

A photograph of two young children, a girl and a boy, sitting at a wooden table and playing with toys. The girl, on the left, has dark curly hair tied in a bun and is wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt with white stripes. The boy, on the right, has short dark hair and is wearing a red and black plaid shirt. They are both looking down at the toys on the table. The toys include several red cylindrical blocks and a wooden block with red circular patterns. The background is a blurred indoor setting with shelves and books.

FORESIGHT LAW+POLICY

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EARLY CHILDHOOD GOVERNANCE: GETTING THERE FROM HERE

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

With support from the Heising-Simons Foundation, Foresight Law + Policy has been studying governance in the early childhood field with the goal of supporting a field-wide improvement strategy. This work builds on existing resources that describe different governance models in states and identifies benefits and drawbacks of those models in different policy areas. In addition to updating those analyses, this project has involved a deeper study of the processes of governance change, identifying key questions states should wrestle with and providing better information about the tradeoffs inherent in answering those questions. In doing so it draws on early childhood systems theory, behavioral economics, and other education policy resources. It also focuses on identifying capacities that states may need as they consider how to move forward in their governance efforts.

Through April 2020, information and insights were collected from a total of 89 informants, mostly in individual conversations. Some conversations involved two or three informants together, typically colleagues from the same organization. The interviews included leaders from 27 states, both inside and outside government, as well as national experts.¹ A full list of informants is included in the Appendix, along with additional information about the outreach methodology.

Informants were promised that they would not be quoted directly and were told that the report would not include “case studies” of specific states. Therefore, the use of specific state examples in this report is very limited. Specific references to states are primarily based on published documents rather than informant interviews. There is one specific reference to a particular state’s approach that is based on an informant interview, and to ensure accuracy the language of that reference was shared with the informant prior to publication.

INTRODUCTION



“The answer to every strategic question is ‘It depends.’ Corollary: The trick is knowing what it depends on.”²

Over the last two decades the federal government, states, and communities have all increased their commitment to early childhood, building on policy roots that go back decades further.³ But the expansion of early childhood services has exposed a number of challenges with early childhood’s policy infrastructure, including the fact that it is very difficult to create a real system from disparate programs sprinkled across multiple state and local agencies. Policymakers and practitioners want a coherent, purpose-driven system — and the drive to create that system has made early childhood governance an ongoing focus for early childhood policymakers, administrators, advocates, and other stakeholders.⁴

Despite the longstanding federal and state commitments to early childhood investment, early childhood has been undervalued in the policy marketplace. We know that the early years are incredibly important to brain development.⁵ We know that the K-12 system is not equipped to play catch-up when children enter school behind,⁶ placing an extremely high premium on success in the early years. Unsurprisingly, that means that an investment in high-quality birth-to-5 early education produces a substantial return on investment.⁷ But states continue to underinvest in early childhood,⁸ and they leave in place all kinds of incentives for K-12 schools to ignore these essential years.⁹

Relatedly, policymakers have not invested enough to support positive parenting experiences for families with incomes near the federal poverty line. Families with young children and financial challenges have very limited bandwidth; indeed, poverty is one of the most significant limiters of human bandwidth, and young children are one of the most significant consumers of that bandwidth.¹⁰ In the masterful book *Scarcity*, Mullainathan and Shafir talk about the need for “slack,” which they describe as the capacity available to deal with predictable disruptions. Parents of young children who lack financial resources have very little slack. They have neither the money nor the time to deal with any setbacks in their lives. Therefore, to see improvement in their circumstances they need to be provided with additional bandwidth.¹¹ High-quality early childhood services that are easy to access could be fundamentally life-changing for young families with low incomes, helping to change the life trajectory for the adults and the child.¹²

To date state early childhood systems have struggled to provide that level of support. Accessing early childhood programs can be incredibly difficult for families, as they must navigate a thicket of overlapping and incoherent program and eligibility requirements. Moreover, the providers themselves often do not have the capacity to help families deal with the system’s fragmentation. Median wages for providers in the field hover near the federal poverty level for a family of four.¹³ Additionally, child care reimbursements historically have focused on the time providers spend with children directly, limiting their ability to engage in professional development and collaboration activities.¹⁴

When the state fails to provide capacity in the system, the cost of that is paid by the families and providers themselves. Many states are understandably reluctant to raise general-purpose taxes because it is politically unpopular — or to cut existing spending in other areas, which risks alienating important constituencies. But when early childhood services, particularly child care, are not treated as a public good — like public education — their cost falls on low-income families, who have limited ability to pay that cost. In practical effect states not subsidizing early childhood services is a regressive tax on low-income parents, and also affects their participation in the workforce.¹⁵



A conversation about governance in a state should confront the question of whether the state is trying to preserve its early childhood system largely as it is, or whether some better system might be possible.¹⁶ Truly changing the dynamic for children and families will require rethinking how the entire system works, which includes designing governance structures tailored to support the new system. As of June 2020, when this paper is being released, the nation's early childhood systems have been significantly disrupted by COVID-19, forcing difficult conversations about what it will be possible for government to do on behalf of families. Ideally, those conversations will yield state approaches to governance that are better than what came before.

A. Why Governance Matters in Early Childhood

The early childhood field features multiple programs serving young children that are often housed in different state agencies.¹⁷ This dispersal of authority has frequently proven to be a challenge when states try to develop a coherent early childhood system. For that reason early childhood policymakers, advocates, and scholars have focused on governance as an essential strategy for developing improved early childhood systems.

One of the most notable entries in the literature on early childhood governance is the 2015 book *Early Childhood Governance: Choices and Consequences*, edited by Sharon Lynn Kagan and Rebecca Gomez.¹⁸ Explaining the importance of governance in managing the early childhood system, Kagan writes that governance functions “include, at a minimum, planning, coordination, resource allocation/distribution, public outreach, quality enhancements, and some form of accountability.”¹⁹ She defines the early childhood system as comprising both direct services that children receive and the infrastructure supporting those services, with governance an essential part of the infrastructure.²⁰ Kagan points out that without governance, there cannot be a functional early childhood system.²¹ She then explains that governance can produce some systemic outputs — including equity, quality, and sustainability — but governance alone will not produce improved child outcomes.²²

The book also explains how governance impacts the shape of early childhood systems. It discusses the practical realities of implementing successful governance systems — including how governance impacts numerous essential infrastructure elements of the early childhood system, such as quality rating and improvement systems, standards, accountability, financing, professional development, and family and community engagement.

This report very consciously builds on *Choices and Consequences* by examining in greater detail the current landscape of early childhood governance and offering recommendations for how states might evaluate their existing governance to consider the possibility of change. While *Choices and Consequences* was constructed to “give voice to multiple perspectives,” this report gives voice to a single authorial perspective that is informed by dozens of knowledgeable and thoughtful informants. The title of this report is meant to echo *Choices and Consequences*, while putting a focus on the process of deciding on a governance structure; the “getting there” should include some new ways of thinking about governance to improve state early childhood systems.

In a nation of 50 unique states, “there” will look different for each. What’s more, there are no easy answers in early childhood governance, only a long series of tradeoffs. Indeed, the introduction to *Choices and Consequences* tells us that “readers should expect to be left with ambiguity, but also to be armed with information to guide their own unique thoughts about governance.”²³ The same is true of this report and the accompanying decision guide.

B. How to Use This Report: Focusing on the Right Questions

The goal of this report is to provide a framework for making decisions about the governance of state early childhood systems. It starts with a discussion of how to set up a process for making decisions about governance, and then walks through a series of questions that the process should address. These decisions are presented in a sequential order that is meant to help guide the conversation, with each decision point following from the one before it. These questions include:

1. Is the state clear on its overall priorities for the early childhood system?
2. What process should the state use to determine whether or not a governance change is needed to meet the state’s objectives for its early childhood system?
3. What functions will the state need to perform to achieve its priorities?
4. How should different levels of government work together to execute the critical functions?
5. What personnel capacities does the state need to succeed at its priority functions?
6. Given the capacities needed at the state level to achieve the state’s goals, what is the ideal configuration of a governance structure?
7. If a decision is made to change governance, how should the state manage the process, and what capacities are needed for that process to be successful?
8. In the final cost-benefit analysis, is a change in governance worthwhile?

Because of this report’s length it is accompanied by a short [decision guide](#), which is meant to be accessible to policymakers and advocates who might not be inclined to curl up by the fire with a report on early childhood governance that has more than 200 endnotes.²⁴ The report and the decision guide have the same structure. If a reader is using the decision guide and wants deeper background on any of the issues it raises, they can easily find that deeper discussion by going straight to the accompanying section of this report. This full report is intended for anyone who wants to dig more deeply into the nuances of the issues traced in broader strokes in that brief summary.

This report consciously focuses on the key questions without proposing “right answers.” This report discusses how some states resolved difficult tradeoffs, and what lessons other states considering similar tradeoffs can learn from them. At some points, it will dive deeply into the nuances of an issue without making specific recommendations for how that issue should be resolved. This will hopefully set the stage for other analysts and advocates to make arguments for one resolution or another on some of those thorny issues.

It is worth noting that the decision to focus on states as the unit of decision-making — while deeply grounded in the United States’ federalist history and current policy practice — has its limitations. Variation among states may have the benefit of being responsive to local conditions, but it also has the drawback of leading to inconsistency throughout the nation.

An important underlying philosophy of this report is that it seeks to prod states into actually addressing the hard questions facing their early childhood systems. It is well-documented that people have a tendency to answer the easier questions they want to answer, rather than the hard questions they ought to answer.²⁵ The hard question is: How can states develop a cohesive and well-governed early childhood system with the capacity needed to make things better for children and families? This report is meant to help states willing to engage in this important work.

C. Definitions

For the purpose of this report, the working definition of “governance” will be the definition used in *Choices and Consequences*:

[G]overnance is not restricted to government and instead incorporates efforts in the public and private sectors, including partnerships of both. It relates to ways in which authority is created and distributed (e.g., the defining/producing of rules and actions and the granting of power), the ways accountability is required (e.g., the verification of performance), and the degree to which the entity that governs has *durability*.²⁶

For other important terms used to describe the array of services included under the umbrella term “early childhood,” this report will use the definitions from the comparative systems analyses that form *The Early Advantage 2: Building Systems That Work for Young Children*:²⁷

[C]omprehensive early development services (CED) is [the] broader [term] and embraces the second, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. CED ... is composed of two categories, general health and welfare services and ECEC services. General health and welfare includes a wide range of services to young children and their families, including prenatal, perinatal, social welfare, and protective services. ECEC specifically encompasses home- and center-based services that are developmental and educational in nature.

While there is some disagreement within the field about the exact parameters of ECEC and CED, those terms will be used throughout this report to provide a structure for the discussion, with the recognition that in each state the exact boundaries of those definitions will be somewhat different.

Across the country, people use different terms for what is referred to here as ECEC. These include “early childhood education and care,” “early education and care,” “early care and education,” “early learning and care,” or “early care and learning;” All of these terms are similar and generally refer to child care and preschool programs.²⁸ For the purposes of this paper, these early childhood services are treated as distinct from a broader suite of services that includes other health, human services, and family engagement programs,²⁹ which are part of CED rather than ECEC.



QUESTION 1

Is the state clear on its overall priorities for the early childhood system?



A. Identifying Top Priorities

One consistent theme in interviews with stakeholders was the idea that states should have a few priorities that guide their governance conversation. If the state is spending time and effort to discuss governance change, there has to be a reason for doing so. And because good governance should always be in service of some larger purpose, states should be clear on what that purpose is. Because decisions about governance structures all involve tradeoffs, informants widely agreed that states need to choose one to three top priorities that serve as the anchoring concepts in evaluating governance options.

