

Stakeholder Interviews for CIMS Part C

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Michigan Department of Education
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Prepared by
Public Sector Consultants Inc.
Lansing, Michigan
www.pscinc.com

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Stakeholder Interviews for CIMS Part C

BACKGROUND

The Michigan Department of Education's Office of Early Childhood Education & Family Services (MDE OECE-FS), in conjunction with the Office of Special Education & Early Intervention Services (MDE OSE-EIS), contracted Public Sector Consultants Inc. (PSC) to manage the development and implementation of the Continuous Monitoring & Improvement System (CIMS) for *Early On*[®] Michigan. *Early On* Michigan is the system of early intervention services for infants and toddlers, from birth to three years of age, with developmental delays or diagnosed conditions with a high probability of resulting in delay, and their families. *Early On* is supported by funding from Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) through the federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), and is administered by MDE OECE-FS.

The first task of the CIMS Part C development project was to conduct interviews of people around the state who will be affected by the new system. This task was recommended for two reasons:

- there was confusion and misunderstanding about CIMS among those affected because CIMS had been scheduled to take effect for Part C in the fall of 2006, but was postponed for a variety of reasons; and
- CIMS for school-age children receiving special education services (funded by Part B of IDEA) had already been introduced and there was some confusion about whether the Part C system would operate as the Part B system does.

Listening to stakeholders talk about their understanding of CIMS, their current workflow activities, and their recommendations for implementation would provide valuable information for the remaining project tasks. At the same time, the interviews would become a vehicle for raising awareness of CIMS among Part C stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

PSC sent an e-mail invitation to 123 *Early On* stakeholders around the state. From February 21 through March 15, 2007, PSC conducted 61 interviews: 58 by phone and three in person. Exhibit 1 shows the breakdown of all invitees and interviewees by stakeholder role; Exhibit 2 shows the breakdown of *Early On* coordinator invitees and interviewees by region.

EXHIBIT 1
Stakeholder Interviews by Role

Stakeholder role	Invited to interview	Participated in interview	Percentage
Early On coordinator (current or former)	71	29	41%
MDE OECE-FS personnel	7	7	100
Early On Training & Technical Assistance (EOT&TA) personnel	15	11	73
State Interagency Coordinating Council (SICC) affiliate (council or team member)	29	19	66
Special Education/Part B affiliate	5	4	80
Early On data partner grantee	2	2	100
Cohort 1 affiliate	26	13	50

NOTE: Totals are greater than the actual numbers invited and interviewed because some individuals have multiple roles.

EXHIBIT 2
Stakeholder Interviews by *Early On* Region

<i>Early On</i> Coordinator Region	Invited to interview	Participated in interview	Percentage
Central	21	8	38%
North & Midland	11	3	27
Upper Peninsula	9	5	56
Wayne & Southeast Regions	10	4	40
West & Southwest	20	9	45

Interviews are most appropriate when **qualitative** data is needed. The primary advantage of interviewing is the ability to gather in-depth, contextual information from stakeholders about their perceptions and to deconstruct their perceptions of why they hold the opinions and perceptions that they do. Interviews allow researchers to probe responses with follow-up questions and allow participants the ability to expound on their answers.

The primary disadvantage of this research method is that the conclusions cannot be projected to the larger population. That is, even if 75 percent of all interview respondents—regardless of demographic characteristics—report that they are satisfied or dissatisfied, this *does not necessarily* mean (and indeed, in most cases *does not* mean) that 75 percent of everyone in the broader population holds the same opinion.

Finally, note that this is a self-selected group of persons who have indicated that they have a vested interest in the development of CIMS for Part C. While the perceptions and opinions of these 61 individuals offer valuable insight into their experiences, it is important to keep in mind that not all Part C stakeholders are represented in this sample.

FINDINGS: UNDERSTANDING OF CIMS

Early On stakeholders have only a vague understanding of CIMS and its purpose. Interviewees knew that CIMS has some relationship to monitoring compliance with federal regulations, but very few could describe that relationship. Most of those interviewed assumed that CIMS is a means for the state to collect data from the local service areas in order to evaluate them. Very few described it as a process for standardizing and streamlining current *Early On* operations.

