

The Strategic Planning Process

The exact way that you organize your process will vary based on a number of factors. These include your knowledge and experience of what works in your community, logistical challenges such as travel distance, and the strategic planning experiences of your leadership council, coalition, and partners.

Agenda Items for Strategic Planning Sessions

However you structure your strategic planning, you do want to make sure it is an inclusive process and that participants have a good understanding of what you are trying to achieve. The following is a list of agenda items that need to be covered in strategic planning sessions in order to enable meaningful participation. Within these items are the key tasks that need to be accomplished which are to select goals, develop strategies, and define action steps.

AGENDA ITEM 1: Review the Purpose of the Smart Beginnings Initiative

Regardless of who is taking part in a strategic planning session, you want to take some time to review the purpose of the SB initiative. This may be very brief if the audience has heard the information before, or it may take a little longer if you are working with a group that has limited information about SB. The information provided should include the following:

- Why focusing on early childhood is important
- SB brings people together across all the sectors serving young children, including child care, preschool, health, family support, and parent education, to help them create a plan for improving services and resources for young children and their families
- The goal is not to create a new program but to improve systems so that existing services and resources work better and so that more people in the community understand the importance of investing in young children
- We are one of over 20 SB coalitions working together with our state partners to improve systems for young children throughout Virginia.

Providing this type of information will help participants better understand what they are being asked to plan for.

AGENDA ITEM 2: Highlight Key Findings from the Community Assessment

A strategic planning session should highlight the key findings from the community assessment you conducted. The purpose is to make the connection between the assessment and the planning activities. Participants should understand that the plans they are making should be connected with identified community needs. The purpose here is to highlight the key findings, not to cover everything you looked at or found. It is worth doing this even if the group you are working with has seen these results before because it will serve as a reminder that the plan needs to be linked to the assessment findings. The things you most want to highlight are

- The key indicators you identified through the community assessment
- The major findings from the environmental scan portion of the assessment

- The reports from any focus area workgroups that were formed as a result of the discussions about indicators.

Participants in the process should be asked to think about what opportunities exist to address the challenges identified through the community assessment. These opportunities can be used to develop the goals and strategies that make up your plan.

AGENDA ITEM 3: What Can We Do Together to Address the Issues Identified in the SB Community Assessment? Brainstorming Goals

Once you have discussed the community assessment findings, it is time to get into the planning part of this work. Your audience should be reminded that what SB is doing is bringing together different individuals and organizations that work with young children and are interested in supporting families and children. The questions for the group are: What can we all do together to address the issues that were identified in our SB community assessment? What should be the goals of our work? You can provide a few examples, such as those mentioned earlier, and you should encourage the group to build on the work of the focus area workgroups. Participants should be encouraged to use this information and to think creatively about what would work best in the community.

Group members should be asked to think about the outcomes they are trying to achieve through the goal. For every goal, someone should be able to explain what measurable benefit would occur if the goal were achieved.

If you have a large meeting, you might want to break the group up into smaller groups ranging anywhere from 5 to 10 people. You should let them know that, while they should be thinking in terms of realistic goals, they should stretch and focus on what would be best for children and families, even if it might be hard to accomplish. You can note that more consideration will be given later regarding what is actually possible versus what would be ideal.

AGENDA ITEM 4: Prioritizing Goals

Comprehensive system building covers a lot of ground. There will be many things that people want to do in the area of early childhood. While your plan can certainly go beyond your immediately available resources and capacity, you don't want it to go too far beyond. If you have too many goals, it will be hard to monitor them and people will get discouraged when you are not making progress. There is not a set number of goals that you must or should have. We recommend having 3 or 4 goals for your plan, which gives you a lot to work on without being overwhelming. How do you get from all the goals identified in the previous agenda item to 3–4 goals? You need to set priorities, which require choosing a decisionmaking approach. The table on the next page shows some approaches to decisionmaking that you might want to consider.

