

POLICY BRIEF

Recommendations for Selecting and Implementing an Early Childhood Care and Education State Governance Structure

Authors: Eboni C. Howard | Patricia Garcia-Arena

Overview

The purpose of this brief is to provide a set of recommendations for state leaders who may be examining or reconsidering their state's early childhood care and education (ECCE) mixed-delivery governance structure. These recommendations arise from work that American Institutes for Research (AIR) did with Illinois as part of the Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five (PDG B-5) initiative.¹

As a result of a commitment to improve the ECCE mixed-delivery system in the United States, several states received a federal PDG B-5 renewal (PDG B-5R) award from the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education in 2020. The overall purpose of the grant is to help states improve the effectiveness of their ECCE mixed-delivery systems by executing several activities. The PDG B-5 awards are intended to support states' efforts to better integrate their ECCE programs, helping to address a critical challenge in what has come to be known as the "patchwork" system. In the United States, ECCE programs have been rooted in multiple systems of care (e.g., education, health services, human services, social services), often on

PRESCHOOL DEVELOPMENT GRANT (PDG B-5R)

The Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five (PDG B-5) initiative, a federal grant program awarded in 2019 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Care (HHS-OCC), supported 46 states and territories in an effort to improve the overall quality of ECCE services. Twenty states were awarded 3-year renewal grants in 2020 to implement their first-year plans with the overarching aim to coordinate existing early childhood services and funding streams and serve more children effectively in a mixed-delivery system. For more information on the federal PDG initiative, visit <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ecl/early-learning/preschool-development-grants>

¹ We want to acknowledge that the work that supported these recommendations came from contract work for the Illinois State Board of Education contract #19-586SBE-CHFED-B-5918 (Howard, Jones, Garcia-Arena, & Stagner, 2019). As part of that work we reviewed the literature base and spoke to national experts on the topic. We want to acknowledge and thank the national experts who spoke to us as part of the Illinois State Board of Education contract that resulted in this brief.

behalf of similar populations of young children and their families (Demma, 2010; Illgen, Stebbins, Barnett, & Fahey, 2011; Kamerman, 2006).

Unfortunately, the mixture of disparate programs within ECCE systems has resulted in fragmented funding, services, and efforts to track data on the impact of the services (Demma, 2010; Kagan & Gomez, 2015; Kamerman, 2006; Regenstein & Lipper, 2013; Regenstein, 2020). Federal, state, and local administrators have long recognized the complexities and inefficiencies of operating separate governance systems. In the last decade, several states have integrated or collaborated across ECCE administrative systems to provide a more cohesive set of programs and services for children and families (Demma, 2010; Early Childhood Data Collaborative, 2011; Illgen et al., 2011). As ECCE programs expand and new services are initiated, concerns have increased about how to organize and administer the collection of programs to maximize efficiency, coordination, and equitable distribution of resources. State administrators responsible for overseeing and coordinating ECCE programs are seeking information to guide their decisions on best state ECCE governance structures. Yet, it is important to recognize that system change is a process (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Hall, 2013; Metz et al., 2015) that is not simple, quick, or easy for states to do.

The five recommendations presented in this brief for considering a state’s ECCE governance structure arise from information that AIR gathered from a review of administrative, fiscal, and governance documents; interviews with national experts; and an examination of multiple existing state governance models. This brief starts with a review of the major types of ECCE governance structures and the strengths and weaknesses of each model. We then offer five recommendations and implementation factors to help states consider, adopt, and implement new ECCE governance structures.

ECCE Governance Structures

ECCE governance systems may include a narrow or wide range of programs, including federal Head Start, state prekindergarten, and subsidies from the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant. Although governance looks different in every state, most governance structures fall into one of three basic models: coordinated governance (coordination), consolidated governance (consolidation), or creation of a new agency (creation) (Regenstein & Lipper, 2013).

A common question among states is *“What is the right and most effective governance structure for ECCE programs?”* The most common answer is that there is no single “right” governance model. Understanding the “right” model and its effectiveness for a state is not easy. Attempting to determine the right and most effective governance structure for a state may involve addressing questions such as the following:

TYPES OF GOVERNANCE MODELS

Coordinated among existing agencies:

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) programs are housed in various government agencies, and these agencies are expected to work together to collaborate and coordinate their efforts.

