

Engaging Parents, Community, and Child Care Providers to Meet State Mandates

Building Partnerships to Increase Awareness and Spur Action

Franklin County Department of Job and Family Services (FCDJFS) is central Ohio's public social service agency handling one of the state's largest overall caseloads. The county agency is responsible for basic financial, medical, and social services programs for residents, including publicly funded child care. By July 2020, the State of Ohio will require all child care providers who receive public dollars to be quality rated through Ohio's Quality Rating Improvement System—Step Up To Quality (SUTQ) or lose that funding. Additionally, by 2025 the State of Ohio will require all child care providers be high-quality rated (three to five stars) to continue to receive funding.

The challenge

Franklin County Department of Job and Family Services knew that while the state mandate would strengthen the quality of child care in the county, there was a significant need for outreach among providers and parents about how the SUTQ mandate impacts them. When the state mandate passed, there were hundreds of unrated child care providers in Franklin County. If the mandate was in effect at the start of this outreach initiative in 2017, more than 10,000 families would have lost child care, resulting in 23,000 children having no place to go, hundreds of small businesses (providers) losing a large part of their income and being forced to close, and local employers being left without a reliable workforce. FCDJFS leadership knew that without a strategic, comprehensive, and aggressive approach, the impact would be catastrophic.

Joy Bivens, FCDJFS Director, knew the need for achieving quality ran even deeper than meeting the state's deadlines with a tremendous sense of urgency and purpose.

"The goal of Step Up to Quality is to ensure every family has access to high-quality child care, and we wholeheartedly believe in that," said Director Bivens. "That's why Franklin County made the decision to invest the time and resources in the significant grassroots education and awareness building needed to support that goal for the long term."

FCDJFS hired Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS) to help them engage in several, related phases of work that built upon one another. Phase one started with research to understand the landscape of need among child care providers and parents/caregivers. In subsequent phases, ACS built outreach strategies based on known assets in the community and knowledge and service

gaps within that landscape. The ultimate goal was two-pronged: to increase awareness about the importance of quality early learning experiences among parents and caregivers, and to encourage child care providers to become star rated.

FCDJFS knew from the start that building authentic partnerships with parents, providers, and community partners was the path to success. These partnerships, along with ongoing outreach with messaging that was both informed by these audiences and that resonated with these audiences, were critical.

“The research showed us what was significant to [parents and providers], what we needed to say, how we needed to say it, and the most effective vehicles to get our message out,” said Joy Bivens. “We wanted a partnership with our audiences, and we were able to reinforce that by talking about the importance of being star rated, rather than adding to any fear or sense of punishment. This emphasis on positive partnership and education was the foundation of every single step we took.”

Forging their own path

ACS and its strategic partners worked closely with FCDJFS leadership to develop a strategy to help advance communication and outreach strategies among child care providers and parents within the region, as outlined below. The approach that includes four key areas of work to help FCDJFS meet the 2020 mandate. These included:

- ▶ **Research and Analysis**—A multi-pronged approach to inform multiple audiences was leveraged. The combination of the following components was critical in shaping messaging and outreach strategies to parents and providers in a way that built trust and authentic partnerships.
 - A landscape scan and database analysis was a deep dive to understand providers who relied on publicly funded child care. This analysis revealed which providers needed to be engaged first—those who were unrated and serving the most children. This analysis also showed the geographic areas within Franklin County that were most at-risk to become child care deserts if providers did not meet the mandate.
 - Initial surveys of parents and families helped FCDJFS understand the perceptions and understanding of quality early care and education, where they look, and whom they trust for information about early learning.
 - Focus groups with both families of young children and providers helped further shape messaging.
 - Ongoing research continues to ensure the initiative continues to reach the right audiences with effective messaging.
- ▶ **Training**—FCDJFS knew that many child care providers were interested in applying for SUTQ star rating, but they didn't have enough information or the right information about the process. At the start of this effort, there were approximately 740 home- and center-based providers, the majority of which were unrated (540). Some providers thought it was unreachable for them to attain even a one-star rating. FCDJFS wanted to help break down the SUTQ rating process and make it more accessible for providers. To supplement the other technical assistance available throughout the county, FCDJFS offered training to help close the knowledge gap about the SUTQ application process. ACS developed and conducted free training in several

rotating cohorts for providers both in person and online, for all Franklin County providers. This work included hands-on technical assistance to help providers understand what is required to become SUTQ star rated and how to fill out forms and prepare their center or home for an initial rating or maintenance of an existing rating. Regardless of their star level, all home-based or center-based providers in Franklin County were eligible to participate in the training, and those who completed the training earned up to 32 hours professional development credit toward their SUTQ star rating.