Approaches to Decisionmaking About Goals

Type	Description	Things to Consider
1 Total consensus decisionmaking	Unanimous agreement on the goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be time consuming and challenging • Hard with anything other than small groups • Harder with diverse groups from different sectors
2 Modified consensus decisionmaking	Goals are presented and group members are given a chance to raise concerns. If the concerns are not resolved a group member may reject a goal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be time consuming • Ensures everyone supports goals even if they are less enthusiastic about some than others • May not serve to reduce the number of goals enough since participants may be willing to acquiesce even when not enthusiastic • May cause resentment towards the person rejecting a generally accepted goal • May be useful as a second step when combined with a vote or it may be used by the leadership council when reviewing goals prioritized by a larger group
3 Voting	Everyone in the group is allowed to vote on what they think should be the priorities for the group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone has equal input • There is a clear process for reducing the number of goals • The results may depend on the characteristics of the people who attend the meeting or participate in the vote

Total consensus decisionmaking is very challenging among diverse groups and is very difficult once a group gets to be larger than 8–10 people. You probably have a sense whether your coalition is able to function using this method, but there are good reasons to try other methods when choosing something like goals.

Modified consensus decisionmaking allows you to check whether everyone is willing to support a choice even if they are not enthusiastic. You can use the **stoplight tool** (appendix D) or a similar device when using this approach. If your group is relatively small (less than 15 people), you could give participants individual sheets of paper with green, yellow, and red lights or caution and stop signs. The process consists of the following steps:

- A goal is presented.
- If someone has concerns about a goal, he or she can raise a caution flag or yellow light. The participant should then be given the opportunity to explain his or her concern.
- The group can discuss ways to modify the goal to address the issues raised by the concerned participant. If the concerned participant agrees, the goal can be accepted.
- Any participant may raise a red flag, sign, or light and reject a goal. If that happens, the group is required to move on to a new goal.

Voting allows everyone to have a say about an issue. There are various voting techniques.

- Everyone could be given one vote.
- Everyone can be given multiple votes. Three is a common number though you could provide four to more closely match the target for the number of goals the group is trying to select.
- If everyone is given multiple votes, they can be required to use only one per goal or they can be told that they can put multiple votes on a particular goal. That way, if they feel strongly about one goal, they can express that with their votes.
- Participants can also be asked to rank a set of goals, and votes can be given out based on the rankings. For example, participants can be asked to rank their top three goals with the highest ranked getting three votes, second ranked two votes, and third ranked one vote.
- Voting can be done publicly using dots or other markers or it can be done privately.

The most important thing is to establish the rules and stick to them. Because you want to end up with multiple goals and you want people to suggest things that may involve programs outside their sector, it is recommended that you use one of the multiple vote strategies or the ranking strategy.

On a final note, you can also vote through electronic means such as email or by setting up a Zoomerang or Survey Monkey survey (see the SB Community Assessment Guide). This may allow you to reach people who aren't able to come to a meeting or to get feedback from a larger group without holding multiple large meetings.

Once the process is finished and you have decided upon goals, it is very useful to get back to all the people who voted and let them know the results of what has been decided. You do not have to give them specific tallies of votes or explain why some ideas may have been dropped. However, you should convey that people's votes were taken into account and, if at all possible, provide examples of how that was done.

AGENDA ITEM 5: Developing Strategies

Strategies should also be tied to measurable outcomes. While strategies are ultimately designed to achieve the goal they are associated with and the outcome that is tied to that goal, they should also be tied to some short and medium-term outcomes. For example, providing a certain kind of training is designed to produce a short-term outcome of increasing knowledge, a medium-term outcome of changing how a service or resource is delivered, and a long-term outcome of improving parenting practices and the well-being of children and families. One of the advantages of using evidence-based practices is that the link between particular strategies and outcomes is already established. Sometimes participants are unsure whether something is a goal or a strategy or even an activity. You do not necessarily need to worry about whether something is a strategy, activity, or a goal during your planning meeting. As mentioned above it is probably better to not use the activities and outcomes form. In fact, it is probably better just to let people brainstorm ideas at first and then maybe group things together at some point in the meeting so you can decide who is going to follow-up with next steps.