This has important implications for the ultimate design of a governance system. For example, if a state's top priority is that "all children should have access to preschool," that might suggest a very different governance structure than if the top priority is "connecting the most vulnerable families to needed services." There are a whole host of priorities that a state might choose, but being clear on which are most important is widely seen as a critical first step in designing a governance system.³⁰

Some goals were mentioned by informants in multiple states as having been prioritized in their state's discussions about governance, including:

- **Minimizing the amount of work families with low incomes have to do to access needed services.** ECEC services are often spread across multiple state agencies, and CED services are spread across even more. Informants indicated that there is often very little infrastructure in any individual state agency to help connect families to the services they need, let alone any cross-agency support. Thus, states are appropriately focusing on what they can do to make the experience of raising young children easier for families by designing governance systems around their end-user experience.
- **Ensuring quality across the full range of available services.** In addition to the need to connect families to services, informants in numerous states indicated that state government leaders are concerned about the quality of the services being delivered. While moving services under the same roof does not guarantee that any or all of them will improve, it does at least create a single entity responsible for ensuring quality across multiple related services.
- **Expanding access to services.** Some informants believe that a governance change should only be considered successful if it expands access to the early childhood system by increasing enrollment in existing services or adding new services. In some states, a desire to implement universal pre-K for 4-year-olds was identified as a major driver of governance discussions.

- ***Efficiently delivering services.*** Some informants indicated that policymakers in their state were frustrated by the perceived inefficiency of having related early childhood services housed in different places. In these states, a conversation about governance emerged from a desire to be more efficient in the use of government dollars.
- ***Elevating the level of leadership on early childhood issues in state government.*** Informants relayed that when early childhood programs are spread across multiple agencies, the highest ranking officials in each agency address early childhood as just one of many responsibilities. They noted that this is not only an operational challenge, it can mean that early childhood lacks a powerful spokesperson in the political arena. This has been a major motivator for change in some states, which have concluded that elevated leadership is critical to the early childhood field and will put it on a more even footing with other sectors like K-12, higher education, and human services.



None of these priorities is mutually exclusive, of course, and states may articulate overarching priorities that incorporate more than one to differing degrees. Additionally, top priorities are not necessarily static over time, and states may decide to re-evaluate their priorities as their work evolves. It is important to acknowledge that within states, there are often multiple priorities that lead different stakeholders into conversations about governance. The process of synthesizing those views is the focus of Question 2 of this report.

In 2019 46 states were funded by the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five program to prepare early childhood strategic plans.³¹ These strategic plans should provide an articulation of some critical priorities already identified by states, which is a valuable starting point for a discussion about governance.

While most of the informant interviews for this project were conducted in 2019, the concluding work on this report was done in spring 2020 — by which time much of the nation was sheltering in place due to the COVID-19 outbreak. In several of the final interviews conducted for this report informants noted that the COVID-19 response had placed a premium on states having clear lines of authority and communication to mobilize a response. This report is being released too soon after the COVID-19 outbreak began to include any insights on whether crisis response will turn out to be a major motivator of early childhood governance change, but that seems like a real possibility given the scope of COVID-19's impact.

B. Governance as a Key Element of System Quality

The idea that governance should be built around key priorities is a reflection of the fact that governance is a necessary component of a successful early childhood system, and that system's overall priorities should accordingly be reflected in the structure of its authority. In *The Early Advantage 2*, Kagan offers a theory of action for early childhood systems that builds on previous work, including *Choices and Consequences*.³² In this theory, the outputs of an effective system will have the following attributes:

- They will be of high quality.
- They will be equitable, meaning that they reach the children who need them most.
- They will be sustainable over time.
- They will be delivered efficiently.

Another attribute proposed by Kagan is the idea of continuity of services — that is, the degree to which there is commonality of approach across different programs birth through 8.³³

As states consider the priorities that will shape their governance structure, they should keep these attributes in mind to ensure that the structure ultimately helps the system achieve these outputs. These attributes may also be useful to the public conversation about a governance change. For many audiences, it may be useful to describe the value of a governance change in terms of improved quality or efficiency.

While efficiency is widely acknowledged as an important system value, multiple informants noted that discussing efficiency can be a challenge with certain audiences — particularly legislative ones. Nationally fewer than half of 3- and 4-year-olds are served by publicly funded ECEC programs, and many of those programs are of relatively low quality.³⁴ Some informants expressed concern that policymakers are laboring under the misconception that improved efficiency will allow states to offer high-quality services to a much larger number of children without spending additional money. Based on the current data, no state is close enough to providing comprehensive birth-to-5 services that it could realistically get there without a dramatic increase in funding.³⁵ Thus, informants noted that when they talk about efficiency, they are talking about improving the current system *and* adding more resources — and those ideas should be mutually reinforcing, not in competition.

C. Governance and Child Outcomes

It is important to acknowledge that all of the priorities identified above are in service of an overarching goal: improving child outcomes and family well-being. It is also important to acknowledge that governance conversations can feel relatively far removed from the program settings in which young children interact with early childhood professionals in a manner that hopefully helps them achieve better outcomes. That level of removal has important implications for a state's consideration of its governance approach.

We know that the first five years of life are incredibly important, and that adult interactions with children can have a significant impact on child development.³⁶ We know that quality adult-child interactions take place in the context of stable and continuous relationships.³⁷ In ECEC, we even know a good deal about how to design programs that support those relationships.³⁸

But what we have yet to master at a systems level is how to most effectively and efficiently maximize the number of those successful adult-child interactions taking place in publicly funded ECEC settings, and how best to support the programs providing those interactions through a well-designed governance plan that supports capacity throughout the early childhood system. Early childhood governance is about the manner in which states organize themselves to support the effective and efficient delivery of services that provide children and families with high-quality support.³⁹ The fact that stability and continuity are important in adult-child relationships actually puts a premium on coherence in early childhood systems. When ECEC funding streams are managed separately, it can be difficult or impossible to focus on providing integrated and continuous services.

Many informants believe that improved governance leads to improved child outcomes,⁴⁰ but there is not presently an empirical research base showing a direct link between specific governance choices and specific child outcomes. Child outcomes should always remain the overarching focus of the system, and improving those outcomes will remain the goal of all of the functions that sit within the governance structure. But state leaders must understand that the relationship between their governance choices and child outcomes may be indirect and difficult to quantify. As one informant put it, good governance does not assure good outcomes, but a governance system that is well coordinated and highly functional provides the best opportunity to assure that good outcomes are being achieved for all children in the state.



Relatedly, many informants pointed out that not all state priorities can be advanced significantly by a change in governance. This issue is always important for states to consider, but particularly important at two points: (1) the point at which a state is considering whether or not to engage in a serious consideration of governance change, and (2) the point at which a state is considering whether or not to actually make a governance change. The latter is addressed later in this report under Question 8. The former, however, should be considered before establishing any process to consider the possibility of a governance change. In the words of Harriet Dichter, who spearheaded one of the nation’s most significant early childhood governance changes in Pennsylvania, “Neither elected nor appointed public officials want to use their limited time and resources to press forward on governance unless they believe it will make a concrete and meaningful difference in the early learning mission[.]”⁴¹

QUESTION 2

What process should the state use to determine whether or not a governance change is needed to meet its objectives for its early childhood system?



Because the design of early childhood governance is about weighing competing interests, who is doing the weighing matters a great deal. In an inclusive process, the primary design work will be conducted by the stakeholders who will end up implementing the structure, and they will be the primary drivers and judges of whether or not the system works. Many informants talked about the importance of a thoughtful process that engages a wide range of stakeholders in evaluating whether or not a governance change is worthwhile. Informants also noted that this process should be culturally sensitive to ensure that all stakeholders are able to participate successfully.

A. The Importance of Engagement From Political Leaders

Processes for discussing governance have generally been initiated by either the governor or key legislators. Unless these officials express interest in a conversation about governance, it is unlikely to get the airspace needed to move forward. If advocates or leaders in the early childhood community believe a change is necessary, they can lobby the governor or key legislators to initiate a discussion process — which is how change has come about in many of the states that have modified their governance structure in the last two decades.

In New Mexico, for example, several philanthropically funded reports helped pave the way for legislation in 2019 that authorized the creation of a new Early Education & Care Department.⁴² After advocates began discussing the possibility of a governance change, in 2016 funders supported the development of a report by the New Mexico Early Childhood Development Partnership — a non-profit advocacy effort⁴³ — that summarized different governance options and argued that improved governance could be beneficial in New Mexico.⁴⁴ In 2018, funders supported the development of a report entitled *A Business Plan for Early Childhood in New Mexico*, which continued to push for governance change.⁴⁵ Advocates also created a short handout promoting a new department.⁴⁶

Prior to 2019, these advocacy efforts had not culminated in the passage of legislation. In 2019, however, newly-elected Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham put her support behind the creation of a new department, including highlighting the need in her inaugural address.⁴⁷ After that, a bill to establish the department passed with overwhelming margins — 39-2 in the Senate on March 2, and 47-8 in the House on March 9 — and was signed by Governor Lujan Grisham on March 14.⁴⁸

B. Engaging Multiple Stakeholders in the Change Process

While high-level leadership is critical, a successful governance change also benefits from wide buy-in among members of the early childhood community.⁴⁹ Thus, the process of governance change should provide ample opportunity for stakeholders to weigh in. In Washington state, for example, a Blue Ribbon Commission was formed to study the possibility of adding new responsibilities to the Department of Early Learning.⁵⁰ The commission's 2016 report led to legislation creating a new Department of Children, Youth, and Families.⁵¹ In Massachusetts, a legislative initiative engaged a wide range of stakeholders over multiple years in the process of supporting legislation to create a new department, which ended up being signed into law by a “reluctant” governor.⁵²

While states have often focused on inclusive processes because of the need to create stakeholder buy-in, there is another reason for the process to be inclusive: complex decisions are more likely to succeed when they are informed by multiple perspectives.⁵³ A conversation about governance change will not succeed if it takes place in an echo chamber of supportive advocates.⁵⁴ Indeed, even experts have a hard time knowing exactly how governance will impact the future of early childhood systems.⁵⁵ While some participants will approach the process with a specific end in mind, the process is most likely to succeed if it considers multiple alternatives⁵⁶ — a process that might benefit from including participants who may know little to nothing about the early childhood system, yet who might bring valuable fresh perspectives to the table.⁵⁷

Whether or not a state establishes a formal task force to address governance issues, some of the stakeholders whose voices need to be heard in a discussion about early childhood governance include:

- The governor and their immediate staff;
- Legislators;
- Agency heads from potentially impacted agencies — which could include health, human services, education, workforce, and more;
- Agency staff potentially impacted by any change;
- Direct customers of the state — that is, direct grantees of state funds, which might include regional and local governments, providers, and nonprofit and for-profit entities;
- Indirect customers of the state — most importantly, the families potentially impacted by a change ;
- Advocates, philanthropists, and philanthropic organizations; and
- Other community leaders with an interest in the issue, such as civic and business leaders.

While there are benefits to inclusive processes, this too is a balance. Including too many stakeholders can bog down the work, and complete consensus among stakeholders is highly unlikely. States should balance the need for multiple perspectives with the need to be efficient; the right equilibrium between those needs is likely to be very context specific.

C. Staffing the Change Process

Given the number of stakeholders involved, the process of discussing potential governance changes requires substantial and sustained effort. Successfully driving and facilitating the process requires dedicated staff capacity and the skills needed to bring people together. Some informants noted that strong leadership on the task force can be very beneficial to moving the process forward.

Numerous informants from states with experience in this process emphasized the importance of dedicated staff time. Frequently leaders inside government have too many competing priorities to dedicate the time needed to keep the process moving. For that reason the process of governance change has often been supported with resources from outside the state budget. Informants in some states pointed to philanthropic support for staff capacity as a key resource; in other instances federal grants have provided the capacity and focus needed to discuss governance, with Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge one noteworthy example.⁵⁸

Another important process support is the technical and legal capacity to understand exactly what the state's options are under its constitution. State constitutions vary widely in how they authorize the creation of agencies and the functions of those agencies. Some informants ruefully acknowledged developing plans that turned out to be impossible to implement without a state constitutional amendment. The early engagement of legal experts who can explain the parameters of what is constitutionally possible is useful to help frame the conversation. If the state is attempting to change governance through executive order rather than by statute, the restrictions on what is permissible will likely be even tighter, and legal guidance will be critical to ensure that the changes can be executed without legislative action.



Some informants noted that the process can benefit from additional forms of technical knowledge, depending on what issues come to the surface. Some issues will require expertise specific to a particular state, whereas others will benefit from the insight and perspective of national experts. Moreover, in some cases researchers will be able to add significant value, and in other cases the process will benefit most from practitioner insights. These varying needs emphasize the importance of having core staff capacity, as these staffers are often responsible for identifying the expertise needed and ensuring that the right experts are brought to the table.

