

Taking the Leap

by Eileen Eisenberg

Could this be you? Look under your desk or in the corner of your office. Is there an unopened box of NAEYC accreditation self-study materials? Have you been using it as a footstool or a place to toss your jacket? How long has it been there? Have you been intimidated by the size of the box, heard discouraging stories from colleagues, or are you just too overwhelmed with your daily work to open it?

NOTE: *The National Early Childhood Program Accreditation (NECPA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation system have similar programming standards and self-assessment procedures. NECPA accreditation standards include NAEYC standards and the American Public Health Association/American Academy of Pediatrics National Health and Safety Performance Standards. Whether a director chooses to seek NECPA or NAEYC accreditation for her program, her ultimate goal is to provide the highest quality care and education for children and families and a workplace that promotes continued professional growth for her staff.*

For this article only, programs going through the NAEYC accreditation process were interviewed, but stories and experiences tend to be similar across processes. In our next issue, we will share stories of living through accreditation from a variety of perspectives.

Over the past five years, I have worked with over 200 directors. They include brand-new directors and veteran administrators from Head Start, church-based, nonprofit, private proprietary, public school, university-sponsored, and hospital-affiliated programs. They are from inner city, suburban, and rural areas representing a wide range of economically and culturally diverse communities. Their programs are half-day and full-day, infants through school-agers. Some of their programs enroll as few as 25 children; others serve 500 or more children. Their educational backgrounds vary.

All of these directors were interested in pursuing NAEYC accreditation. They enrolled in a management course to learn about the process. What I learned about working with them is that taking the leap from being informed and interested in accreditation to engaging in the self-study process is a gigantic step.

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Five directors recently shared their stories:

Leatha, director of an inner-city, full-day Head Start program

My interest in accreditation began seven years ago when I first became a center director. I was just fresh out of college, already a member of NAEYC, and knew all about developmentally appropriate practices. I was enthusiastic, brimming with ideas, and ready to share my wisdom with others. I soon discovered that staff were not as eager as I was to take a critical look at their current teaching practices. I also quickly learned about staff turnover. It was the overwhelming inconsistency of personnel that quietly discouraged my hopes of making constructive changes.

Three years passed and I enrolled in a masters program in early childhood leadership and advocacy. My research instructor was incredible. She inspired and guided me, helped me redefine and refocus my goals; I began to think again about accreditation.

Kathy, director of a suburban, half-day and full-day nonprofit program

I went from classroom teaching into a job as director. Before I began my new position, I attended a week-long leadership institute. I learned about staff development and heard what other directors were doing to promote the professionalism of their teachers. I also heard about accreditation for the first time and recognized that the self-study process would bring about positive changes for teachers. That is how I presented the challenge to my staff.

Patti, director of a suburban, church-based preschool

When I was first hired as director, I recognized that many classroom teach-

ing practices were quite “outdated”: art was created from patterns, academic activities were offered on worksheets, activity centers offered little opportunity for discovery or experimentation, yet the program enjoyed a good reputation with dedicated teachers who had been there for years.

Karen, director of an on-campus university-affiliated program

During my second year as a director of a community college child care center, I recommended to the administration that we seek NAEYC accreditation. The chairman of the department overseeing the center had participated in the college’s national accreditation and was fully supportive of the idea. Accreditation was equated with quality and my center’s accreditation would bring respect and greater public recognition for the staff.

Mary Ellen, director of a multi-site public school prekindergarten program

I have always been deeply committed to providing high quality programs to the families in our school district. There is a well-defined philosophy driving our work, and the importance of early childhood care and education is taken seriously. I knew that accreditation would give validity to the professional status of my staff and felt the local political climate was ready for us to begin.

Our teachers had recently made many changes: they had gone from a traditional “holiday” nursery school curriculum to implementing the High/Scope curriculum. They had begun to bring children together more often in small groups, they had rearranged their classrooms, and they had initiated portfolio assessment. To be successful in engaging their interest in the self-study, I

knew I would have to get their full support.

We see from the experiences of these five directors that the key elements in the successful launching of the self-study phase of accreditation are rallying support, finding funding, and staying motivated. Most directors, I have found, encounter stumbling blocks along the way. Every beginning journey looks a little different.

Leatha: I approached our agency’s executive director with the suggestion that we pursue accreditation. With her full support, we ordered the self-study materials and hired a consultant to assist us in the process. The teaching staff made a commitment to focus their energies on accreditation, to work together as a team, and to be open to change. In turn, the administration made a commitment with both time and money to support the accreditation process.

The teaching staff and I met monthly for two and a half hours with the consultant. Our meetings were held during naptime, and support staff from other areas of the agency covered the classrooms. A training opportunity became available off-site for the whole teaching staff, and one day a week, for eight weeks, the center closed early to enable staff to attend. Additional funding provided us with money to renovate classrooms, purchase materials, and create an outdoor play space.

Kathy: I asked a faculty member I met at the leadership institute to talk with the staff about accreditation. Four teachers decided it would be too much work. They were not interested in making changes and left the center. The majority looked upon the process as a great opportunity to critically examine the curriculum and the physical environment.

