COMMUNITY LITERACY OF ONTARIO

CIPMS E-COMMUNIQUE MARCH 2008

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

In January 2007 Community Literacy of Ontario received funding from the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities for a project called: *"The ABCs of the Continuous Improvement Performance Management System."* It doesn't seem possible that over a year has gone by, but it has, and CLO is proud to report on our achievements in CIPMS research and training in the past year. We have successfully:

- Developed and delivered face-to-face training at the Laubach Literacy Ontario conference in June 2007
- Developed and delivered face-to-face training at CLO's conference in October 2007
- Developed and delivered three online training events in November 2007 (a recorded version is available for playback at http://alphalive.alphaplus.ca)
- Written project backgrounders, newsletters and e-communiques, available on our website (www.nald.ca/clo)
- Written a hardcopy manual, *The ABCs of CIPMS*, that will be published in hardcopy in April 2008 and will also be available for download on our website (www.nald.ca/clo) later in the spring
- Written a **Literacy Basics** module that will be available on that website (www.nald.ca/literacybasics) by the end of April 2008
- Moderated an AlphaCom discussion (which will run until March 31, 2008) open to anyone in the literacy field.
- Served on a Provincial CIPMS Working Group with MTCU and the other provincial organizations delivering CIPMS training: Ontario Literacy Coalition, Deaf Literacy Initiative, La Coalition francophone pour l'alphabétisation et la formation de base on Ontario, and the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition.

GETTING STARTED WITH CIPMS: *AGENCY ASSESSMENT*

CIPMS implementation shares much in common with both outcomes-based evaluation and strategic planning. If you have already developed a strategic plan or recently conducted an outcomes-based program evaluation, you are off to a great start because a core concept of CIPMS is "agency assessment". Simply put, agency assessment is about looking at your agency from both the inside and the outside, determining what you do well and what outcomes could be improved, setting targets towards those improvements, developing and implementing a plan of action, monitoring the implementation of your efforts to meet the outcomes and targets identified, and adjusting activities or targets as needed.

The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities has developed an Agency Assessment Guide and Tool that was distributed at training events. If you do not yet have these resources, ask your program consultant for a copy They also can be found in both the upcoming *The ABCs of CIPMS* manual and the CIPMS **Literacy Basics** module. Copies were provided to participants in CLO's October conference and to people enrolled in the November online training events on Centra. The Guide and Tool are being provided to help agencies work through the steps involved in collecting and analyzing data, determining areas for program improvement, creating an action plan, and monitoring implementation. Use of the actual Agency Assessment Tool itself is not mandatory; some agencies already have excellent and effective planning processes in place, and they can continue to use those so long as the following criteria are met:

1. The process must be dynamic and include a system for continuous progress toward your improvement objectives.

2. You must include direct consultation of internal and external stakeholders (including learners, volunteers, staff, MTCU, partners and/or referral agencies, and others as needed).

3. You must ensure that the Action Plan has identified one area of strength and two areas for development/improvement.

CLO's training events as well as the upcoming manual and **Literacy Basics** module have included detailed information on suggested ways to gather stakeholder input. We have included a number of sample resources that you can use "as is" or modify to suit your needs. In early April 2008 CLO will also be adding a Strategic Planning module to the **Literacy Basics** website (www.nald.ca/literacybasics), and this module also includes some excellent information about gathering both internal and external stakeholder input.

There are four steps to agency assessment.

1. *Understanding your program results*, or outcomes. The purpose here is to identify exactly what your agency has achieved and understand why you have been successful in certain areas. You will also identify areas that need improvement. The information you gather to help you identify and understand your outcomes should be both quantitative (e.g. statistics) but also anecdotal (e.g. success stories). You need to gather this information from internal sources such as the Information Management System, Learner Satisfaction Survey results and other statistical information you track, but you also need to gather data from external sources including referral agencies, other funders, partners and even the community in general.

2. *Understanding "cause",* or why you are achieving the results you are. In order to be able to make improvements, you first need to understand why you are successful in some areas. What management processes or other steps do you undertake that result in success? What might happen if you change something? "Cause" is any action that you take that brings about a result. Of course, you are looking for positive results! Cause is within your control and links to desired outcomes. So, for example, while a plant closure in your town isn't a cause (but it could be identified as either an opportunity or a threat in a strategic planning SWOT analysis), your response to that external factor may be a cause.

3. *Planning to improve*. In this step, you will identify measureable outcomes that you want to achieve and also document what you can do to bring about those outcomes. What cause can you bring to bear? You will develop a concrete, written plan that includes measurable targets, milestones (steps along the way to achieving the final desired outcome) and timelines.

4. *Continuous review and adjustment*. In this step, you will monitor and assess progress towards achieving identified outcomes. You will adjust your activities accordingly if you have not achieved the identified milestones as outlined in your action plan. If you are ahead of plan, you might adjust your outcome targets to a more ambitious level. Whether you adjust your activities or your targets, this step is critical in a continuous improvement process. Constant review and adjustment is the key to seeing real results. Simply writing a plan and then hoping it happens won't bring about desired change.