Beyond technical knowledge, it is also important for states to take account of their history. The state's current early childhood governance system is the product of numerous choices made over the course of decades, and the reasons behind those choices are important. Indeed, understanding how the underlying rationales for certain decisions have changed can help states reach consensus about what should come next. The lessons from past decisions about early childhood governance can be very helpful for states making new decisions about the future of early childhood governance.

One kind of support referenced by multiple informants was the opportunity to connect with policy leaders who have experienced governance changes in other states. Hearing from governors' office staff, agency leaders, and advocates in states that have been through governance changes has proven very useful to states considering changes of their own. Peer-to-peer learning can provide meaningful insights and distinctive perspectives that an intra-state discussion might not surface.



Some informants reported that the process of considering governance change in their state was a multiyear process with numerous fits and starts. They explained that in their states the legislature sometimes needs several legislative sessions to consider complex changes before finally taking the plunge. Informants noted that funders and advocates must be ready for an extended process and recognize that conversations about governance are likely to require sustained focus.

D. Final Decision Rights

While broad stakeholder engagement has proven valuable in numerous states, key leaders inside government — most notably the governor and legislators — will ultimately be responsible for deciding whether or not a governance change is warranted. If the governor is engaging stakeholders to consider a governance change, they should be explicit about whether they intend to (a) act by executive order, (b) seek legislatively adopted changes, or (c) keep an open mind about the possible approach until the task force has made its recommendations. Informants from states where the governor provided that clarity indicated that it was helpful to deliberations.

Clarity about how the process will end is much less likely if advocates are initiating the process of pushing for governance change and hoping that the governor or legislature will take up the issue. Indeed, some informants in states with gubernatorial term limits explained that they initiated a discussion about governance not to engage the sitting governor at the time but to prepare for the next one. Informants explained that some advocates have sought governance change by engaging a governor whom they think can be a champion for the cause, but others have sought it by pushing the issue in a nonpartisan way during election campaigns, with the hope that both major candidates will express support — and then act on the issue once in office.

In some instances, governors and legislative leaders have made a conscious effort to work together effectively to advance governance changes. But that has not always been the case. For example, as noted above, in Massachusetts the advocacy campaign to create a new agency targeted the legislature, because the governor had publicly expressed his opposition to creating a new department.⁵⁹ It is rare for legislatures to initiate governance changes over the objection of the governor, given that the governor is responsible for implementing any legislatively adopted changes. It is more common for governors to make governance changes by executive order without engaging the legislature. This may occur when the governor and legislature are not getting along, and an administration perceives that its best route to making a change is to act unilaterally.

Informants raised concerns that the enactments made by governors who use executive orders might not prove to be as durable, because a new governor might come in and reverse or alter the order. In addition, the transition to a new structure can take years to execute, and with executive orders it may become easier to undermine the change as time goes on when there is no statutory backstop. Nonetheless, executive action can be an option for governors looking to make a change without engaging the legislature — and in some cases those changes have proved durable. For example, Pennsylvania’s structure was adopted by Governor Ed Rendell in 2007⁶⁰ and remains in place to this day.

E. Challenges in Managing the Process

According to informants, states that have engaged in processes to consider possible governance changes have encountered numerous challenges along the way:

- Some stakeholders do not want change even if they know the status quo is unsatisfactory, which can be a byproduct of the scarcity mindset.⁶¹ They are so focused on their short-term needs that they are unwilling to spend the bandwidth on longer-term approaches that offer no short-term payoff, even if in the long run a governance change might fundamentally improve their circumstances.
- Governmental institutions play an essential role in providing leadership on issues and structuring policy, but they can be notoriously difficult to reform.⁶²
- Some stakeholders may want change but are fixated on a single option for change that meets their needs. They are not interested in an open-ended conversation about the costs and benefits of different options, but instead want to see their viewpoint ratified in full.
- Other stakeholders may be skeptical of the potential impact of a governance change — sometimes rightly so — and need to be engaged to have their concerns addressed. If people in the field are having a hard time envisioning a better way, leaders of the movement for change must be willing to engage them to help them develop that vision. One major purpose of a stakeholder engagement process is to raise practical concerns that need to be addressed.
- Relatedly, some stakeholders may feel like the conversation about governance is meant to be a distraction from what they perceive to be more pressing issues. Some stakeholders have seen political leaders use a discussion of governance changes as a way to avoid confronting the fact that new funding is needed to expand access and improve quality.
- Some stakeholders will enter into the conversation with a deep sense of urgency about the need for change but ignore some of the underlying reasons informing previous decisions about the state’s governance structure. The cost-benefit analyses underlying those decisions may well have changed, but the factors that went into those decisions should be considered and respected when discussing an updated system.

- Discussions about moving any particular unit out of its current location may create defensiveness among both the people in that unit and those in its current host agency.
- A discussion about which decisions should be made by which actors can become territorial and hostile very quickly, and that may lead to outcomes that are based on personality and force of will rather than a sustainable agreement about institutional roles. An open mind and civility can go a long way toward reaching positive outcomes in governance conversations.

Importantly, these are challenges to *reaching a thoughtful conclusion*, not challenges to achieving any specific outcome.

Another challenging dynamic that can surface in a process of evaluating potential governance changes is tension within the executive branch about the proper course of action. This conflict is natural given institutional roles and can start at the top. While the governor's office may be well positioned to recognize the needs of the entire field, individual agencies by definition are focused on a particular segment of it. Some agency leaders can take a broader view, but informants noted that this is not always the case.

Based on informant feedback, it is clear that the political dynamic between the governor's office and agency heads can vary substantially across states. Even if the governor appointed the agency head, it does not necessarily mean that the two will be on the same page about a governance change. In some states agency heads are tightly aligned with the governor, whereas in others they are relatively independent. In some states, the state superintendent of education is elected separately from the governor,⁶³ and other states have elected or appointed state boards of education with varying levels of accountability to the governor.⁶⁴ One informant noted that if a governor who gave agencies more latitude is replaced by one who seeks to manage them more tightly, it can create tension not only with agency heads but through multiple layers of each agency. How agency heads see their relationship with the governor can also change meaningfully over time, with some informants observing that agency heads often become more assertive about their independence the longer they have been on the job.

An additional factor to consider is the intra-agency dynamic that can emerge between politically appointed agency leaders and the managers of key divisions relating to early childhood — sometimes referred to as “mid-level leaders.” The complexity of these relationships is discussed in greater detail later in 5.B, but the most important point is that the interests of agency heads and agency staff are not necessarily aligned. Informants noted some instances where agency leaders were willing to consider substantial governance changes, but the program staff were not. Sometimes that has been because the program staff anticipated that the agency leaders would soon be gone, and then they would be left to do the hard work of implementing the change.

Because of the inherent power dynamic between senior leaders and mid-level leaders, it can be difficult for mid-level leaders to share their views fully and honestly in a public process of considering governance change. Of course, informants noted that there may be other pressures that make it difficult for even the senior staff to speak freely. Ideally, the design of any information-gathering process will take account of some of these pressures and create opportunities to engage government leaders from multiple levels of all impacted agencies. It may make sense to create working groups of leaders from inside state government who can meet on their own as part of the larger process, creating a venue to work out some of the issues unique to state agencies. The findings of those groups would need to be vetted in the larger process, but having a separate space to do some initial exploration may allow for more complete conversations.

All of these challenges may be daunting, individually and collectively, but there are states that have worked through each of them. Multiple informants talked about the trust-building processes they used to overcome these challenges and the benefits they realized from both the process and the result.

F. Continuing the Conversation

Whatever decisions are reached, it will be important for the stakeholder engagement process to continue after a direction is set. If the state decides to make a change in its governance, that will require extensive planning and additional work. What that might look like is discussed in more detail below under Question 7. Importantly, though, the state might choose *not* to make any major changes in its governance structure — and if that is the decision, there should be clear agreement as to what that decision means and when the issue of governance could appropriately be revisited.

Frequently in public policy the impetus for change comes from a belief that the underlying consensus around an issue has changed, so that the law and regulatory framework in place no longer reflects the best thinking of stakeholders. The process of identifying the underlying consensus and then forging a new one can be arduous, and states should not enter into the conversation without a deep appreciation of how much work it will take to establish that new consensus — let alone act on it.

In every state the existing governance structure is the product of the culture of the state and a series of decisions made over time, each of which was supported by at least some good reasons when it was made. In many cases, decisions were based on the need to place an individual program in an agency that made sense for it, while current governance discussions may focus on reorienting around a particular age band of children served (birth to 5 or birth to 8). Today's conversation should take account of the reasons behind those long-ago decisions, even while focusing primarily on the dramatic changes that have occurred in the early childhood field — and the importance of not accepting inadequate governance simply because that's how things have always been done. Participants in today's conversations should be appropriately humble about the likelihood that early childhood governance will continue to be an evolving policy area, so the governance structures they adopt will likely change as conditions continue to shift.

QUESTION 3

What functions will the state need to perform to achieve its priorities?



Once the state has established a process for discussing a governance change and identified the priorities that will drive the discussion, it should identify the functions it will need to perform to achieve its priorities. Indeed, there are certain functions that the state will need to perform regardless of its priorities, but its priorities may suggest emphasizing some functions over others.

A. The Broad Range of Functions Government Performs

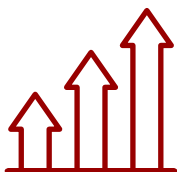
In the classic book *Bureaucracy*, Wilson argues that government agencies are most successful when they are organized around tasks.⁶⁵ There are a multitude of functions that are essential to the successful operation of an early childhood system, and that should be accounted for in a state's governance structure. Different states will have different ways of talking about and grouping these functions, and each state should develop its own list of functions it considers essential. Informants suggested numerous critical functions, which are presented here to give states a starting point for their own conversations:

Money Management



- **Distributing funds to pay for services.** One of the most basic functions of government is to distribute money to pay for designated services. The federal government and all state governments fund some providers directly, but also can fund local governmental structures that then distribute funds to providers.⁶⁶
- **Budgeting and fiscal management.** For every funding stream, there is a need to forecast how much money will be necessary given usage and demographic trends and to manage the budget over the course of a fiscal year.
- **Determining how to allocate resources.** With many funding streams, there are administrative choices to be made about how the resources can be used by recipients.

Setting Standards for and Maintaining and Improving Service Quality



- **Establishing and maintaining learning standards.** Every state has learning standards for children under the age of 5.⁶⁷ State governments have taken responsibility for establishing and maintaining those standards.⁶⁸
- **Defining program quality.** Every federal and state funding stream in ECEC comes with a legal structure that defines the quality of service expected for those dollars. While statutes generally provide a high-level framework for definitions of quality, state agencies then establish regulations and provide guidance to add precision to the definition.
- **Monitoring of program implementation.** Government funding agencies generally monitor how their investments are being spent. This can include monitoring for compliance with basic standards, as well as evaluations of quality.

- **Supporting improvement efforts.** Through technical assistance or other means, funding agencies often help their grantees work on improving quality once it is measured. In ECEC, quality rating and improvement systems are often the framework through which states conduct this work.⁶⁹ Improvement efforts should go beyond professional development for educators to include support for providers on business practices and program operation.⁷⁰
- **Developing and maintaining data systems.** Frequently, each individual funding stream within early childhood tracks its own data about programs. In addition to supporting those individual data systems, state and local governments sometimes attempt to develop cross-agency data systems that can provide a more holistic picture of service delivery.⁷¹ These have their own set of operational imperatives and need focused governance capacity.⁷²
- **Facilitating research and evaluation.** Ideally, states will have dedicated capacity focused on evaluating program implementation and research capacity to answer important questions that cannot be answered by data and analytics alone.

Supporting Professionals



- **Licensing professionals.** In many early childhood disciplines, there are state requirements to be licensed as a professional. States often play a critical role in setting expectations for qualifications and experience. There is a strong argument that the role of defining the qualifications of professionals should be played less by policymakers and more by the practitioners who make up the field.⁷³ But state government does play an important and complex role in defining those qualifications.
- **Supporting the education of future professionals.** States can provide support to higher education students training for numerous roles in early childhood, including teaching, whether those candidates are seeking degrees or certifications in public or private higher education settings.
- **Planning, delivering, and overseeing professional development.** Similarly, in early childhood there are frequently professional development requirements for professionals to retain their license.⁷⁴

Engaging and Supporting Families and Stakeholders



- **Determining program eligibility.** In non-universal programs — which in ECEC includes Head Start, child care, and many state preschool programs — there are specific eligibility criteria for participating families. Different programs have different protocols for establishing eligibility.
- **Supporting family and community engagement.** Service providers in numerous CED and ECEC programs are expected to engage families and the community in their work to support child development.⁷⁵ Policymakers should be engaging with families — directly or indirectly — to gain a richer understanding of what kinds of programs and services are needed before making decisions about which programs and services to fund.