Vague Information

Many interviewees could name the three components of CIMS—the service provider self-review (SPSR), focused monitoring, and verification—but very few had a clear sense of how CIMS activities would be incorporated into their everyday operations or what would be done with the fruits of CIMS labors (whatever they might be). Focused monitoring began this past year for several service areas, and there was notable frustration about CIMS as a result because the activity was described as disorganized, cumbersome, and lacking tangible results.

The confusion and misinformation about CIMS stems primarily from the nature of how it has been communicated to stakeholders thus far. Many interviewees described “the sound and the fury” of CIMS Part C coming fast on the heels of CIMS for Part B and looking very much like Part B. Indeed, most of those who were confident in their understanding of CIMS had some close affiliation with Part B. Mixed messages were disseminated from Lansing as the Part C project was put on hold while officials continued to make general presentations about its impending arrival. Very few interviewees recalled receiving any materials with concrete descriptions of CIMS SPSR tasks or timelines for *Early On*.

Changes in Workload

Interviewees were asked to comment on their perceptions of whose workloads would be affected by CIMS Part C SPSR activities, and almost everyone named local service coordinators (and especially *Early On* coordinators) as receiving an increase in job duties of one type or another. Interviewees from smaller service areas were particularly concerned that the *Early On* coordinators will be overburdened, because those areas have fewer resources on which to rely. Interviewees also mentioned a probable increase in the workloads of EOT&TA staff, whom they highly recommended to do the training required once CIMS for Part C is operational.

An interesting finding is that very few interviewees had a clear idea about the specifics of these increased workloads; in other words, most assumed their workloads would increase, but few knew what tasks would be added to account for that increase. There were several vague references to activities that exist in CIMS for Part B. Some thought the coordinators would be responsible for training others how to use the computer tool; others thought they would have to gather and review the requisite files for children in the sample. There was also no knowledge from the field that CIMS SPSR activities take place over several months, thereby spreading out the work.

When questioned further, most interviewees revealed that the biggest increase in workload would take place when the system was first implemented and corresponded

directly with the “learning curve” for new processes. They thought the change might be the most pronounced for service areas in cohort 1, but that over time the CIMS activities would not be overly cumbersome—assuming that the state continues to use it over time.

FINDINGS: CURRENT PROCESSES

PSC asked respondents several questions pertaining to the work they do in order to gain a broader perspective that will inform the CIMS SPSR system build. Since CIMS is fundamentally a tool to leverage and standardize existing processes in order to produce and share meaningful data, it is incumbent upon us to understand those processes.

Self-assessment

As part of the grant application process for Part C funds, *Early On* coordinators oversee the completion of a self-assessment. Each year, about a month before the grant applications are due, the self-assessment tool becomes available in the Michigan Education Grant System (MEGS). The questions on the self-assessment typically require the *Early On* coordinator to review case files as well as data from the Early Education Tracking System (EETRK) in order to provide an answer.

Self-assessment questions may differ from year to year, and the previous year’s self-assessment is not available to users when they undertake the current year’s version. Very few interviewees knew whether or how the data collected through the self-assessment is used. As a result, most respondents consider the self-assessment to be purely a grant application activity. Few of those interviewed involved their local interagency coordinating councils (LICC) in either the information-gathering activities or the results of the self-assessment.

Local Teams

Interviewees were asked whether there was a team of people in place at the local level who could effectively become the SPSR team, responsible for strategic oversight and analysis of CIMS Part C in each service area. Many respondents cited the LICC as already being in place at the local level, but most of them remarked that CIMS responsibilities might not be a natural extension of current LICC work. The type and frequency of LICC meetings and activities vary widely by service area; some areas reported active LICCs who meet monthly and form subgroups to work on specific tasks, while others reported quarterly meetings and little involvement in *Early On* operations. Many LICCs are reported to have oversight on all of the service area’s early childhood programming, of which *Early On* is only a component. Despite these differences, however, respondents generally believe that the very existence of an established local team bodes well for the creation of the SPSR team, particularly if each service area has some influence on its composition.