If you take the time to prepare before you begin, these four steps will be more manageable.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR PROGRAM RESULTS

In order to prepare, you need to collect and organize the information you will need in order to identify your areas of strength and areas for improvement. What information do you need to do this? You will need some internal program documents, and you will also need to gather information from outside of your program. It's not enough to just look at what you know about your agency, you also need to look at how others perceive you. Some of the information will be readily available, but you may have to take some extra steps to gather all of it, particularly if you do not currently survey your referral partners or other stakeholders.

The following information should be readily available to you:

- Literacy services plan

- Annual business plan

- Schedule B

- Most recent program monitoring report

- Learner satisfaction survey results

- IMS reports and any additional database information you collect

- Exit and follow-up information

- LBS program guidelines

- MTCU letters to the field (posted in the LBS-Info discussion on AlphaCom)

- Any other formal contracts with other funders or partners

The following information is also needed; some programs may have easy access to this type of information, some may have to do some more legwork to gather it:

- Agency strategic plan

- Surveys to partner agencies

- Surveys to referral agencies

- Surveys to other relevant community agencies

- Surveys with learners that provide more information than the learner satisfaction survey

- Surveys to board members

- Surveys to staff

- Surveys to volunteers

Together, the information that is contained in these documents can help you:

- understand the expectations of your agency and any commitments you have (through formal arrangements such as the Schedule B and the LBS guidelines, along with any other formal contracts

- identify outcomes you have achieved or have been working towards (through statistics and feedback from learners and other key stakeholders

Charts can be very helpful here. Rather than continually trying to sort through the various documents that outline expectations, set up a simple chart that lists what you are expected to do, who expects you to do it, the results that are expected, when those results are expected and what has been achieved to date. This chart could expand to include expected outcomes or you could develop a separate outcomes chart that would enable you to collate all of the feedback you have gathered from learners, staff, volunteers, referral agencies and other key stakeholders. Charts can also be very helpful in allowing you to quickly see where an expected outcome was or was not achieved. This in turn can then help you identify areas of strength that you can build on and determine areas of improvement that you might want to work towards.

This may seem like a lot of information, but you need all of this to fully understand what your agency is expected to achieve and what it is actually achieving. Too often, we look at these various documents and sources of data as separate and individual pieces of information. What you will be doing through the agency assessment process is bringing all of this together in one place to more fully understand the complete picture of what is happening in your agency and why. This will then help you decide what is possible for you to achieve in the coming months and where you should focus your efforts.

Full CIPMS implementation takes time. Perhaps you have historical data that you can use to establish any patterns, but if you do not, then now is the time to start. The sooner you start gathering data, the sooner you will be able to develop a history that will help you analyze your achievements and help you set targets for future achievements.

Both *The ABCs of CIPMS* manual and the **Literacy Basics** (www.nald.ca/literacybasics)module include detailed information about how you might gather the information that you need and both of these resources include sample forms that are successfully being used by literacy agencies around the province. You are free to use these resources and tools "as is" or you can adapt them to suit your particular program needs.

UNDERSTANDING "CAUSE"

Once you begin to understand what your program has achieved and where it has struggled, you can start to identify the actions you have taken that might have contributed to both successes and difficulties. Look to your successes first – what has your agency done to bring about success? Can you learn from those successes and apply similar tactics to areas that require improvement? If your results are not as good as you had hoped, what might improve them? Are you putting a lot of effort into an area of programming but not achieving very good results?

PLANNING TO IMPROVE

You will use the findings of your information gathering and your analysis of cause to help you set targets for the coming year. Remember that targets need to be realistic. Don't choose a target of a 50% increase for a certain outcome unless you have good reason to believe that you can actually achieve that type of improvement. Targets also need to include timelines. Is it likely that you will achieve your target in a month, six months or a year? How will you know that you are on track? When setting targets, identify milestones along the way that will let you know if you are likely to achieve your target or if you will have to make some adjustments. Finally, remember that you have to be able to measure your success. Saying "there will be improvements" is not an adequate target. Targets needs to be stated in terms of numbers and/or percentages otherwise measuring success is not possible. If you can't set a numerical target, then perhaps you need to revise your outcome statement.

Of course, setting targets isn't just a brainstorming activity – you will also be documenting what you decide upon. The MTCU Agency Assessment Guide and Tool include a sample planning chart that you can use to document your CIPMS plan.

CONTINUOUS REVIEW AND ADJUSTMENT

This final step is where the "continuous" part of CIPMS really comes into play. It is not enough to set targets and write up a plan once a year. The key to success is to monitor your activities to know if and how you are (or are not) achieving your targets. Through ongoing monitoring you will be able know if you are on track. If you are not achieving the success you had planned on, then you might need to adjust your activities so that you reach your targets. If, despite your best efforts, you are still not achieving what you had planned on, you might have to adjust your targets. On a more positive note, you might well achieve greater success than you had anticipated. In that case, you will want to document your actions so that you can learn from your successes, and you might also want to either adjust your timelines to a shorter period of time or you might want to adjust your targets to reflect a greater deal of success.