Armed with information about accredited centers in our community, the

differences between licensing and accreditation, and a proposed budget to facilitate change, I sought support from the agency child care committee. They questioned the return: Would accreditation guarantee full enrollment? They granted me \$12,500 with a one-year time limit to complete the self-study. We used the funds to purchase the self-study materials, teacher resources, and food for meetings. We also spent some funds to reimburse teachers for tuition and conference fees. We met monthly in the evenings. Consultants were hired to address team building, curriculum, and diversity. We wrote job descriptions, revised staff salaries, and rewrote the parent handbook.

Patti: I suggested the idea of accreditation to the president of the preschool committee. With additional information that he received from our local NAEYC affiliate association, he gave his approval. We received funding from our resource and referral agency for self-study materials and from the affiliate group for the validation visit. The director of another church preschool, and my good friend, had been the first to take a program through accreditation in our community. She became my mentor and support.

Many of the staff were not eager to begin the process. That gave us a slow start. A consultant conducted creative art workshops on-site and sparks of enthusiasm began to fly. We met after school once a month. Staff were paid for that planning time.

Karen: We created a one-year timeline and stayed focused. The worksheets from *The Guide to Accreditation* were extremely helpful. The college supported our professional development by funding attendance to local and national conferences and by providing additional support staff to facilitate teachers' planning and meeting times.

Mary Ellen: I brought in a consultant to introduce accreditation to the teachers and answer their questions. Some teachers feared they would lose their jobs because they did not fully meet the staff qualifications, some questioned the additional work, and one even wanted to know if the process involved writing a term paper. The meeting resulted in a 100% endorsement to seek accreditation.

An accreditation facilitation grant from Work/Family Directions supported the purchase of self-study materials and the validation visit. The grant also provided for monthly directors' meetings that helped guide our progress in a timely manner.

In working with these and other directors, I have found that the examination of the self-study materials presents overwhelming challenges. The key is to maintain momentum, find quick solutions to unexpected budget expenditures, and not get sidetracked by staff turnover. Although there are bumps along the way, the successful completion of the self-study process results in lasting changes. The collaboration of the administration and teaching staff is essential; informing and involving families completes the picture. Here are some of the positive changes these five directors experienced.

Leatha: The self-study initiated lengthy staff discussions about relaxing our classroom schedules, easing transitions, and communicating with parents perceived to be "difficult." Perhaps the most startling change we made was incorporating literacy into every aspect of the curriculum. Teachers record the children's stories and the activities of the day, and interest areas are labeled. Photo displays now reflect the children in their play. We kept families informed through workshops and newsletters. Their positive comments were encouraging.

On the night we celebrated the achievement of accreditation, the board of directors, parents, and community representatives applauded the work that we had accomplished. All of the teachers who originally made the commitment to work together were present.

Kathy: The self-study process allowed communication to flow between staff and administration. We set goals together. The whole process made me feel more confident as a director. Our staff policies became more "family friendly." I am proud of the changes in our program. Last year, we had almost no staff turnover and a waiting list of 80 children. Accreditation allowed us to raise salaries 16-23% over three years. Teachers continue to further their education. The board gave us \$175,000 to buy new classroom furnishings. I even put a line item into the budget for equipment replacement.

Patti: As we examined the self-study materials, the staff wrote new curriculum goals. We started to work as a team. Assistant teachers, who had previously been excluded from training, were made full partners in the process. Delegating the responsibility for change gave the teaching staff ownership of the process. Teachers started to enroll in early childhood classes at the community college. Parents commented on the positive changes in the classrooms and applauded our efforts. To show their appreciation, the board gave the teachers a small bonus. I also put small gifts of flowers and candy in their mailboxes. We celebrated our accreditation with a fancy dinner.

Karen: The self-study process definitely promoted more staff collaboration at our center; it helped us appreciate the work that our aides and student workers do to assist us in the classroom. We wrote a very inclusive parent handbook, staff guidebook, and accompanying

administrative training manual. We shared the completion of these materials during an open house. A parent program was created to promote support and networking. Our accreditation team picture proudly hangs in the entryway to our center.

Mary Ellen: The examination of the self-study materials created a tremendous struggle and exposed a lot of pain around the subject of salaries. In order to be in compliance with NAEYC criteria, the newly hired staff would require appropriate credentials and consequently would be employed at comparatively higher rates. I contacted every school in the area, looked at tuition fees and staff salaries, and created a salary index. Teachers went from an hourly wage to a yearly salary.

Each staff person was required to complete two early childhood courses: child growth and development, and play and creative expression. We paid for their textbooks but not their tuition. Teachers were frightened about returning to school; 15 enrolled and they all did well.

For Leatha, Kathy, Patti, Karen, and Mary Ellen the process of self-study made an enormous impact on the way they looked at the process of change in their centers. They came to appreciate that change is slow, collaborative, and continuously evolving. The key lesson learned from their experience is that they didn't try to do it alone. They sought and received support from mentors, colleagues, consultants, administrators, boards, and parents. They also recognized the need to delegate some tasks to others and to remain flexible while working within a timeline.

In the next issue, our accreditation story will continue with reflections from directors on specific strategies they implemented to overcome hurdles and remain enthusiastic and on the benefits of the self-study process.