

The Importance of Community Collaborations: Recommendations for the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding

Among the recommendations that the Illinois Commission on Equitable Early Childhood Education and Care Funding (the Commission) is considering are consolidating management and oversight of early childhood programs into one agency and transitioning to a funding formula to inform multi-year contracts to providers. While these proposed changes will likely have positive impacts, they will not fully address disparities and the inequitable distribution of resources endemic in our current system. The Commission's recommendations must also include investments in the community-level structures needed to account for local priorities and build local capacity in areas that lack resources, so that all children are able to access high-quality early childhood programming and achieve equitable outcomes, no matter their race, ethnicity, culture, ability, language, income, and geography.

At present, resources are inequitably distributed across the state with some communities having an abundance of early childhood resources while other areas are early childhood deserts. Even worse, areas with scarce early childhood services often do not apply for more resources, because they lack the capacity and infrastructure to draw down the funds. Examples of these types of barriers include a lack of facilities, workforce shortages, and lack of existing programs on which to build for increased quality and access. A dearth of community-level infrastructure also makes it difficult to bring stakeholders together across the early childhood system to do the capacity building and planning required to build a coherent, robust system of early childhood services. Furthermore, areas without a strong local collaborative that do have early childhood programming still face barriers in supporting families to access the services they need.

The Commission's proposed recommendations will not, on their own, effectively tackle these challenges if they are focused on the state-level alone. For example, a community that currently does not have the capacity to plan for and identify the best use of resources across a range of early childhood services in preparation for an RFP will still face those challenges in allocating funding sent to the local level through a funding formula. In fact, using a formula to allocate funding to high-needs areas that lack a community level infrastructure may result in these funds being unspent or allocated to the easiest service to support, rather than what is needed most.

Regardless of the funding mechanism, communities with early childhood collaborations are better positioned to access and effectively utilize resources. Early childhood collaborations develop a shared vision for their community and define a set of goals and shared data measurements to address a community concern. Community collaborations are uniquely positioned to better know and understand their local context, respond to and guide how resources should be directed to meet that need, and are best positioned to understand and create the on-the-ground infrastructure to ensure efficient use of the resources available to their community.

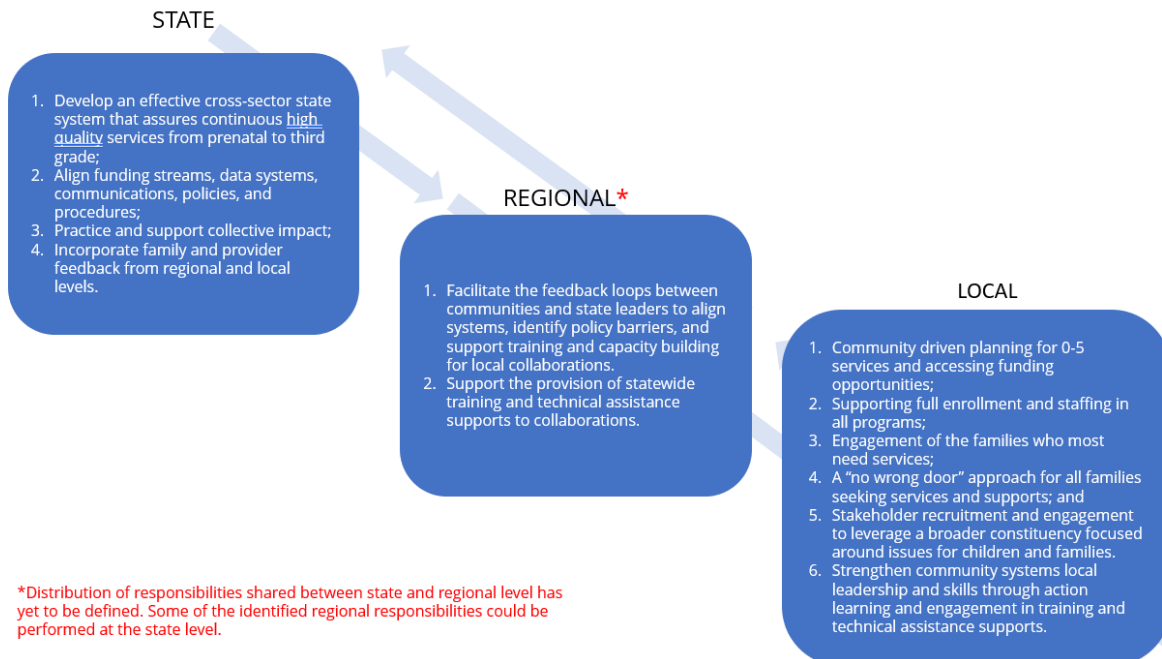
However, community collaborations, much like early childhood education and care programming, exist in pockets across the state, in varying structures, some funded and others not, and with varying levels of formalized activities. Our experience over decades of this work has not only taught us the importance of these collaborations to the success of our system, but also that our lack of providing ongoing, stable, and adequate funding for community collaborations has hampered progress for children and families. Once community collaborations are funded statewide and seen as having a critical role in our early childhood system, they could hold the responsibility for a set of key functions, which would have associated targets and outcomes defined at the state level:

1. Community driven planning for 0-5 services and accessing funding opportunities;
2. Supporting full enrollment and staffing in all programs;
3. Engagement of the families who most need services;
4. A “no wrong door” approach for all families seeking services and supports; and
5. Stakeholder recruitment and engagement to leverage a broader constituency focused around issues for children and families. It should be noted this function could enhance the ability to garner local resources to support both services and infrastructure.

In addition to providing local community collaborations adequate funding to execute the identified functions above, the state should provide comprehensive supports to ensure communities make strong, data driven and equitable decisions. These supports would include capacity building, ongoing training and technical assistance, data sharing and the facilitation of feedback loops so that community collaborations can achieve equitable outcomes for children and families in their area. These functions may live at the state level, or at some level between the state and communities. They may be functions provided within government or through public-private partnerships, particularly around areas of specialized knowledge, skills, or expertise. What is essential is that these kinds of capacity building supports are recognized as an integral and ongoing part of the funded early childhood system and meaningfully connected to early childhood community collaborations.

It should be noted that in our current system, some existing structures are charged with performing all or some of these key functions in certain geographies across the state. Implications for these current infrastructure components will need to be considered, but the work should begin with the functions and necessary support structure for effective community systems.

Visualizing a potential structure that incorporates community systems



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