The first time you determine program outcomes and set targets for success, you might feel that you are doing some educated guesswork. However, you are not guessing – you will be gathering and using the information you need to make informed decisions! By looking back at your past achievements, you may be able to establish patterns that can help you determine reasonable targets for the coming year. As CIPMS continues, you will have more and more historical data and experience to draw upon and your ability to analyze information and use it to plan future activity and set targets for success will improve.

SO WHAT? (*OR OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS*)

Recently, CLO held an online workshop looking at marketing. The facilitator, Karen Farrer, suggested we ask ourselves "so what?" when we look at our program features. This simple question can go a long way in helping us identify what our program does and what that means. In marketing terms, it's about features and benefits.

However, features and benefits aren't just for marketing exercises. The "so what" question can be very helpful when trying to determine the outcomes our program has achieved as well as the outcomes we would like to achieve. Benefit, or impact, is another way to describe an outcome. Therefore, if we are looking at what our literacy agency offers, we can identify the potential outcomes by talking about the benefits.

For example, a community-based literacy agency might offer one-to-one tutoring. That is a feature of the program but it is not an outcome. What benefits does that tutoring provide? What impacts does it make? What are the outcomes? One of the benefits this feature of one-on-one tutoring might offer is to help learners gain the confidence they need in order to succeed in a larger group setting. This can be a measurable outcome because you can track how many learners began in a one-on-one tutoring situation and then made a successful transition to group learning.

Looking at what we offer and answering the "so what?" question can be a very useful tool for CIPMS!

WHICH OUTCOMES TO PICK?

After analyzing all of the data gathered during the agency assessment process, you might identify a number of areas in your agency that could be developed and/or improved. By asking yourself "so what" and identifying the impacts you are trying to bring about, you can determine some outcomes that you can work towards. However, you might find yourself feeling overwhelmed, that there is just so much to accomplish and your agency is small with limited resources. Don't despair! CIPMS does not mean that you turn your program around overnight or do a complete overhaul.

Some of the outcomes you identify might require a lot of work or a significant change in the way your program operates. Or, they might require resources (particularly time and money) that you might not currently have at your disposal. Other outcomes might be more readily achievable given the resources you have available or require only small changes in the way you do things.

It is important to remember that you don't have to do everything at once. At the time of writing this e-communiqué, the expectation is that LBS agencies will be required to identify and act upon two areas of development/improvement in their agencies. Although you might identify four or ten or twenty outcomes that you would like to work towards, this is not expected. In fact, it is better to start off small and focus on what is manageable and reasonable for your agency. With time and experience, you can take on bigger challenges.

When considering which outcomes to choose, you might want to think about the results you are trying to achieve in comparison to the amount of effort you put in. By this, we don't mean that you should look for the easy fix, but rather think about how you can get the maximum return for your effort. We all know that literacy programs are short of resources when it comes to time, staff and money, so you want to get the "best bang for your buck". An important thing to consider here is the Pareto Principle, also known as the 80/20 rule. What this says is that 20% of your effort brings about 80% of the result. Sometimes, we put a lot of effort into an area of programming, but we don't see much of a result. Other times, a more concerted effort can result in much more significant outcomes. It is worth the time to think about this. Is there some part of your agency's programming that goes on simply because it has always been a part of your program, yet it doesn't really add anything to your program or to learner outcomes? If so, you might want to consider whether to continue with it or not. Might your efforts be better spent elsewhere?

WHAT'S NEXT?

Although the term Continuous Improvement Performance Management System may be new, the concept isn't. It's about discovering what we are currently achieving, what we should be achieving and what we would like to achieve and then working towards that in a deliberate and organized fashion. It's about setting goals and working towards those goals and then documenting how we know we have achieved them. This is something we have done

with our learners for quite a few years now. We are applying a similar process to our agencies. Since we encourage our learners to set goals and work towards them, why wouldn't we do the same with our agencies?

The coming year will allow LBS agencies to begin to work on their CIPMS plans and start implementing them. It will be an opportunity for us to put into practice the information shared by CLO and other literacy projects (Ontario Literacy Coalition, Ontario Native Literacy Coalition, La Coalition francophone de l'alphabétisation et la formation de base on Ontario, and Deaf Literacy Initiative) during this past year's training and support projects. Although we don't yet know just what supports will be in place during the coming year, a range of organizations have submitted project proposals to provide ongoing development and support in the 2008-09 year.

Employment Ontario is currently looking at their overall approach to CIPMS and will do so throughout the coming year. Some agencies (e.g. Job Connect) have had CIPMS in place for a number of years. Some do not have type of performance management system in place. LBS has been bringing in components of CIPMS for a number of years now. As such, we are well ahead of many of our colleagues and have the opportunity to continue the momentum. CIPMS is complex and takes to implement, therefore the coming year is an excellent opportunity to become more comfortable with this approach and to move ahead at a reasonable place. It is important to continue to move forward, so that we don't fall behind. LBS agencies should take advantage of the "head start" we have been given and stay abreast of developments and continue to develop our internal CIPMS processes so that the change will continue to be manageable. We can do this by accessing the resources produced in the past year by CLO, the OLC, the ONLC, La Coalition and the Deaf Literacy Initiative. We can also do this by taking advantage of the projects that will be funded in the coming year.

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