Consolidated in an existing agency:

ECCE programs are administered by a single existing executive branch agency, most often the state education agency.

Creation of a new agency: The state creates a new executive branch-level agency, or a new entity within an existing agency, with accountability for all early childhood programs and services.

- Does the operating governance structure facilitate the implementation of the state’s strategic vision and goals for early childhood services?
- Does the governance structure improve efficiencies in administrative management?
- Does the governance structure raise the visibility and funding of ECCE?
- Does the governance structure improve efficiencies in the use and equitable distribution of program funding?
- What impact does the governance structure have on cross-functional activities, such as program monitoring, program quality, workforce recruitment and retention, professional development, program technical assistance, and data systems?
- Does the governance structure make it easier for children and families to access the services they need?

No state governance structure will automatically lead to improved collaboration, coordination, and efficiencies in ECCE funding, distribution, and access to services for children and families. No single governance structure is a magic wand to improve outcomes. There is general agreement that states would benefit by having a coherent governance system to manage many, if not all, types of early childhood programs and services: early learning, care, family support, health (including mental health and nutrition), and special needs/early intervention (Goffin, Martella, & Coffman, 2011). However, it is difficult—or at least uncommon—to be able to place all ECCE services under one administrative governance structure. Given the same or fewer financial resources, a governance structure alone will not fix broken programs, increase state capacity, crystalize leadership and management processes, or increase efficiency by improving results (Regenstein, 2019). Changing the governance structure does not in itself reduce gaps in access to quality services or improve collaboration and coordination across disparate programs (Regenstein, 2019).

When it comes to evaluating whether a governance system is effective, it is best to start by assessing how well the current governance model advances what is defined as “success” for the state. For example, the goals of a governance structure may be to decrease fragmentation, increase coordination between ECCE services, expand quality, and/or ensure that the state’s ECCE resources are being leveraged and distributed equitably. If success means improved efficiency in the service referral process, no matter what type of ECCE programs a family needs, does the governance structure facilitate that? Or, if success is having a greater number of 4-year-old children enrolled in high-quality preschool services, how well does the governance structure facilitate that indicator? It is critical that state leaders are clear about their goals for the governance model; in other words, state leadership must ask itself, “What does the state want to get out of its governance structure?” It also is important to establish a set of indicators that multiple ECCE programs can use to define progress toward the shared goals and to have consensus about what matters most.

The strengths and challenges of different governance models are detailed in Exhibit 1 (Howard et al., 2019).

Exhibit 1. Strengths and Challenges of Governance Models

| Strengths | Challenges |
|---|--|
| Coordinated Model | |
| <p>Increased information sharing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased visibility for early childhood care and education (ECCE) ▪ Increased conversations across relevant ECCE agencies and entities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ May not have authority or funding to influence agencies that control ECCE programs. ▪ Midlevel agency leadership and agency heads are not really involved. ▪ Degree of influence over other agencies changes with the governor. ▪ Sustainability |
| Consolidated Model | |
| <p>Increased visibility for ECCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There is a unified vision. ▪ Increased alignment and better coordinated policies and practices ▪ Higher level agency leader at an appointee level who has administrative authority ▪ Improved operational efficiencies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Decreased visibility for ECCE when there is no strong leadership, strong voice, or coordination; ECCE can get deprioritized within the agency in which it is consolidated. ▪ Adopting an existing “agency culture” that may not fit with ECCE culture ▪ Not all ECCE programs are included in the consolidation. ▪ Need to have ongoing structures to coordinate with other ECCE programs and services that are not part of the consolidation ▪ Can be disruptive for the existing programs and leaders in the agency; can cause disengagement and fragmentation ▪ Need a way of systematically and strategically coordinating policies within the agency ▪ Centralizing everything in one department does not mean that all that needs to be coordinated and standardized actually is. ▪ Will not have perfect coordination across all programs and functions ▪ Easy to replicate the same pitfalls as before consolidation |
| Independent Agency Model | |
| <p>Increased visibility and authority for ECCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There is a unified vision. ▪ Increased visibility for ECCE ▪ Higher level agency leadership at an appointee level who has administrative authority ▪ Improved operational efficiencies ▪ Agency has its own decision-making authority and financial resources. ▪ Children and families may have a single entry point for some ECCE services within the agency. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Not all ECCE programs are in the independent agency. ▪ Still need to have ongoing structures to coordinate with other programs and services not in the agency ▪ Centralizing everything in one department does not mean that all that needs to be coordinated and standardized actually is. ▪ Will not have perfect coordination across all programs and functions ▪ The new childhood agency does not have the same “cache,” leadership level, and respect as the other long-standing state agencies. ▪ Takes a lot of political capital ▪ Easy to replicate the same pitfalls as before consolidation ▪ Big-change initiatives take strategic thought, capacity, buy-in, and funding. ▪ Takes a lot of time to build a new entity |