- **Building local capacity.** In some communities there is a significant need for early childhood services but an inadequate local delivery system. States often play a role in supporting local delivery structures, including local collaboration among governments and providers.
- **Helping families to enroll in the services they need.** This can include systems that streamline the eligibility determination process or that provide supported referrals so that families can get the right mix of services regardless of which provider they seek out first.
- **Planning and stakeholder engagement.**⁷⁶ The maintenance of a complex system requires ongoing planning and the engagement of key stakeholders with an interest in the system. The stakeholder engagement function also includes a government affairs function, including working with legislators.

Communications and Public Relations



- **Informing about development.** Parents and the public at large can benefit from information about child development and best practices in parenting and caregiving. An information campaign about child development does not necessarily need to be tied to a specific government-funded service.
- **Informing about government-funded services.** Both intended beneficiaries and the public at large should be informed about what services the government is funding, how to take advantage of them, and what benefits they are designed to provide.

This list is drawn from informant interviews and existing literature. It is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather a jumping-off point for states.

Governance requires the assignment of authority for each of these functions.⁷⁷ While the functions listed above are generally expected to sit somewhere within the early childhood system, states will not treat them all as equally important, nor will they have the same approach to managing them. Each function should be accounted for in the governance structure, but the considerations about each of them will vary substantially.

B. Minimizing Administrative Burden in Executing Key Functions

In thinking about executing these functions, states should be sensitive to the idea of administrative burden. Each service comes with some administrative burden, and when families need to access multiple services from multiple providers the burden can quickly become substantial.⁷⁸ By definition the families accessing these services have a young child, and in many instances have limited resources; that may be the very definition of the people least able to deal with administrative burdens. Some of that burden comes from federal requirements, but many informants pointed out that states often double down on those burdens rather than ameliorate them. And those administrative burdens send a message about the lack of trust the state has in those on the receiving end.

In *Administrative Burdens* Herd and Moynihan argue that these burdens are a constructed choice,⁷⁹ so there are some key principles states should have in mind when constructing them:

- **Public programs should be simple, accessible, and respectful.**
- **Burdens should be minimized to the extent possible while protecting important values.**
- **Considerations of burden should be evidence-based.**
- **Burdens affect some groups more than others, so states should be attentive to the costs for those with limited resources.⁸⁰**

Herd and Moynihan explain that there are several different costs inherent in administrative burdens, all of which are present in the ECEC system:

- **The cost to families of figuring out what services they are eligible for and how they can apply.** Increasingly states and communities are attempting to address this cost through unified enrollment systems. The acknowledgment of this cost is a positive step, even if much more work is needed to actually relieve the burden on families.
- **The cost of actually complying with the rules.** Families bear this cost in limited-eligibility programs, with child care and Head Start two important examples. The federal government moved to limit this burden in the 2014 reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act when it limited the frequency of eligibility redeterminations.⁸¹ The cost of compliance also weighs heavily on ECEC providers, who are subjected to numerous program rules. Providers who offer services through multiple funding streams may bear the cost not only of dealing with each set of rules but with reconciling ambiguities among them.⁸²
- **Psychological costs.** There can be a stigma to applying for public benefits, which can reinforce negative perceptions of an applicant's status in a community.⁸³

These burdens are often greatest for the people who need services the most.⁸⁴ Some amount of administrative burden is inevitable in publicly-funded programs; when public funds are designated for specific uses, it is appropriate for the government to have measures to ensure that the funds are used correctly. But if policymakers are not sensitive to the difficulties families may have in navigating the system, they may unthinkingly create hurdles that prove to be insurmountable.⁸⁵

In implementing a governance system, states that want to maximize the impact of their resources on children and families should evaluate the administrative burdens built into the system. States can consider whether their system might be more efficient with those burdens reduced, thereby improving their execution of core functions while freeing up resources at the program and family levels. Indeed, more ambitious states might consider opportunities to go beyond burden elimination to create “channel factors” supporting easier enrollment in services⁸⁶ — which would likely lead to improved child and family outcomes.



EXAMPLES OF HOW TO EXECUTE TWO CRITICAL FUNCTIONS: DISTRIBUTION OF FUNDING AND MEASUREMENT OF QUALITY

An in-depth analysis of how states execute all of the functions listed in 3.A is beyond the scope of this report. To provide some additional context for states evaluating their governance structures, this sub-section provides some greater detail from informants and the literature about the performance of two core functions in ECEC: distribution of funding and measurement of quality. These are not the only functions that every state is performing, but they are two functions that are always central to supporting providers and families in an early childhood system.

1. Distribution of Funding

Even limiting the discussion to ECEC programs focused on 3- and 4-year-olds, the four largest funding streams serve different purposes with some overlap:

- State preschool is a state-funded program in which education is the primary focus and children engage in group learning multiple days of the week.⁸⁷
- The federal Child Care and Development Block Grant provides funding through states that subsidizes child care for eligible parents, with parents expected to make a co-payment based on their income.⁸⁸
- Children identified as eligible for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act are entitled to a free appropriate public education.⁸⁹
- Head Start is a federally funded, whole-child development program that supports early learning, health, and family well-being for children from low-income families. Funds are provided directly from the federal government to providers.⁹⁰ While states do not play a role in distributing Head Start funds, they must take account of Head Start in planning for the distribution of preschool and child care funds.

States use several different methodologies to distribute state preschool funds, including grants and the use of state education funding formulas.⁹¹ Each of these approaches represents a set of tradeoffs, and states may seek to revisit those tradeoffs in the course of a conversation about governance. Funding formulas have numerous advantages in some states as a strategy for expanding and protecting resources; they have historically been stable and reliable, and they can reinforce the idea that early education is part of the education system.⁹² But they sometimes struggle to incorporate non-school providers and infants and toddlers, and they can also have a hard time targeting communities or neighborhoods with the greatest need.⁹³

The distribution of funding raises important questions about the state-local dynamic. In many states, early childhood funding has come exclusively from the state without substantial local contribution. One negative to this approach is that it might allow communities and school districts to think of early childhood funding as something that isn't really their responsibility.⁹⁴ But demanding too much local funding can raise serious equity issues. K-12 education is more dependent on local funding than other major social goods; arguably, funding is more equitable if it comes primarily from the state.⁹⁵ State funding does not have to eliminate local control if the state takes a thoughtful approach to structuring how communities can use the money.⁹⁶



One of the overarching questions states wrestle with in establishing their finance systems is: Who is responsible for navigating among ECEC programs with overlapping and/or conflicting mandates? Too often, that navigation must be conducted by low-income families themselves. In some instances, there have been meaningful efforts to package funding together at the program level⁹⁷ and the community level, but the further upstream the coordination can occur the easier it is for all of the downstream actors. This places a high value on states thinking holistically about their ECEC funding and redesigning funding streams to make it easier for communities and programs to deliver quality services.

Historically, the ECEC field has talked about coordinated financing through the lens of “blending and braiding,” which is meant to allow for the interconnected use of different funding streams — particularly state preschool and child care.⁹⁸ States may want to consider more radically different approaches to unifying the experience of communities and providers. The nature of the state’s approach should take account of what capacities the state believes are needed at both the state and local levels. In addition, the state’s

financing approach has significant implications for how the state structures oversight among agencies, an issue addressed more deeply under Question 5.

Blending and braiding reflects an almost complete reversal of polarity from the highest-leverage uses of federal and state funds. To date, blending and braiding has largely been talked about as a workaround for the fact that federal and state funds are distributed in an incoherent manner and need to be woven into coherence at the local level. Some amount of blending and braiding may always be needed to meet the diverse needs of children and families, but a focus on blending and braiding is in effect an acknowledgment that the state is not fully leveraging its spending to achieve its desired outcomes. States can correct for this system failure by better coordinating the funding being distributed to communities and programs, reducing the capacity burden on those recipients.

2. Defining and Measuring Quality

One primary method of defining and measuring quality in ECEC is state quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS), something almost every state now has.⁹⁹ These systems, which use a variety of inputs to measure quality, are intended to support continuous quality improvement.¹⁰⁰ Part of what makes quality ratings an interesting governance challenge is that in many states informants related that there is no universally-agreed upon definition of quality; when that is the case, it is hard to have a coherent system for rating and improving quality.

Indeed, some informants acknowledged that in their states there may be at least five different groups with different visions of quality: (1) what families want from their ECEC provider; (2) what ECEC providers think they ought to deliver; (3) what researchers think are the critical elements of ECEC quality; (4) what policy leaders think of as quality; and (5) what the state-level staff administering the QRIS think of as quality. Of course, none of these groups is monolithic — there may be wide variation within and across these groups. But some informants said that in their state the tensions among these groups had not been fully resolved, so the state is operating without any real agreement about what quality ECEC is supposed to entail.

Even without that consensus a QRIS is often one of the most important ECEC functions of state government, and in many states the QRIS currently affects programs funded by multiple agencies. The impact of a QRIS in a governance structure can vary substantially, regardless of the alignment of state agencies overseeing programs. One critical inflection point is whether QRIS is required or just optional; some states believe that if providers are taking public money, they should be required to participate, but in many states QRIS is voluntary.¹⁰¹

Whether or not the state has a mandatory QRIS, it makes a difference to have a coherent quality driver and clear local accountability for meeting quality requirements; that can be a critical part of the state's leverage strategy for influencing communities and providers. But multiple informants agreed that in their states the QRIS is not currently strong enough to drive coherence among funding streams.

Some informants noted that while coherence among programs is sometimes one of the stated aims of the QRIS's design, the actual designs and implementation of the QRIS frequently have not led to a more unified approach to service. Moreover, a well-designed QRIS would also hold the state accountable for its role in ensuring that programs have the capacity needed to be successful.¹⁰²

The capacity needed to implement a QRIS is often shaped by the rating criteria. In some states a program's rating is essentially set on the day it opens, because the rating is based on a set of program design characteristics that are easily measured at a single point in time. In other states, ratings are weighted more toward measuring the quality of adult-child interactions, which requires much more intensive measurement over a longer period. That measurement requires the oversight agency to have greater capacity, but it is also more likely to impact provider behavior on an ongoing basis.¹⁰³ Louisiana is one example of a state that has chosen to restructure its QRIS specifically to maximize leverage on providers to maintain quality throughout the rating year, with a strong focus on the quality of adult-child interactions.¹⁰⁴

In addition to the QRIS, multiple informants pointed to licensing as an important and underutilized point of leverage for states. While many states treat licensing as a basic compliance function, some have tried to use it as a major driver of behavior — including with Head Start programs. Informants also pointed out that even where the QRIS is mandatory it is not necessarily the only state lever for addressing quality, as there will frequently be other program requirements in statute or regulations.

There are some difficult balances in the work of defining and measuring quality.¹⁰⁵ On one hand, experience has shown that if states do not take a strong hand in dictating quality requirements, the experiences of children and families can be diminished. States also have an essential role in building the capacity of communities and providers to be successful in a QRIS.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, if states are too dogmatic regarding early childhood programming then communities can feel like the state is imposing its will on them rather than feeling empowered. Some states are engaging in a constant push and pull with providers, where the providers continually resist quality improvements and the state keeps attempting to impose improvement from above. Other states are trying to change the paradigm and engage providers to help them understand the benefits of quality and make them a more integral part of the process.

In the long run, it is important to maintain quality and for communities to feel ownership over the work. Managing this dynamic requires state-level capacity and leadership, as well as ongoing communication with local leaders.



QUESTION 4

How should different levels of government work together to execute the critical functions?

As states work to develop improved governance structures, they should start with identifying anchor priorities and key system functions. They should then figure out how to allocate responsibility for those key functions at the state and local levels.

While this narrative talks about the “state level” and the “local level,” states may have multiple levels of service delivery — including regional subsystems. In considering this question states should be mindful of the fact that state and local represent two points on a spectrum, and other points on that spectrum are available.