- ▶ **Paid Media**—To buttress the grassroots outreach and training engagement efforts and continue to build awareness more broadly across the community, television, radio, and online ads were developed and distributed across key stations in the central Ohio region. These ads included and reinforced key messages that were tested and tailored using surveys and focus groups. Those in the ads were real parents and child care providers in the county. Those commercials can be seen here:
 - **Providers:** <https://youtu.be/fRNiwuhcZG4>
 - **Parents:** <https://youtu.be/xJgwyU-oqro>
- ▶ **Outreach and Support**—In order to reach the intended audience of parents and providers with effective messaging, FCDJFS partnered with several community organizations. ACS also developed a [toolkit](#) that included messaging and communication materials (such as flyers, frequently asked questions, and fact sheets), which allowed FCDJFS to extend their reach into other areas and utilize different messengers to maximize awareness. ACS made recommendations and gave support for engaging key organizations to help leverage FCDJFS activity, including suggesting asking community partners to engage providers in their networks through digital and social media.
- ▶ **Child Care Division Assessment & Workflow Modification**—FCDJFS wanted to ensure it was prepared for its own increased responsibilities when the State of Ohio began requiring county Job and Family Services agencies to take responsibility of SUTQ ratings for home providers applying for 1 and 2 stars in January 2019. ACS worked with the FCDJFS Child Care Unit to understand its current staff capacity and workflows, to best respond to upcoming state SUTQ mandates, and understand how to close the gaps to take on SUTQ responsibilities. ACS and FCDJFS came up with several recommendations to ensure that the Child Care Unit is prepared to take on the challenges of SUTQ ratings through 2020 and is preparing for any additional responsibilities in advance of 2025.

Achieving stellar outcomes

Through the five-pronged approach outlined above, FCDJFS was able to engage with parents in the community and share the positive rationale for SUTQ. The agency also reached those providers most likely to gain from additional awareness regarding the program and translate that into increasing the number of star rating trained providers. By engaging in paid media and social media, and by using community partners to broaden the reach of the message, FCDJFS stretched its impact beyond the traditional communication vehicles of a county agency. In addition, focusing the effort to find the audiences most likely to benefit, the most effective messages, and the right mix of vehicles

and messengers, the agency created a pathway to success. In 2018, FCDJFS exceeded expected provider training outcomes. To measure the influence of all the engagement and efforts to build awareness strategies around SUTQ, an additional survey was conducted in November 2018. The following progress was made in 2018:

- ▶ Awareness of Step up to Quality rose 13 percentage points, from 20% to 33% since July 2017.
- ▶ 31% of survey participants had a favorable view of SUTQ (up from 18% in July 2017).
- ▶ Awareness of a five-star rating system for child care rose 18 percentage points, from 32% to 50%, since July 2017.
- ▶ 44% of survey participants had a favorable view of a five-star rating system (up from 28% in July 2017).
- ▶ 93% of survey participants believe that access to a child care provider is essential for someone in their household to attend work or school.
- ▶ 180 child care providers registered and completed FCDJFS SUTQ training, meeting the annual training goal. These 180 providers:
 - Equate to 30% of the unrated providers (180 out of 543 unrated providers).
 - Drawdown \$12 million in publicly funded child care dollars (out of \$26 million).
 - Serve more than 9,000 children in high risk neighborhoods (out of 23,000).
 - Employ 463 early childhood professionals.

“When the majority of the children being served by unrated providers are children of color living in some of the lowest asset neighborhoods in our community, that’s something I take personally,” said Bivens. “The team at ACS really helped us realize our vision and put it into action. We’ve made great strides, but we certainly still have work to do—and those children and their families are counting on us for that.”

Every family deserves high-quality child care, and every child care provider deserves to have the support they need to reach their potential. Franklin County saw the need in its community to ensure parents and providers had the information and tools necessary to reach those high-quality goals. With double digit increased awareness among survey participants of the SUTQ program, the need for child care programs to be of high-quality, and favorable views of a five-star rating system, FCDJFS has the data to show that parents and providers are engaged, providers are on the path to being rated, and the child care workforce is being supported. The agency has given parents a greater ability to choose a high-quality program and given its small businesses the tools they need to stay in business. FCDJFS is not stopping with this success. Provider training will continue through June 2020, as will ongoing outreach to child care providers and families through social media and radio, to increase awareness about and attain high-quality child care in Franklin County.