Recommendations for Selecting and Implementing a Governance Structure

This section provides five recommendations and an implementation approach on how these recommendations could be executed. Implementation of a major initiative, such as changing ECCE system governance, will involve setting clear goals and objectives, making decisions, operationalizing actions, gathering data, making midcourse adjustments, and including key stakeholders who will consider what will be best for children and families.

Recommendation 1. Create a shared, strategic vision of what the state wants to achieve by its governance structure and a set of strategic goals for the ECCE system. Change should be based on a shared, strategic vision of what the state wants to accomplish by reinforcing or changing its ECCE governance structure. Experts agree that coordination in the administration of programs should be guided by clear strategic goals, perhaps based on those emerging from the PDG initiative and processes.

Recommendation 2. Develop a decision-making process for establishing the benefits and costs of changing governance structures. A decision-making and communication process can determine if it makes sense to change the governance structure. When considering changing governance structures, the power and decision-making dynamics between state agency administrators, advocacy groups, and private funders should be considered. As such, it is important to develop a clear decision-making process, with established definitions and boundaries concerning who is accountable, responsible, contributing, and/or supporting the process.

Recommendation 3. Reach a consensus on the purpose of the governance structure, aligned to the state's strategic vision and goals. Any ECCE governance system must include (a) coordination at the policy and practice levels; (b) coherence, meaning alignment across developmental ages and settings; (c) sustainability; (d) efficiency, meaning that the system uses resources wisely and avoids duplication of effort; and (e) accountability (Goffin et al., 2011). In choosing a governance system, a state should ensure that “form follows function” (Goffin et al., 2011, p. 11). First, decide what functions each governance structure should fulfill, then determine what structural form will best support those functions. A state also needs to be realistic about its capacity to enact major structural change and sustain it. One important aspect of capacity is the governor's support for change because a shift in governance will often require gubernatorial action and support (Regenstein & Lipper, 2013).

These three recommendations require a clear understanding of the central and primary problem the state wants to solve and of the strategic vision, goals, and objectives to address the problem. Only after that understanding and strategy are in place should the state examine details about innovations in governance that will address the problem and be aligned to achieving priority goals. Executing this approach successfully requires key actions steps for determining the governance purpose.

ACTION STEPS FOR DETERMINING THE GOVERNANCE PURPOSE

1. Clearly define “the problems” that a different governance structure would solve. What does the state want out of new governance approach?
2. Assess the values and principles within, across, and external to state agencies. What is the state, across agencies and services, trying to achieve with its early childhood care and education (ECCE) system?
3. Determine what the “shared strategic vision” is within, across, and external to state agencies. What will you ask every agency or organization to “bring to the table” to support the governance structure?
4. Create clear inclusion and exclusion criteria that define the population or programs for which a change in governance would be most beneficial. What programs would be “in” or “out” of a governance change?