Interagency Collaboration

During the interview process, PSC tried to ascertain the amount and quality of collaboration between the four agencies that comprise *Early On* at the local level (education, human services, public health, and mental health). When CIMS was first introduced for Part C, the CIMS architects did not have an understanding of how these

entities relate, and there was subsequent concern that CIMS would produce an undue burden on an already strained system. PSC's goal was to learn enough about that system to be able to inform the CIMS design for Part C toward minimizing any additional strain.

The interviews made it clear that interagency collaboration varies widely by service area, and there are few patterns of practice identifiable by service area size or location. Some *Early On* coordinators from small service areas reported a close collaboration among agencies that was a direct result of their need to leverage resources and “rely on one another.” Other *Early On* coordinators—again, from small service areas—reported a distinct disconnect between the agencies because of the same limited resources: “We don't have enough resources to do each other's work.” Several interviewees cited history and relationships as the primary determinants of interagency collaboration. In most cases, the education agency in a service area was responsible for primary service coordination because funding flows through the intermediate school districts (ISD). Nonetheless, agencies other than education provide services and service coordination across the state despite the funding stream. In general, respondents were uneasy at the prospect that CIMS might upset whatever workload balance currently exists in any given service area.

Improvement Planning

The term “improvement planning” is not well-known as such to Part C stakeholders. Interviewees responded to questions on the subject with a general understanding of how improvement planning could become more standardized, since many have seen it being conducted by their counterparts in Part B. But most of those familiar with the term considered improvement planning to be embedded in many *Early On* administrative activities. They mentioned that the self-assessment tool in MEGS requires them to document their plans to address deficiencies. Most of those interviewed expressed a keen understanding of the types of things that might be included on an improvement plan, from “outcome-focused” items such as identification rates to “process-focused” items such as keeping good records. Most interviewees also expressed a desire to participate in an improvement planning process that is meaningful: locals want to understand the links between their improvement goals and better outcomes for families.

Other Activities Relevant to CIMS

Interviewees were asked several questions about some of their current processes that might have a connection to CIMS SPSR activities. When asked about the prevalence of surveys among *Early On* stakeholders, almost all interviewees cited the surveys distributed by Wayne State University. Some interviewees expressed a desire for the surveys to use less formal nomenclature because families don't often speak in terms of “service coordination” or “service provision.” Several interviewees questioned how the survey data is used, as they were not certain of the data's benefit to local areas. However, most could name the numerous types of surveys sent out by Wayne State (parent survey, LICC member survey, service provider survey, etc.) and most considered these surveys to be an accepted and well-known form of information gathering.

Interviewees were asked whether “corrective action plans” were developed for Part C service recipients. The only ones who were familiar with that term were those interviewees who had some affiliation with Part B. Several of those interviewed cited the

semi-annual and annual reviews required when an *Early On* service recipient does not make sufficient progress as being similar to corrective action planning. Generally, respondents stated that planning for corrective action on a child/recipient level is intrinsically related to the work of Part C service coordinators and providers.

FINDINGS: RECOMMENDATIONS

Interviewees were asked for their input on moving forward with the CIMS Part C SPSR rollout, with particular focus on communication and involvement in system design and testing. They were also encouraged to provide any additional concerns or ideas.

Communication: Clear, Tangible, and Meaningful

Without exception, interviewees stated that the information they have received about CIMS Part C thus far is vague. Respondents who function at the service area level were somewhat grateful to have received numerous presentations about CIMS, but invariably they were frustrated that the information was conceptual and primarily based on Part B operations. Respondents do not have a good idea about how CIMS Part C will affect their lives—adversely or positively—because they have not received clear instruction from the MDE about when CIMS will be implemented, why CIMS matters to them, and how CIMS translates into their day-to-day activities. In order for CIMS Part C to succeed in any manner at the local level, communication about it must be clarified.