AGENDA ITEM 6: Developing Action Steps or Activities

Action steps are more detailed than strategies. They specify the particular steps that need to be taken to carry out a strategy. They can include tasks such as researching, planning, and leading events or activities. More details can be added later, but enough information should be provided to show that there is a clear plan for carrying out the strategy. Having action steps can also serve as a way for you to recruit partners for particular strategies. There may be community members who are not inclined to participate in the coalition but who can contribute to the success of the plan through their contributions to particular action steps. Unless you are having a very long meeting or even a two day meeting chances are you are not going to be able to cover all of the elements of an Action Plan in a single session. Given how challenging it can be to keep people focused for many hours it probably would not be wise to try and do so. At some point you do want to have a group of people sit down and try and outline action steps. This is often something that works better in smaller work groups who have agreed to further develop the goal or strategy.

Ways of Organizing Your Strategic Planning Process

The way you decide who is responsible for the various tasks required for strategic planning will vary. As noted earlier you will need to take into account the characteristics of your community, the size of the area, and your community's experience with similar efforts. This section provides suggestions on organizing your strategic plan.

Bringing Together a Broadly Inclusive Group. One of the best ways to obtain input from a wide range of people in your community is to bring together a broadly inclusive group. You could try to do this through an open meeting where anyone who is interested can come. However, there are disadvantages to that approach since you are not quite sure who will show up, some people who you would like to come may be reluctant to participate in an open forum, and it is much harder to plan a successful meeting when you are unsure who your audience will be. Therefore, you may want to invite a specific set of participants. This could include a wide range of people involved with early childhood issues, including people from a variety of sectors, as well as parent leaders. You might want to ask coalition members, leadership council members, and people you contacted for the community assessment about who they would suggest attend such a meeting.

Examples of Possible Participants in an Inclusive Strategic Planning Meeting

- Select leadership council members
- Coalition members
- Public officials (county, city, and state) who have shown an interest in early childhood or health, education, and human services
- Head Start and child care administrators and staff
- Kindergarten team leaders and teachers
- Infant and Toddler Connection leaders and others who work with children with developmental delays
- Preschool special education staff
- WIC program staff
- Home visiting program staff and administrators
- Health department staff
- Department of social services staff and administrators
- Hospital social workers
- Local cooperative extension staff
- Parent education program staff or administrators
- Staff members from health care facilities that see a lot of children, including community health centers
- Parent leaders from Head Start and other groups (ask for recommendations from programs who work directly with children)

What Should Be Covered in a Meeting Involving a Broadly Inclusive Group? What kind of meetings can you hold with a group like this?

- At a minimum, you should cover agenda items 1–3, though ideally you should also take advantage of the group’s presence to offer them an opportunity to prioritize (agenda item 4). A meeting of this type will probably take a minimum of 3 hours. If time is an issue, you could prioritize goals through one of the electronic means mentioned above.
- You could add agenda item 5 and develop draft strategies. This will add at least an hour to the meeting. Often times in the process of developing goals meeting participants will also discuss strategies for implementing the goals. While it is useful to group goals and strategies together, it is more important to generate ideas than to make sure everything is exactly where you ultimately want it to be in your strategic plan. The meeting also could pose an opportunity to ask for volunteers who will participate in workgroups that will be responsible for refining individual strategies and developing action steps for implementing the strategies.
- You could work through all the agenda items and use this group to develop a draft strategic plan that can then be refined by the coalition, leadership council, or work groups. Working through all the items would likely require a minimum of 6 hours. Seven hours may provide more of a cushion and a more relaxed version of the process could easily take a day and a half. However, as noted above there are good reasons to assign this part of the task to work groups. If you are going to try to do this in one day, you will benefit tremendously from having an experienced and skilled facilitator lead the process. It is very hard to keep people engaged for so long. If you want to split the process into two meetings, you may want to get through agenda items 1-4 in the first meeting and cover the rest in a second meeting. You could also use electronic voting between the meetings to prioritize the goals that will be part of the second meeting. One of the challenges with having two meetings is that you may end up with different participants. You will have to recap the first meeting and explain how you arrived at the goals you will be working with in the second meeting. Some people, especially those who missed the first meeting, may want to reopen the discussion around the goals that have been chosen. Ideally, you want to avoid having this happen since it will make it difficult to complete the process. The best way to do this is to clearly and confidently state how the goals were chosen in the last meeting and to define the purpose of the second meeting as fleshing out those goals. If someone has very strong feelings you could suggest that they write down their suggestion and it will be reviewed by the leadership council.