Recommendation 4. Inventory the state’s capacity and resources needed to change the governance structure. Big-change initiatives, such as those involved in altering a state’s ECCE governance structure, can take a lot of time, effort, and attention from active, vision-aligned leadership and managers at multiple levels within the state. Some states have gone through the process of changing structures only to realize they do not have the human capacity and workforce to do the work required in the new structure. Practical preparations are needed to initiate a major change in a state governance structure. Getting into the nitty-gritty of legal agreements, data privacy/storage/transfers, informational technology infrastructure, real estate and offices, unions, human resources, communication channels, financial management, office space, equipment/IT supports, and several other operational factors can often be discounted in decisions about change, and those details can be all-consuming for staff, taking attention away from big strategic goals and objectives. There is limited appreciation of the practicality, complexity, and perseverance that major change efforts require (Hall, 2013). In addition, the human psychological element of those people doing the work is often overlooked (Hall, 2013). States need to make sure they have the manpower to change models. Also, it is important to note that new governance structures, such as a consolidated or independent new agency, can take a lot of money to develop, so states considering these structures need to take stock of what financial resources, in addition to human resources, they have for such an investment. This inventory stage of implementation alone may take 2 to 4 years (Fixsen et al., 2005; National Implementation Research Network, n.d.).

Recommendation 5. Begin to make the change from existing governance structures already in place; augment the authority and funding of existing governance structures. There is often an assumption in big-change initiatives that once a new process is in place, the desired outcomes will be realized. But all too often there is little difference between the new and old ways. This is often because major change initiatives consume the time of people as well as other fiscal and physical resources that are open to challenges and failures throughout the change process. There is a lot of thoughtful and systematic analysis to be done about resource and capacity needs, along with determining the decision-making process of the methods of communication and the necessary leadership to be developed, in order to change state governance structures within a state’s complex ECCE system. As such, we recommend that states start their initial governance change incrementally, by building on what the state already has in place that can serve as a coordinating body working with various components of the ECCE system. The existing structure may need to

IMPLEMENTATION FACTORS FOR ECCE GOVERNANCE

- Strategic goals and priorities
- Agency philosophy and culture
- Administrators and providers; agency history and perspectives
- The early childhood care and education programs to be included; that is, what is “in” and “out” of a new governance model?
- Thorough understanding of current roles, authority, and responsibilities
- Involvement of those outside of state government such as service recipients, local communities, counties, advocates, and philanthropists
- Leadership, at all levels
- Infrastructure availability, including facilities, information technology, and data servers

be financially fortified and empowered with cabinet- or governor-level authority for the purposes of supporting the governance transition. Starting from an existing governance structure before moving forward with a new governance model, such as a consolidation model or creating a new agency, can provide the time to make sure there is a clear understanding of the goals and trade-offs, and then develop a strategic decision-making process and implementation approach about changing it.

Implementation Approach

Implementation of a major initiative, such as changing ECCE system governance, will involve setting clear goals and objectives, making decisions, operationalizing actions, gathering data, and making midcourse adjustments. “It is clear that implementation is not an event, but a process...” (Metz, Naom, Halle, & Bartley, 2015, p. 4). Several frameworks in the implementation science field suggest that implementation is a multistage process that is not always linear. To address these recommendations, states might begin by creating implementation teams. “Implementation teams are groups of individuals who have the task of intentionally monitoring and supporting implementation. Implementation teams see themselves as accountable for the success of the new initiative”

(Metz et al., 2015, p. 5). They can comprise five to eight people who include key personnel (such as program administrators and practitioners) and key stakeholders (funders, recipients of program services, and community members). These teams can consider a number of implementation factors for ECCE governance. Ideally, having a small team at every level of system change is important (Metz et al., 2015), with a “core” implementation team responsible for the day-to-day implementation.

Summary

A change initiative, such as in the statewide governance structure of ECCE programs, will require a considerable length of time and resources. It also will be vulnerable to failure because of deficiencies in any number of factors, such as a shared vision, short- and long-term goals, leadership, coalition management, communication approaches, decision-making processes, agency/program culture, and resources (Kotter, 2007). Skipping and rushing through the process can result in no change in improving the access, quality, and coordination of much-needed ECCE services for young children and their families.