A. Comparative Advantage

In evaluating state and local roles in exercising authority over the early childhood system, state analyses will likely start with existing structures at the state and local levels. But rather than focus on those structures states would do well to think about state and local cultures and capacities, and what changes in them are realistic given the functions the system needs performed. Existing state and local structures may change in the process, but cultures tend to be more enduring. Capacities, meanwhile, need to be built, as discussed under Question 3.

The fact that states have shown leadership does not mean they should do all of the work themselves, and the growing role of local capacity does not relieve states of their leadership obligations. In many ways growing local capacity only increases the importance of the state role and puts pressure on states to redefine that role. It will be important for state and local leaders to have open and honest conversations about what capacities should live at each level, recognizing that the proper state-local balance will vary among issues.

The issue here, then, is *comparative advantage*¹⁰⁷— what roles should be placed at the state level because states are more likely than others to be successful at those roles? Ideally, states will methodically consider each of the functions described in 3.A and make a set of individual and collective decisions about what role state and local capacity should play in executing each of those functions.

This narrative provides an overview of the importance of state leadership and local capacity, with attention to some priority functions at each level. It also provides guidance on how to approach the ongoing balance between state and local authority.

The following are some considerations for states as they think about the state and local roles in executing each of the functions described in 3.A, as well as any other functions the state has identified as critical:

- Functions that benefit from the ongoing direct input of parents and families may sit better at the local level, where it is easier to get that kind of feedback.
- Even if functions addressing direct interactions with service providers and families are increasingly pushed toward the local level, there are oversight and backbone functions that logically live at the state level.

- Some informants noted that some communities started building their own capacity because they had given up hope on the state building that capacity in a timely manner. A conversation about governance should be an opportunity to revisit those decisions and see if capacity-building at the state level could alleviate local burdens. If communities across the state are building similar or identical capacity, there may be an economy of scale to having the state step up and take a role. Additionally, the buildup of local capacity can raise potential equity issues, because it most likely occurs in communities with higher resource levels.

One role where states have a comparative advantage is in supporting equity on a statewide basis. Increasingly equity has been a focus in ECEC and CED.¹⁰⁸ But pushing roles to a community level can exacerbate inequities if low-capacity communities are left to their own devices — or, even worse, expected to emulate high-capacity communities that have stronger philanthropic and business involvement. Indeed, the success of those high-capacity communities has in some cases distracted from the fact that low-capacity communities are being abandoned by the state. High-capacity communities may want the state to leave them alone, but that does not mean all communities should be left alone. While communities have their own role to play in supporting equity, the state’s commitment is essential.

B. The Need for Local Capacity

A major theme of the informant interviews was the growing importance of local capacity to support early childhood.¹⁰⁹ Importantly, this local capacity comes in many different forms. Typically there are local structures that bring together multiple stakeholders, referred to here as “local collaboratives.” Some of those collaboratives are vested with significant decision-making authority, but others are not. Figuring out what authorities should be entrusted to local collaboratives is one of the most important decisions of any state-level process of governance change.

Many states have made the reasonable calculation that active engagement with providers and families is something best done locally, rather than by a central administration.¹¹⁰ But just because decisions are logically made at the local level does not mean that local decision-makers are well-positioned to make those decisions successfully. States play an essential role in establishing and supporting local decision-making structures, and effective governance requires them to take that responsibility seriously. There are several definable elements of this work.

1. Authorization and Establishment by the State of Local Decision-Making Structures

For community collaborations to succeed, they need to have a clearly defined role in the system. In many states, the role of collaboratives is a subject of state law or regulation. States can use their legal authority to define a role for collaboratives in distributing funds and holding programs accountable for quality. In some instances collaboratives thrive even without an officially defined state role, but in a well-designed governance structure the official role of collaboratives should be a conscious choice. That role could be designed by the state or left entirely to the locals themselves, but states should be thoughtful about which approach is most likely to succeed in their context.¹¹¹

Informants identified some valuable lessons states have learned from wrestling with that decision. One is that there are real differences between collaborations that are established to be advisory and those that have specific programmatic responsibilities. In some instances, collaboratives were set up without specific duties but eventually took some on or had duties imposed on them; this can be extremely disruptive if not managed effectively. Sometimes collaborations have the unrealistic expectation of being “neutral,” a perception that is exploded when these bodies start actually making decisions and distributing funds — at which point participants who do not like those decisions might stop participating altogether.

The lesson here is that if the state is establishing local decision-making bodies, it needs to provide communities with clarity about their authority — and the resources and support to exercise that authority. The state can set defined charges for collaborations to help focus their activities, including defining common outcomes and using data to measure progress toward those outcomes.¹¹² States have also supported leadership development for local collaborations,¹¹³ which can help them navigate shifting dynamics.

States can also help define roles within local collaborations. Informants reported that local roles are often incoherent, and that states have in some cases performed a valuable service by helping to define them. This can involve defining a single lead entity that the state will hold accountable for the collaboration's performance, which has been a priority in some states.

While role definition will vary to some degree across states, some common themes relating to ECEC institutional actors can be found across the country:

- **School Districts.** In some states, school districts are seen as the logical hub of early child collaboration. For example, Louisiana's early childhood improvement strategy has been heavily focused on local collaboration, with school districts in the lead. But in other states, informants talked about the challenges of getting school districts involved. Informants did note that districts are not monolithic, and that even when superintendents are uninterested early childhood coordinators can be an important point of entry. Informants said that understanding the intra-school district dynamics can be key to the success of state-level initiatives that depend on school district capacity.

But some informants cautioned that the involvement of schools in local collaborations has not always been successful. In some instances districts have used their capacity advantage to consolidate power and funding in a manner that freezes out community providers. School districts have also proven at times to be less focused on infants and toddlers. Some informants said that school districts sometimes see themselves as accountable only to the state education agency (SEA), in which case the SEA may be needed to assist in facilitating local collaboration and shared community-level accountability.

- **Head Start.** Head Start programs are required by law to collaborate with other providers in their community, but they are ultimately accountable to the federal government, not to state or local leaders. This has led to a wide variation in how effectively local collaborations have integrated Head Start. Informants emphasized that Head Start programs can and should be bedrock participants of any local collaborative, and they often are. When they aren't, the reasons are many and varied — and often disputed within the community, which is frequently part of the problem. States cannot solve this problem on their own, but to the extent they are regulating and supporting local collaboratives they can take account of this issue and try to establish best practices.¹¹⁴

- **Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs).** CCR&Rs play a valuable role in helping connect families to services, which is typically a key priority for local collaborations. Moreover, they can serve as an important bridge between the ECEC and CED worlds. But informants noted that in too many states and communities, the role of the CCR&Rs is not well defined.

Collaboration is hard and often done poorly.¹¹⁵ Collaboration does not work if each participant feels like they are helping others at the expense of their own mission; it works when participants feel like others are helping them with work they were committed to anyway. States can help local collaborations succeed by clearly defining their authorities, creating a framework for their success, and being sensitive to the ongoing tension between state and local roles.¹¹⁶ As Cobb and Ponder describe in *The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems Through State/Local Initiatives*, there are multiple approaches that can work,¹¹⁷ but states need to be really committed to making them work — and that requires capacity.¹¹⁸

2. Providing Capacity to Local Structures

Too often states set up local collaborations as an unfunded mandate, and they break down accordingly. While there is value in states seeking to leverage local capacity, assuming the existence of local capacity is frequently an unsuccessful strategy. Local collaborations without capacity will not solve fragmentation problems or be effective decision-makers.

States need to think holistically about local capacity and how they can support it. Indeed, the collaborations that have worked are those that have a specific strategy for dedicated capacity, like North Carolina's Smart Start.¹¹⁹ This is an area where the state's role in protecting equity becomes critical, as there are some communities where the early childhood need overwhelms available resources. The state can serve as a backstop for these communities and provide funds to support the capacity needed for effective local decision-making.

Importantly, the state's role has to go beyond simply establishing collaboratives in the first place. Once collaborations are established they will have ongoing needs for continued learning, and the state can facilitate that both by supporting professional development and by creating a community of practice. Community collaborations can learn a lot from each other — but the state can take on a valuable central role in distilling lessons from across the state, helping to communicate those lessons, and then supporting implementation in communities that choose to adapt their practices.

Other capacities that informants identified as important were the ability to cultivate new providers, engage families, and support equity:

- Some informants noted that local structures can end up being dominated by the providers who have the most influence at the time the structure is formed. States need to ensure that local collaboratives foster new providers and make room for them to grow. Multiple informants discussed the role of school districts in local collaboratives, which varies substantially across states.
- Informants indicated that local collaboratives should be held accountable by the state to include families in their deliberative processes and to authentically include their voices. A strong communication loop between collaboratives and families is essential to take advantage of the community's comparative advantages.
- Relatedly, some informants urged that local collaboratives be expected to reflect the diversity of their community.
- While states play an essential role in ensuring statewide equity, local collaboratives should be held responsible for supporting equity as well. This can include ensuring that the children with the greatest needs are prioritized for enrollment and services.

If communities do not adapt their practices on an ongoing basis, states can play a useful role in pushing them to do so. Informants pointed to some communities where a collaboration was established to be an agent of change but then morphed over time into just one more part of a calcified bureaucracy. States can help keep the pressure on collaboratives to evolve with the changing needs of their communities.



3. Supporting Local Innovation

One potential benefit of utilizing local collaborative structures is their ability to “lead from the middle.”¹²⁰ Accordingly, some informants emphasized the importance of states creating a culture of innovation rather than compliance. This is not simply about reducing administrative burden but about acknowledging that different communities will make different choices, and that can be a good thing. States can reinforce that culture by highlighting places where communities have chosen different approaches and both have succeeded, helping to set a frame for other communities that may not be as far along in their work.

This approach requires a skill set that can be quite different than what is expected of many current state leaders and staff. State officials who have been responsible for compliance and oversight may or may not be capable of playing a role facilitating innovation, but the safest assumption is that without support and training they will not transition their roles successfully. If a state is trying to create a mindset of local innovation, it will need to make sure its representatives are well prepared to reinforce that mindset at every opportunity.

One important form of state support for local innovation is pilot programs, and informants noted that states need to be thoughtful about their role in these pilots. Piloting strategies can be effective in expanding services; they can place a focus on strong and innovative local partners, use the lessons from that work to expand capacity throughout the state, and create a community of practice for local leaders. But pilots can also be an excuse for state leaders to avoid spending more money on the system as a whole, or on the communities of greatest need in particular. Part of a state’s focus on equity should be to ensure that pilots actually inform systemic change to benefit all communities, and do not end up funneling more money to the communities that were already doing the best work.

States will only support local innovation if they express an enduring commitment to providing services. As important as ECEC and CED are to long-term child outcomes, they are “optional” in the sense that states aren’t required to provide services and families aren’t required to sign up for them.¹²¹ States need to reinforce the idea that if communities attempt models of service delivery that end up not working, that just means that the particular service delivery model does not work in that community — it does not mean that it could never work, or even that ECEC and CED services are no longer worthy of funding at all (which will be a real concern in some communities). Part of why the ECEC field holds on to quasi-successful structures is the very real fear that they will be replaced not with something better but with nothing at all. If a state takes affirmative steps to break that mindset, it increases the chances that it will get real innovation from the communities that depend on it.



C. Establishing a Healthy State-Local Dynamic

The tension between state- and local-level decision-making will never be eliminated, only managed more or less effectively. There is a historic tendency for technocrats to blame frontline professionals for the failure of reforms, whereas practitioners are historically skeptical of policy actions.¹²² Ultimately state leaders need to accept that there are limits on how much they can accomplish through top-down regulation.¹²³ This report’s focus on the state role in capacity-building at the local level is an acknowledgment that states are often better off not attempting to make decisions themselves, but rather empowering better-positioned communities to make them. Indeed, some informants expressed a belief that quality supports may sometimes be more effective if delivered at the local level.¹²⁴

Governance at the federal and state levels is often about creating the right incentives for downstream actors.¹²⁵ The strongest incentives often come from how the state distributes money, how it oversees quality, and how it shapes communication and collaboration in the field. In using these powerful incentives, states need to empower communities but must also be responsible for guardrails — particularly around goals, measures, and accountability. Communities can then be responsible for determining the strategies and activities that will produce the desired results. The state is a “choice architect” for communities, providers, and families,¹²⁶ and needs to be thoughtful about how it is really impacting the way each of those actors is making decisions on an ongoing basis.