How Do We Get People to Come? You may be concerned that people will be reluctant to come to a large meeting. There are various things you can do to encourage people to come.

- Send a carefully crafted invitation from your leadership council asking people to attend. Be sure to include their names and positions and to stress the importance of hearing from community members as part of developing your plan.
- Have individual coalition or leadership council members with connections to the invited participant follow up with an email or phone call.
- Offer refreshments
- Choose your location carefully
- Hold multiple meetings that cover the different counties you are working in

Refining Your Plan. Once you have input from a broadly inclusive group or groups of community members, you will still need to refine the action plan section of your strategic plan. This toolkit includes a template, the **activities and outcomes form for planning and reporting** (appendix C), which can be used for this purpose. The template allows you to capture your goals, the strategies you will use to try to reach the goals, and the action steps that will need to be taken to carry out those strategies as well as the outcomes you are trying to achieve.

In some communities, the coalition or leadership council can take on the role of refining your plan. However, if these groups have limited availability, are very large, or are struggling to find a way to work effectively and cohesively, you may want to have other groups refine your action plan. One way to do this is to create workgroups organized around the goals you have selected. Prior to developing workgroups, you should prioritize your goals so the workgroup can focus on a limited set of goals. If you have already done this within the inclusive groups, you probably want to review the goals with the leadership council before creating workgroups. If you have not prioritized within an inclusive group, you may want to have the leadership council or a strategic planning subcommittee or workgroup prioritize the goals selected and decide which ones will be included in your strategic plan.

Refining the plan will involve different activities depending on how much work has been done in the inclusive group. The tasks may include:

- Reviewing and refining goals—refining may just mean editing the way they are worded or it may involve some rethinking
- Defining the outcomes the goals are expected to lead to
- Developing or refining strategies
- Defining the outcomes that the strategies are expected to achieve
- Developing or refining action steps
- Developing or refining resources available that support the strategic plan
- Developing the timeline for particular action steps or strategies

Endorsement of Your Plan. You may want to ask your leadership council and coalition to formally endorse your action plan by signing something indicating their support for the plan and their commitment to carry it out. It would be helpful to include some indication of their support on the front page of the strategic planning document. A formal endorsement may be more effective than simply listing the members of the council and coalition.

Alternative Approaches to Strategic Planning. If you are unable to use a broadly inclusive group as part of your first phase of strategic planning, you may try alternate approaches that enable you to obtain broad community input. For example, if your leadership council made an initial pass at drafting a strategic plan, you can still obtain community input by sharing that plan with an inclusive group or groups and asking them for suggestions for goal strategies or for ways to best implement strategies. Such a meeting would still include agenda items 1 and 2, but these would be followed by a presentation of the strategic plan draft. The key to successfully executing this approach is to make sure there is room for meaningful input from the more inclusive groups and a willingness on the part of your leadership council to take into account the comments that are received and to accept changes if warranted.

Using Your Strategic Planning

Once you have completed your strategic plan, you should begin to think about how best to use it. Its main function will be to guide your work, but it is also the document that summarizes what you are doing and thus is a critical communication tool. You may want to develop a one to two page summary of the plan that briefly describes what it is and how it came to be and then focuses on what you are going to try to accomplish. This brief summary might be confined to a discussion of goals and the outcomes to which they are tied. It would be helpful to develop a presentation which describes your plan. This can build on the presentation of your community assessment and show that your coalition is working hard to address the community's needs and would benefit from the support of other community members. Depending on your audience, you may need to tweak parts of the presentation and emphasize different things. The presentation should allow you and coalition members to tell an effective story about what it is you are seeking to accomplish with your SB strategic plan.

Your strategic plan represents a commitment to taking particular actions. VECF will evaluate your coalition based on progress on the implementation of your plan. Both the periodic review of your grant and applications for future SB grant will involve a review of progress in implementing your plan. There may be things that you need to change or that turn out not to work as well as you had hoped. Everyone involved in doing this kind of work recognizes that as a possibility, but if you are unable to make progress on some goals or if you decide you need to change some of your approaches, you will be asked to explain why and how you came to such decisions.