Acknowledgments

Preferred citation: Howard, E.C., & Garcia-Arena, P. (2020). *Recommendations for selecting and implementing an early childhood care and care education state governance structure*. Arlington, VA: American Institutes for Research.

These recommendations came from contract work for the Illinois State Board of Education contract #19-586SBE-CHFED-B-5918 (Howard, Jones, Garcia-Arena, & Stagner, 2019). As part of that work we reviewed the literature base and spoke to national experts on the topic. We want to acknowledge and thank the five national experts who spoke to us as part of the Illinois State Board of Education contract that resulted in this brief. The national experts have professional experience in ECCE policy, research, technical assistance, legal issues, and state administration, including long histories of working with states on governance issues.

References

- Demma, R. (2010). *Building ready states: A governor's guide to supporting a comprehensive, high quality early childhood state system*. Washington, DC: National Governors Association. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED512711>
- Early Childhood Data Collaborative. (2011). *10 fundamentals of coordinated state early care and education data systems: Inaugural state analysis*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved from <https://ecedata.org/files/DQC%20ECDC%20brochure%202011%20Mar21.pdf>
- Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature* (FMHI Publication No. 231). Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, National Implementation Research Network.
- Goffin, S., Martella, J., & Coffman, J. (2011). *Vision to practice: Setting a new course for early childhood governance*. Washington, DC: Goffin Strategy Group. Retrieved from https://goffinstrategygroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/EC_Governance_A_New_Course_1.2011.pdf
- Hall, G. (2013). Evaluating change processes: Assessing extent of implementation (constructs, methods and implications). *Journal of Educational Administration*, 51(3), 264–289. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/09578231311311474>
- Howard, E., Jones, K., Garcia-Arena, P., & Stagner, N. (2019). *Final recommendations and implementation report. Illinois PDG B-5 ECCE governance strategic planning facilitation*. Chicago, IL: American Institutes for Research.
- Illgen, S., Stebbins, H., Barnett, S., & Fahey, M. (2011). *SLDS topical webinar summary: Creative solutions to defining and capturing the "P" in "P-20."* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/defining_p_webinar.pdf
- Kagan, S. L., & Gomez, R. E. (Eds.). (2015). *Early childhood governance: Choices and consequences*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Kamerman, S. B. (2006). *A global history of early childhood education and care*. Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Retrieved from https://olc.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/3-A_global_history_of_early_childhood_care_and_education_Background_paper_EFAGlobalMonitoringReport2007UNESCO_0.pdf
- Kotter, J. P. (2007, January). Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2007/01/leading-change-why-transformation-efforts-fail>
- Metz, A., Naoom, S. F., Halle, T., & Bartley, L. (2015). *An integrated stage-based framework for implementation of early childhood programs and systems* (OPRE Research Brief 2015-48). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and

Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. Retrieved from <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/resources/integrated-stage-based-framework-implementation-early-childhood-programs-and-systems>

Regenstein, E. (2019). *Early childhood governance strategy conversations: What the field is saying*. [Unpublished draft]. Los Altos, CA: Heising-Simons Foundation.

Regenstein, E. (2020, July 20). *Making sense of governance in early childhood* [web log comment]. Retrieved from <https://ednote.ecs.org/making-sense-of-governance-in-early-childhood/>

Regenstein, E., & Lipper, K. (2013). *A framework for choosing a state-level early childhood governance system*. Boston, MA: The BUILD Initiative. Retrieved from <http://www.buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Early%20Childhood%20Governance%20for%20Web.pdf>



AMERICAN INSTITUTES FOR RESEARCH®

1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor
Arlington, VA 22202-3239
202.403.5000

About the American Institutes for Research

Established in 1946, with headquarters in Arlington, VA, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance, both domestically and internationally, in the areas of education, health, and the workforce. **For more information, visit www.air.org.**

Notice of Trademark: "American Institutes for Research" and "AIR" are registered trademarks. All other brand, product, or company names are trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners.

Copyright © 2020 American Institutes for Research®. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, website display, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the American Institutes for Research. For permission requests, please use the Contact Us form on www.air.org.