In many ways ECEC has very different state-local dynamics than K-12 education, but some analyses of the state-local dynamic in K-12 ring true for ECEC as well. In *The Allure of Order*, Mehta argues that education as a profession has been subject to a struggle for control between state-level policy actors and practitioners in the field, with state policymakers ultimately winning. For that reason, he argues, education has not crystallized as a profession but instead has become a hierarchical bureaucracy;¹²⁷ while frontline workers are skilled, they are not truly empowered.¹²⁸ Therefore, policymakers and frontline workers can end up supporting different policy goals based on their institutional vantage points.¹²⁹

As states re-evaluate the role that local structures can play in exercising authority as part of an early childhood governance system, they need to allow communities to truly take ownership of their work. Distrust between state and local actors can run both ways and be based on a variety of factors, including the different contexts surrounding state and local actors — and the distrust embedded in hierarchies.¹³⁰ This can be particularly true in communities that have experienced a lot of disruption, but states can build trust in those communities by honoring local expertise.¹³¹ State leaders can spend time listening and learning in communities to help break down some of those contextual and hierarchical barriers, and states may need to identify the capacity to do that listening and learning as essential to the design of the system.

States also need to be cognizant of the fact that communities are not always best positioned to undertake certain initiatives. Informants noted that in some cases, communities will fight to keep their authority even if it might be better positioned at the state level; this can include efforts to standardize definitions of quality. Informants thought that communities sometimes see state capacity-building as a threat, even when it would likely be helpful to communities.

Mutual respect is an indispensable ingredient in the long-term preservation of a healthy state-local balance. Communities have a hard-earned and appropriate skepticism about the ability of centralized governments to make good decisions about issues whose resolution requires local expertise.¹³² But in a fragmented and under-resourced field certain roles essentially have to be played at the state level in order for certain functions to be performed successfully. Many states are in the early stages of wrestling with this issue and must engage stakeholders with widely varying perspectives on the right roles for each institutional actor. Multiple informants expressed a view that while communities may resist state mandates, they are often grateful to states that play a convening role to bring together teams of leaders from communities — both to create space for those leaders to work with each other and to partner with similar leaders in other communities.¹³³

This process isn't easy, but the goal is not to achieve a state of perfect bliss that endures for all eternity — the goal is to establish a workable equilibrium that has room to evolve over time. Honest discussion about core system functions — and institutional advantages in the roles needed to execute those functions — can help to establish that equilibrium and then support its evolution.



QUESTION 5

What personnel capacities does the state need to succeed at its priority functions?

Question 3 identified some of the highest-priority functions for an early childhood governance system, and Question 5 addresses the capacities needed to succeed at those functions. Informants expressed their belief that to date, some of the most important functions have not been well executed at the state level, including:

- Distributing funds to providers efficiently;
- Using data to present a coherent narrative (and collecting the data to feed that narrative);
- Seeking and utilizing stakeholder feedback authentically;
- Communicating messages in a form that audiences — including families, providers, legislators, and others — can understand; and
- Providing training and technical assistance that actually helps providers improve.

Informants noted that when state agencies are weak at these core functions, it erodes confidence in the agency both within state government and in the field — which can create a vicious cycle where agencies cannot get more capacity and the field cannot get its needs met.¹³⁴ Regardless of what roles are assigned to the state level and how the state is performing in those roles, states need to be thoughtful about the personnel capacities needed to execute all of the functions they identify as important.

The system functions described in 3.A only go well if there is adequate capacity to execute them — and that requires having competent people (and enough people) at multiple levels of the system. In the most effective systems all of those functions will benefit from the thoughtful work of a range of actors at the state level — including the governor, the governor’s staff, state agency heads, state agency senior leaders, state agency division managers, state agency line staff, legislators, legislative staff, and advocates (which can include both statewide and local leaders who work on state-level policy). Each of those actors has a critical role to play in the state’s early childhood governance, and ultimately the chain will only be as strong as its weakest link.

As noted in Question 4, state government is only one part of the larger early childhood governance system. For it to be successful in playing its assigned role in core functions, it will need to have adequate capacity. This question looks at the capacities needed to be successful at multiple levels within state government, including political leaders, managers, and line staff. In assessing these capacities, it is important to be realistic about what is possible; no state has ever had a “fully staffed” early childhood system, and no state is likely to in the immediate future. One informant pointed out that the field may not have a good understanding of the capacities that are really necessary.¹³⁵ Moreover, the research on the value of state agency capacity in the early childhood system is extremely limited. In evaluating their capacity states will need to focus on their top priorities and determine what capacity is absolutely essential given their focus.

In evaluating the capacity of state government it is important to distinguish between leadership and management:

Leadership: “Leadership attends to conditions for adapting to changing circumstances, recognizing opportunities for setting new direction, and navigating toward a different future. Involving a complex interplay of individual characteristics, context, specifics of a leadership issue, and key leadership behaviors, leadership frequently entails risk taking and mobilizing others to come together to realize a shared, often co-created vision.”¹³⁶

Management: “Typically, management is defined as overseeing processes that keep a complicated system of people and technology running smoothly. This involves knowledge and skills related to planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, and project management.”¹³⁷

Leadership is an attribute that can be demonstrated by individuals in any role — even if those roles do not have managerial authority.

To be successful, the system requires leaders who are “Analysts and architects of effective organizational environments that support and promote the field’s agenda; Catalysts for change and growth; Motivators who inspire those contributing to organizational goals; and Advocates and negotiators.”¹³⁸ In some states, new leadership and management structures have been put in place to support strategic decision-making and improved program implementation.¹³⁹

A. Political Leadership

Every state government has a set of key officials who are directly elected or inextricably tied to elected leaders. This includes the governor and the governor’s staff; legislators; agency heads; and the staff who surround agency heads, including top deputies with responsibilities that cut across multiple divisions.

The role of governors in early childhood governance is critical. Because governors are seen as the key drivers of state agendas, informants broadly agreed that lack of gubernatorial leadership is a problem no structure can fully overcome. The unique bully pulpit that elected officials hold gives them an opportunity to influence public opinion in a way that nobody else can. If the governor or agency heads do not articulate a vision for the state’s system, it is likely that nobody else will; if somebody else develops a vision, it is not likely to accomplish much unless the governor adopts it. To be sure, there are states that have made meaningful improvements and/or successfully executed important reforms despite an absence of gubernatorial leadership — but many informants acknowledged that an indifferent governor lowers the ceiling on what is possible for a state to accomplish.

Of course, a governor’s leadership alone is not enough to sustain a successful early childhood governance system. Governors have many responsibilities, and even the most committed ones can spend only a limited fraction of their time and political capital on early childhood. Without adequate staff capacity to follow up, the governor’s leadership may be limited to articulating an agenda and building public will; staff are needed to actually advance initiatives over time. On the governor’s staff this will likely include the early childhood lead (if there is one) and point people on education, health, human services, budget, legislative affairs, and the counsel’s office. All of these people play active roles in supporting the governor’s substantive agenda and in an early childhood governance system.

Similarly, at the agency level it is essential to engage key staff surrounding the agency head. This staffing capacity must also take account of the fact that governors and agency heads are routinely dealing with emergencies and “fire drills” that can take up a lot of capacity. Any accounting of capacity at this level must anticipate a meaningful percentage of staff time being spent on issues that arise over time and limit the ability to advance an affirmative agenda.

The capacity of legislators is also critical. Legislators are generalists; they may not be steeped in the details of the complex ECEC and CED systems, but they are responsive to constituent engagement at the community level. Informants articulated the value of engaging with legislators about early childhood systems — but noted that engagement is sometimes difficult for outside advocates, the executive branch, and the programs in their legislative districts.¹⁴⁰

Institutionally, a critical role of high-level leaders in both the executive and legislative branches is to look across programs and agencies and think about interconnections within the system. The division managers who run individual programs are likely to have neither the bandwidth nor the line of sight to drive conversations about how the pieces of an ECEC or CED system fit together within or across agencies. Moreover, only higher-level officials in the executive branch have the authority to make collaboration happen even when components of the system are reticent to participate.

There is an ever-present tension between high-level officials and civil service managers. Agency heads are typically political, and while their mandates may vary they are very rarely judged primarily on how effectively they manage their bureaucracy.¹⁴¹ But while agency heads come and go, the staff running programs within agencies can remain on the job through multiple administrations. Some informants emphasized the importance of having high-level officials who are skilled at working with career staff and supporting them effectively. Informants discussed the difficult balance these leaders face: If they do not push an affirmative agenda with the permanent staff then the system may settle into stasis, but if they are too aggressive or disrespectful of the career staff then their efforts to change the system will likely be ineffective.



This tension ends up putting a lot of pressure on the layer of state agencies that often sits between agency heads and division managers: the senior officials who have oversight of early childhood divisions but also other parts of the agencies. These staff — who often have titles like deputy or assistant commissioner — are often very important decision-makers, but frequently they do not have a strong grasp of issues in the early childhood field. Some informants noted that this can create tension because the leaders of early childhood divisions are reporting to bosses who do not really understand their work. In contrast, other informants noted that savvy early childhood division leaders are often able to take advantage of bosses who lack knowledge of early childhood — and are instead more focused on other issues — by carving out quite a bit of latitude. Some informants did note that if early childhood division leaders are able to create independent space for themselves in one agency setting, it may be hard for them to adjust if their division is moved to a new agency with closer oversight.

Moreover, the staff who sit between agency heads and division managers often report to bosses who are focused on visionary and entrepreneurial thinking, but are themselves responsible for managing staff who are more focused on the nuts and bolts of administrative processes. These senior officials are, therefore, often responsible for harmonizing these two different ways of thinking, which informants noted can be challenging work. Both systems thinking and domain expertise are necessary to properly administer the system. As one informant put it, if a state is counting on domain experts to fill systems-thinking roles, it is unlikely to be successful.

B. Managerial Leadership

As described above, leadership and management are two different things.¹⁴² Managerial capacity is critical regardless of how strong a state's leadership is, and there are some states where many of the most important decisions about the functions of the ECEC and CED systems are being made by managerial-level agency staff.¹⁴³



In many states, informants saw a disconnect between managers and the policy process. In some states without a lead early childhood agency, division managers are effectively the highest ranking staff solely focused on early childhood, so their roles take on an outsized importance. But even in these instances those managers are sometimes not well connected to political processes. That disconnect can arise for various reasons — including agency policies, a lack of interest or skill on the part of the division manager, or other reasons. But the end result is that division managers are often expected to execute political priorities without having clear lines of communication with the people who

set those priorities, leading to disconnects in implementation. Relatedly, political leaders often underestimate how difficult it will be to implement their priorities — leading them to set unrealistic expectations for managers, which can make those managers feel powerless.¹⁴⁴

Informants observed that often very little attention is paid to developing managers' capacity and expertise within the field. Jobs managing early childhood programs typically require strong administrative skills. As noted above, division managers are often in the difficult position of being domain experts who report to systems thinkers. Tensions and lack of understanding between those different forms of expertise can be challenging to manage on an ongoing basis. Division managers may feel underappreciated by their bosses, who may consistently undervalue the importance of administrative competence; their bosses may accuse them of not seeing the bigger picture, even when their daily responsibilities give them only a narrow view of that bigger picture. In that situation it can be easy for risk aversion to take hold, with discretionary authority pushed upward — away from the agency's expertise in core functions.¹⁴⁵

Indeed, informants stated that division managers often play a critical role as a connection point between the ECEC field and the political leaders they report to. Frontline staff may have a lot of expertise in the needs of the field that must be translated to senior decision-makers; senior decision-makers may hold a vision for the field that needs to be regularly communicated to frontline staff. To be successful managers must be effective in facilitating that ongoing exchange.

Another important role for managers is in supporting interagency initiatives. Multiple informants noted the potential benefits of having structures established to facilitate collaboration among managers to ensure successful implementation of cross-cutting efforts. But informants also acknowledged that early childhood division managers often do not have the bandwidth to collaborate. The ability to collaborate is frequently not part of their job description, which means it is not a skill they were hired for. Even when it is part of their job description, it is not necessarily prioritized. Moreover, if nobody above the early childhood division manager is ensuring that collaboration happens, it may not.