Respondents also recommended that *Early On* stakeholders get some real information into their hands. Aside from a few PowerPoint presentations about the CIMS concept, nobody had any tangible reference to the work of CIMS Part C, such as timelines, roles, or tasks. Interviewees suggested that *Early On* stakeholders would benefit from receiving such things as flow charts of SPSR activities along a timeline, frequently-asked-questions, index cards with contact information for reference or assistance, and a simple process guide explaining where the data will go and how it will be used—or better yet, showing locals how they might use it for their own benefit.

This last item segues into the most powerful recommendation from those interviewed: communication to *Early On* stakeholders about CIMS must convey why CIMS matters. In particular, interviewees with a local affiliation expressed a strong desire to know how they could use CIMS Part C SPSR data or activities to improve the services they are providing and coordinating. It appears that local stakeholders are less fearful about the SPSR's effect on their workload than they are about that work being meaningless. If there is any way for the locals to make use of the data or activities themselves, they will not be so dubious about the state's use of it.

Interviewees also recommended that any communication about CIMS be directed toward the *Early On* stakeholders at the local level, especially the *Early On* coordinators. Respondents recalled that CIMS Part C was introduced through Part B monitors and others involved in special education, primarily because CIMS was already active in Part B. While there may still be some question about whether and how Part B personnel will play a role in Part C CIMS, communication about CIMS must be dispensed to the Part C stakeholders. Interviewees generally agreed it would be best to communicate as

transparently as possible about CIMS Part C, to all its constituencies: *Early On* coordinators, EOT&TA, MDE, ISDs, LICC members, and Part B monitors.

Involvement in System Design and Testing

Early On stakeholders generally agreed that if there is a way to involve them at various levels or stages during the design, development, and testing of the SPSR, it should be employed. Most interviewees recommended that *Early On* coordinators should be part of the project team in some capacity, and that representation from different sized service areas in different locations should be included. Most interviewees also recommended that EOT&TA play a key role in SPSR design and testing, as they would be the logical and preferred choice to train users on any new processes and systems. Few respondents thought it necessary to include representatives from the agencies other than education on the project oversight team because few perceived those agencies as having any real role in the SPSR, other than serving on the SPSR team. Several interviewees recommended making use of Part B monitors somehow, and all thought it would be a good idea to involve *Early On* data partner grantees in order to gain from their knowledge and experience of working with data that feeds into Part C.

Interviewees liked the prospect of having *Early On* stakeholders be involved in testing the SPSR application before it is officially made available to the field. They suggested that *Early On* coordinators make recommendations later in the project about who from their area would be suitable for a testing team. Interviewers agreed that whoever is likely to be responsible for doing work in the application should be responsible for giving recommendations through early testing.

Other Recommendations

PSC asked respondents if they had any additional questions, comments, or concerns that had not been covered. By and large, their comments here fell into four categories:

- Many interviewees were quite pleased to have been asked to participate in an interview. They expressed satisfaction with how the CIMS process seemed to be restarting.
- Most respondents were concerned about bringing on new activities for *Early On* coordinators and service providers. They recommended that every way possible be made to use or modify existing processes and resources (such as websites) to implement the SPSR.
- Respondents were cautiously hopeful—although perhaps not optimistic—that *Early On* stakeholders at both the state *and* local levels could learn new things from CIMS, and perhaps even bridge the existing gap between Part C and Part B.
- Interviewees at the local level *want* to improve and become more efficient. They want to comply with state and federal regulations and they are not opposed to being monitored in the process. They also want the “self-review” to reflect the *Early On* system and the families it serves.

PUTTING THE FINDINGS INTO PRACTICE

PSC and MDE will use the stakeholder interview results to inform the composition of the CIMS project and testing teams over the next month. These findings will also be incorporated into the CIMS Part C SPSR application design and implementation over the next several months, leading up to the October/November release of the SPSR for cohort 1. In addition, PSC and MDE will develop a communication plan for CIMS Part C that reaches all *Early On* stakeholders.