because they were in under-resourced schools and all the issues around being in poverty. And their children's introduction to education through Head Start, and with this person in the classroom who was so revered in the community, was a wonderful beginning for them and not something that could be duplicated by any other program. We always believe at Head Start that

children need to find themselves in the classroom. They need to be accepted. Their cultures need to be reflected, and there is no better way to do that than by including others who are part of the community where the children are living.

Angela: Thank you so much. Elson, we all know that often the school is the hub of the community. Tell us a little about this from the education standpoint.

Elson: Parent, family and community engagement is critical to the academic experience, whether it be low-income or high-income. I think the key here is involvement in school. The added benefit of having someone that our young people are familiar with—particularly someone who has status—an elder that they can look up to that can remind them of their “nana” or “papa” is critically important. Ranging from school climate—meaning helping a young person get across the street. To academic success—helping them read, and helping them with math. Helping them to critically analyze situations. Foster Grandparents can be that last bit that can help take a school to the top. It can also provide the foundation, but that piece is critically important—having full range of community support for a school, regardless of what type of school it is, is critically important.

Angela: Thank you Elson. Throughout our virtual conference our grantees, including FGP grantees, will have learning sessions. These will go over the requirements and all of the pieces that they are going to need to help prepare them to implement new performance measures as they go through all of our grantee networks, including Head Start Centers and schools. So this is an important perspective for them, and before we end our panel I wonder if there are any thoughts, recommendations or advice you would like to give our grantees as they are adopting these new measures.

Amanda: The world of performance measurement is fraught with all kinds of concerns, sometimes competition and worries about high stakes. I think the most important message to keep in mind is that it’s our obligation to make sure that children are getting everything they need. This isn’t about pushing kids because we need to meet certain benchmarks. It’s not so much about judging individual people. It’s about making sure systems are learning organizations, that they continuously improve and that they are responsive to the individual needs of the children and families involved. So it’s a burden in a way for us, but we’ve taken on what is really a sacred responsibility. So we need to embrace the work and really use to make sure we are doing the absolute best we can do for the children that we’ve been entrusted with.

Angela: Thank you. Elson?

Elson: Yes- I totally agree, those are all great points. The only added piece that I would look for, which is a trend in many high performing programs. And that is, to the degree that Foster Grandparents can use data to improve the program and better improve the lives on individual children. So what does that mean? It could be conferring with the teacher who is associated with that classroom and if the teacher says “Johnny/Bonnie is having some challenges in X area this quarter, perhaps we could increase our level of

literacy in this area, to help the literacy skills of Johnny/Bonnie”. So that whole idea of continuous improvement, using data in a positive ways to positively affect the academic engagement of the individual. That’s something where we need to think deeper- about how data can be used in a positive way.

Angela: Thank you so much. Thanks again Angela and Elson. What we’d like to do now is keep the conversation going a little. Any audience members, if you would like to take the opportunity to post questions or comments on the interactive chat board, we would love to hear from you. Examples of some of the questions/comments could be:

Would you like to share some of your own experiences with FGP volunteers in local Head Start Centers or K-12 schools?

What activities are you most excited about when you think about being able to use performance measures to show FGP’s impact nationally?