Informants noted that some division managers sit in state capitals and wait for the field to come to them, whereas others are out in communities and more actively engaged. The proper orientation of these roles is important for states to consider in ensuring that they have adequate capacity to perform them.

From 2013 to 2019, the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO) at the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) implemented a State Early Education Leadership Academy, which provided national experts, coaching, and a peer learning community to more than 20 state early childhood administrators from 15 states. The academy was designed to help state leaders develop their systems thinking and communication and collaboration skills.¹⁴⁶ Participants reported that the experience improved their leadership skills and improved their ability to develop and implement policy.¹⁴⁷ Managers are not always empowered to be change agents or trained in the skills to engage in that kind of work, but the academy was meant to help provide some of that capacity to participating state leaders.

C. Staff Capacity

Staff capacity at state agencies is essential to performing the system's functions, but states often do not have enough people to do the work.¹⁴⁸ Many legislatures are resistant to funding state agency capacity, and governors often do not want to spend political capital on expanding the bureaucracy. It can be very challenging to advocate for state-level staff positions even when they are sorely needed. When high-level leaders focus on "efficiency" they often think about eliminating state-level positions — even if those positions actually help ensure that federal, state, and local funding is spent efficiently.

One challenge is how state agency staff are funded. In some states many early childhood staff are on grant lines, meaning that when grants shift or expire their positions are not funded or are eliminated. Many early childhood staff are supported by federal funding, including child care and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Multiple informants emphasized the importance of durable and consistent state funding for early childhood staff.

Even when there is funding for early childhood positions, it can be a challenge to define those roles well and fill them successfully. Getting good people in the right roles requires strong organizational design and good job descriptions — but state agencies are often very weak at organizational design, and job descriptions are often controlled by a centralized human resources agency that does not fully understand early childhood's issues and context. In some states union and personnel rules substantially impact who ends up filling state agency jobs, and informants noted instances where early childhood expertise — or even relevant skills — were not the driving factors in agency hiring. This puts pressure on managers to improve job descriptions when possible and find opportunities to help staff build their skills, but funding for that kind of professional development is often limited.

The following are structural challenges to getting the staff capacity needed, and there are cultural challenges as well:

- Many state government jobs require an understanding of the state's role and leverage. But state agency jobs are often filled with people who come from a program provider background, and who may be expert in the program but not understand the role of state administrator. While in some cases adequate supports might help them learn the new role, some informants pointed out that those supports are not always available — and even with those supports in place, sometimes staff turn out to be ill-suited for a state-level role.
- There are also instances where high-level officials make policy changes that demand an evolution in staff roles, but the staff hired for one role are not capable of evolving into a new one. But agency work rules may make it difficult to replace those staff, and state agency cultures often weigh against making wholesale personnel changes at the line staff level.
- State agency pay scales are often low, which makes it hard to attract top talent.
- When state government jobs are seen as unappealing burnout jobs, it is hard to attract and retain talent. People who leave state government often go into the private sector, which can breed resentment with their former colleagues. This can lead to a shrinking support network for the staff remaining in state government.

Many informants emphasized that when state government employees are unsuccessful that it is often a product of bad system design, not any personal failure on the part of the employees. But informants categorically agreed that state agencies have not been positioned for success through adequate capacity to execute their expected role. In too many instances, states do not have enough staff to get the job done, and the staff they have are not adequately trained or supported to do their jobs effectively.



D. Other Forms of Capacity

One approach some states use to add capacity is contracting out certain roles. Some informants pointed to hiring contractors as a successful strategy for bringing in expertise that state government would not be able to cultivate on its own. But one challenge of this approach is that it requires contract management skills, which state staff might not have. In part for that reason some informants noted that contractors can raise challenges in ensuring consistency of messaging and service delivery; some informants talked about contracting creating a power base separate from the agency, one that is not always easy to rein in.

Some states have created additional capacity by developing public-private partnerships that increase the state's overall capacity, and increase the odds of getting the right people into the right roles.¹⁴⁹ These partnerships have been effective in a number of states but typically require sustained commitments from both the state and philanthropic partners to be successful. The biggest potential tension is that the public-private partnership and the state agency will have different visions for the work,¹⁵⁰ which can create confusion for everyone. But while informants recognized these potential complications, sometimes the tradeoff is worth it because the outside support allows states to accomplish things they simply could not otherwise.

Public-private partnerships can perform a wide range of different roles. For example, Nebraska's Sixpence Early Learning Fund brings together leaders from inside and outside state government to oversee a grant process that supports family engagement and home-based services, center-based early care and education, and partnerships between child care and schools.¹⁵¹ In 2010 Pennsylvania created an Early Learning Investment Council that engages business leaders in supporting public funds for early childhood.¹⁵² In Kansas, public-private partnerships have focused on building community- and program-level capacity.¹⁵³ These are just three of the different kinds of initiatives that states can consider in partnering with their philanthropic communities.

E. Confronting the System's Capacity Challenges

One challenge all agencies confront is the limitations of the early childhood system. In every state, early childhood programs face serious funding and quality obstacles, and program leaders struggle to collaborate with each other given limited capacity. This longstanding problem has in many states been dramatically exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Agency leaders facing internal and external pressures can find it difficult to tell the truth about their challenges, which then makes it hard to surface and address them. It is easy for reports like this one to argue that honest communication is absolutely essential to the successful functioning of the system — but it takes real courage for a state agency leader, manager, or frontline staffer to speak hard truths, particularly when it will make their job more difficult (or even cause them to lose it). Indeed, in some political cultures there is a legitimate concern that certain policymakers would vote to cut back or eliminate early childhood services if they knew some of the hard truths about the state's programs.¹⁵⁴

This problem is by no means unique to early childhood, but it is a real problem in the early childhood field. Overcoming it requires strong leaders willing to create safe spaces for the truth, and confidence and capacity from managers and staff to deliver that truth. A review of state governance processes is an opportunity to consider how much truth-telling really occurs in the early childhood system, and whether a governance change is likely to create more or less of it.

Capacity is essential to successful governance. While this narrative has detailed some of the challenges states face, many informants told stories of state government leaders being thoughtful about utilizing available capacity to address the state's priority functions. The process of considering governance can provide the opportunity for states to take new initiative in identifying those roles and capacities and creating a better match. States can define new roles, identify the skills needed for those roles, and then attempt to get the right people into those roles; if there are constraints on those processes, a conversation about governance is a good time to identify and potentially change them. It is also an opportunity to consider what capacities might best be addressed through contracting or public-private partnerships, and to ensure that those capacities are established with clear lines of authority that do not create confusion in the field.

F. The Capacity to Move Into the Future

Whatever kind of system states have set up, they are largely executing that system through an antiquated model of service delivery without the analytic tools to consistently refine and improve performance. A conversation about governance should at least contemplate the possibility that instead of building a better version of the old system, a state might build a system that operates in a completely new way.

In an increasing number of fields, enterprises are aggressively using data and analytics to improve performance.¹⁵⁵ This is not merely about creating a culture of data use, it is about ruthlessly seeking out inefficiencies in the way the field operates and changing behaviors based on what the data identifies.¹⁵⁶ Currently, the field has nothing resembling the data systems needed to actually implement such a strategy,¹⁵⁷ let alone the human capacity. There have been calls to develop this kind of capacity,¹⁵⁸ but they have largely gone unanswered. A conversation about governance is an opportunity for states to identify what kind of management they really want to provide.

This is not to argue that governments should be run exactly like a business. Far from it — governments seek different outcomes than businesses and are accountable to a broader range of constituencies. Moreover, a reliance on data in and of itself does not solve any problems; what matters is the analytic capacity to use data effectively to support decision-making problems. And in this context data is not just aggregated numbers produced by large-scale technology, it is also a host of other inputs that contribute to a fundamentally human enterprise.

A state's governance structure is how it chooses to make decisions about its early childhood field. Successful decision-making requires states to be good at “framing of the problem that is to be solved, the collection of relevant information leading to a decision, and reflection and review.”¹⁵⁹ Very few states have mastered any of those capacities, let alone all three. So in setting up decision-making processes states should consider whether they want to keep the universe of decisions the same and just reorganize how those decisions are assigned — or whether they want to change the universe of available decisions and create the processes needed to make those decisions effectively on an ongoing basis. How the state makes this decision will inform how all of its subsequent decisions are made.

A photograph of a baby lying on a blue surface, surrounded by various colorful LEGO bricks. The baby is wearing a yellow t-shirt and blue jeans, looking up at the camera with a smile. The LEGO bricks are scattered around the baby, including red, blue, green, yellow, and white pieces. A red banner is overlaid on the top left of the image, containing the text 'QUESTION 6' and a paragraph in italics.

QUESTION 6

Given the capacities needed at the state level to achieve the state's goals, what is the ideal configuration of that capacity?

Once states have identified which capacities should be located at the state level, they need to think about how that capacity should be configured. In doing so, the state should consider the scope of the change desired and the operational factors relating to leadership and organization. The state will then be positioned to decide how it wants to organize its programs into agencies. There are three basic models states have used:

- Creating a new agency focused on ECEC or CED;
- Consolidating ECEC or CED functions into a larger agency, such as education or human services; and
- Coordinating functions across multiple agencies without moving programs from one to another.¹⁶⁰

Whatever choice the state makes, it will then need to develop structures to support interagency work; even states with a single lead agency focused primarily on early childhood will need to coordinate among different agencies for some functions.

A. Critical Scope Considerations

One important question states face in discussing their early childhood governance is deciding on the scope of the conversation. Some states view early childhood as the birth to 5 years, while others have more inclusive definitions; some states are focused on ECEC, whereas others take a wider view to focus on CED. How states approach these issues should inform the design of their early childhood systems.

1. Is This Birth to 5 or Birth to 8?

For many years, a dominant frame in early childhood conversations was “birth to 5,” but some informants noted that many key audiences do not understand what that term refers to. As the field developed, it widened its frame to focus on birth to 8, birth to third grade,¹⁶¹ or even birth to 10.¹⁶² The 2013 renaming of the Birth to Five Policy Alliance to the Alliance for Early Success was one prominent example of this movement.¹⁶³ As the National Research Council has written, the birth to 8 years “[are] not a developmental period with discrete boundaries,” but are “an important window for children because of the troubling disconnect between the particularly disjointed nature of the systems that serve them and the rapid pace of their development as their experiences profoundly shape their long term trajectories.”¹⁶⁴

The change has not been universal, and there are states where the “first 5” framing is still prominent.¹⁶⁵ States could reasonably choose either framing, and their choice is important to a conversation about ECEC or CED governance.

Some leaders think early childhood is most successful politically when it uses an education frame and is attached to the bigger and better-funded K-12 system. Multiple informants said that if the education world does not see early childhood as a key tactic for achieving its existing goals — improving graduation rates, third grade reading, and test scores — it will never focus on early learning. Early childhood advocates have long pushed the idea that learning begins at birth, and have used a frame that incorporates both public education and the birth to 5 years as a way to reinforce this message. These advocates recognize that K-12 education is widely acknowledged as a “public good,” whereas early childhood is not, so tying the two together can be advantageous.



But using this frame has challenges. There are major cultural divisions between the birth to 5 years and K-12.¹⁶⁶ The role of school districts in early childhood is complex and can vary substantially from community to community.¹⁶⁷ Where the education frame is used, community providers sometimes get anxious that school districts will take over their work; they are also sometimes concerned that K-12 leaders do not understand developmentally appropriate practice in either the birth-to-5 or early elementary years. Moreover, promoting continuity between early childhood and K-12 is valued across the country, but does not necessarily require a governance change or even a birth-to-8 framing to support. A birth-to-5 frame is more comfortable in states that see the early childhood community as something distinct from the K-12 school system.

Some informants noted that using a birth-to-8 frame might be outcome determinative — that is, it might lead the state to consolidate early childhood functions into the state education agency. Informants cautioned against that, noting that the two do not necessarily have to go together. The state’s approach to “birth to X” should inform the governance conversation but should not be seen as dictating any specific approach to organizing programs across agencies.

2. Is the Conversation About ECEC or CED?

Another tension point states work to resolve is between ECEC and CED. In some states governance changes have focused on ECEC, with an emphasis on bringing together preschool and child care — the two major state programs in that area. As one informant pointed out, ECEC must be coherent for CED to be coherent; because ECEC is the smaller category, it may be logical for states to start with ECEC as the innermost concentric circle of a governance change and then build outward from there. This is particularly true given the need for coherence in ECEC funding described under Question 3.

Informants pointed out that while preschool and child care are two of the largest public funding streams in ECEC, child care responsibilities are often spread across multiple agencies. For example, funding for subsidized child care is often in one agency while program licensing is in another. Informants generally agreed that any governance change focused on ECEC should start by bringing together child care functions and putting them in the same agency as state preschool.

While informants felt that putting child care and preschool in the same agency had brought benefits to both programs in some states, in other states there was a sense that this had actually weakened connections between ECEC and CED. Some informants argued that trying to put too many programs together in a single governance change would run the risk of causing the enterprise to collapse from the weight, and that it might be advisable to start a governance change with a more limited scope. Whatever scope the state chooses, it should be grounded in the specific functions and capacities the state has identified as priorities — and the state should acknowledge that the scope will change over time as those priorities continue to evolve. An example of this approach is Washington state, which in 2006 formed a Department of Early Learning focused on ECEC — and then in 2017 added child welfare responsibilities to the department and renamed it the Department of Children, Youth, and Families.¹⁶⁸

B. Critical Operational Factors

There were several factors that informants raised that are important for states to consider in assigning responsibilities at the state level, but there was no clear consensus about the best way to address those factors.

1. Creating Elevated Leadership

One priority that numerous states articulated in their governance processes was elevating the level of leadership in the early childhood field. As discussed in 5.A, high-level political leadership is needed for the system to be successful — but in many states the highest-ranking government employees solely devoted to early childhood are mid-level managers in larger agencies who may not be empowered to show public leadership. In discussing early childhood governance, some states have prioritized the creation of a high-level politically appointed leadership position, such as an agency head.

In general, informants in states that have created an elevated position believe that they have benefitted from doing so. Having a senior official who can work directly with the governor and legislators is seen as bringing visibility to the issue and strengthening the field. Informants also explained that having a high-level official can help create a consistent culture throughout the early childhood system. The positive cultural attributes informants identified included:

- **Using data in critical decision-making;**
- **Holding programs accountable for results while being realistic about what is possible given existing capacity;**
- **Expecting collaborative professional development at the local level; and**
- **Working collaboratively with outside partners.**

None of these cultural changes is entirely dependent on having a high-level official focused primarily or solely on early childhood, but all of them can benefit from having one. More broadly, multiple informants found that if the state seems focused on what is happening with young children, then communities will pick up on that focus. Additionally, having a high-level leader can help maintain that focus.

Some informants said that a state superintendent of education could fill the role of high-level early childhood leader, and in some states that approach has been successful. But some informants worried about being too dependent on a position that has so many responsibilities other than early childhood, and believed that there should be a different high-ranking position solely focused on early childhood empowered to speak and act on behalf of the executive branch.

2. Size and Independence

Two important considerations for determining an agency structure that emerged from informant conversations are agency size and independence:

- **Size.** Multiple informants pointed to a widespread perception that large agencies can be bureaucratic and unimaginative — and if early childhood is just a small function within a larger education or human services agency, it may not get much attention in either the executive or legislative branch. Some informants argue that smaller, standalone early childhood agencies can be more nimble and responsive. But in some states smaller agencies get overlooked, and smaller agencies may still be dependent on larger agencies for lawyers, accountants, and other administrative staff.
- **Independence.** In some states agencies have a culture of maintaining independence; indeed, in many states the head of the state education agency is elected separately from the governor, or is hired by a state board of education that may be independent or quasi-independent.¹⁶⁹ It can be hard to predict from one administration to the next how tightly a governor will attempt to control agency heads, but if states have established cultural norms they must take account of what those norms are.

These factors are very contextual; the right size and level of independence for an effective agency will vary from state to state.

3. State-Level Decentralization

Decentralization of state functions is a strategy that has been attempted in some states, and can be a method for states to address certain functions that require both statewide consistency and regular interaction with local stakeholders. Some informants emphasized that just because a function is a “state” function does not mean that it has to live in the state capital. For example, multiple informants discussed regional monitoring and technical assistance models as a potentially successful strategy. The principle discussed under Question 4 — that when functions are better served by proximity to constituents than proximity to political structures they should be moved closer to the community level — does not inevitably mean that functions have to be moved outside of state government to be closer to the community. Particularly in provider-facing accountability structures, there may be a benefit to keeping state government accountable for the functions but delivering them on a regional basis.

The focus on functions identified in Question 3.A and discussed throughout this report should animate the conversation about decentralization. There are certain tasks for which having decision-making outside of the state capital is likely to be an advantage.¹⁷⁰ Indeed, government is in many instances being required to manage service delivery very differently than it has previously, and centralized structures may not be well-designed to perform that function.¹⁷¹

Decentralization may be more possible in early childhood than in other fields because the early childhood field understands that government-supported services do not have to be government delivered. Instead, the early childhood field uses a pluralistic model — commonly known as a “mixed delivery system” — with government oversight.¹⁷² In the child care system the vast majority of service providers are non-school providers,¹⁷³ and in federally subsidized child care most children are served in independent centers or private homes.¹⁷⁴ The skills needed to perform the governmental role in managing the mixed-delivery system may be different than the skills needed to operate within a system where the service delivery is a governmental function, which is a factor states should consider in designing their governance.

But this is not to say that decentralization is inevitably successful. Governments have not historically cultivated staff with the skill set to manage in the nimble and flexible manner that decentralization can require.¹⁷⁵ Decentralization requires ongoing communication between staff in the field and staff at central headquarters, as well as continued attention to the congruence of goals among those personnel.¹⁷⁶ Those are achievable goals, but states taking a decentralization approach must be sensitive to the fact that it may require staff with an entirely different set of skills than those the state has prioritized in the past.

Another complication is that early childhood functions are currently dispersed among more than one agency in most states. Multiple informants pointed out that regional and local coordination are extremely difficult when different state agencies have different regional boundaries, meaning that each regional office in one agency may need to coordinate with several different regional offices from all of the other agencies involved. The alignment of regional boundaries is very helpful to improving regional service delivery, and the failure to realign regional boundaries can reinforce the notion that early childhood is a fragmented field.



C. Assigning Programs to Agencies: Coordination, Consolidation, and Creation

As noted above, states have used three basic models to organize their agency functions: coordination, consolidation, and creation.¹⁷⁷ There are variants within each of these models, but they are a useful sorting tool for identifying choices available in state-level governance.¹⁷⁸

1. Coordination

In the coordination model, ECEC and CED functions are spread among multiple agencies, putting a premium on the need for coordination. This is the current model in most states, but in some states the “coordination” title is more aspirational than descriptive. Some states do have a centralized office that is charged with supporting coordination among the different agencies, such as Hawaii’s Executive Office of Early Learning,¹⁷⁹ Illinois’ Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development,¹⁸⁰ and Kentucky’s Governor’s Office of Early Childhood.¹⁸¹

Multiple informants noted that even with a centralized coordinating entity, it can be a challenge to actually achieve coordination. They said that in a decentralized model each agency is used to having authority over program implementation, resource prioritization, rulemaking, and other core functions. Having a centralized coordinating agency typically does not change the lines of authority, but changes only the context in which authority is exercised. States using a coordination model need to develop an accurate understanding of how decisions are actually getting made and determine whether authority is in fact being used in a coordinated manner. Informants in some states believed that it was, but others said it was not.

2. Consolidation

In the consolidation model, core ECEC programmatic funding is consolidated into a single agency that is not solely devoted to early childhood. This generally means consolidating functions into the state education agency or the human services agency. California, Maryland, and Michigan have consolidated their programs into the education agency¹⁸² — although in 2020 California Governor Gavin Newsom proposed shifting all child care funding into the California Health and Human Services Agency.¹⁸³ North Carolina’s pre-K program was originally in its Department of Education, but the program was moved into the Department of Health and Human Services in 2011.¹⁸⁴ Arkansas had consolidated programs into its human services agency, but a 2019 law moved its ECEC leadership into its education agency.¹⁸⁵

A unique subspecies of this model is Pennsylvania, which created an Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) that reports to the secretaries of both the Department of Education and the Department of Human Services.¹⁸⁶ OCDEL was created in 2007¹⁸⁷ and has survived two gubernatorial changes, but it has not been replicated in any other state. OCDEL has sought to take advantage of the institutional strengths of both of its parent departments, including their expertise and knowledge base.

Many informants identified advantages of using a consolidation model to manage the complex early childhood system.¹⁸⁸ Having a single administrator responsible for multiple ECEC programs makes it easier to resolve differences among programs and create alignment, coherence, efficiency, and accountability. A unified vision is easier to develop and execute when there is a clear leader within state government responsible for those functions, and it is easier to determine who should be held accountable for the work's success or failure. One informant noted that some agencies have reorganized their consolidated early childhood functions to collaborate more effectively with other units within that agency.

States seeking to take advantage of the potential benefits of consolidation must decide on a host agency. Some states choose the education agency because they want ECEC to be considered “education,” and the placement is seen as reinforcing that message.¹⁸⁹ Some choose human services agencies because they are seen as more effective at dealing with the array of small, independent providers that populate the ECEC field.¹⁹⁰ Some informants pointed out that schools and private providers often have different desired policy outcomes on key issues in the early childhood field — such as required teacher qualifications — and those differences are likely to surface in a conversation about consolidation.

Informants discussed the challenges to agencies of partnering with unfamiliar constituencies. Education agencies are most familiar with school districts, and child care agencies are set up to work with community providers. No matter how effectively state agencies work with their primary constituency — and informants offered a wide range of opinions — there is a broad sense in the field that the cultural and practical differences between the world of school districts and community providers poses a challenge to any agency expanding its scope to include new partners.¹⁹¹

Some informants pointed to resistance from school districts in some states to dealing with any agency other than the state education agency, citing both cultural and practical reasons, as school districts may want to receive funding from as few sources as possible. Other informants described school district resistance to the idea of the SEA advocating for anything other than discretionary funds for school districts, meaning that they may be uncomfortable with the SEA advocating too vigorously for funds dedicated to early childhood.

In states where the head of the education agency is elected — or accountable to an independent state board — that factor is critical to this analysis; a state might reasonably choose alignment with the governor or independence from the governor.¹⁹² Independence can insulate early learning programs during periods when the governor does not support ECEC, but it can also lead to supportive governors taking less interest in the issue because they have less control over its implementation.¹⁹³ Another issue to consider is whether the governance change is seen as a power grab by the governor away from an elected superintendent or independent state board. Finally, the role of the state board of education should be considered, as board members — regardless of how they are appointed or elected — bring a distinctive perspective, and may have value to a governance structure that is different from that of state employees.



Even when all of the relevant agencies are under gubernatorial control, power struggles within the administration can color a conversation over consolidation. This may be a particular issue for the current child care agency, as the flexibility of child care funds often allows state agencies to use them for administrative costs. If the child care agency has numerous other divisions dependent on that administrative funding, the broader agency may strongly resist any effort to move oversight of child care to another agency.

Under a consolidation model, deciding which programs to include is important.¹⁹⁴ In an ECEC-driven consolidation state preschool and child care will likely be the primary focus, but the Head Start collaboration office, home visiting, and special education are other programs that might be considered.¹⁹⁵ In particular, this process should include a focus on ensuring that infant-toddler programs have the support they need. Several states have chosen to start small and then add additional functions after the initial combination proved successful.

Some states have specifically focused on the disconnect in special education between IDEA Part C (which serves 0-3 year olds) and Part B (which addresses 3- and 4-year-olds). Part B must be located in the state education agency, and some states have chosen to place Part C there to improve connectivity. But some states where the SEA is responsible for both still struggle to coordinate.

3. Creation

A third model is to create a new standalone agency solely focused on early childhood.¹⁹⁶ Georgia, Massachusetts, and Washington were the pioneers of this approach,¹⁹⁷ while New Mexico is the most recent state to create a new early childhood agency.¹⁹⁸ Creation has been a particular focus for advocates wanting to elevate leadership in the field, as discussed in 5.B.1 above. In many ways, that elevated leadership is the signature difference between consolidation and creation. One informant pointed out that senior leadership is valuable not only for communicating to legislators and the broader field but for serving as a voice for early childhood in a governor's cabinet.

One issue that has been raised about the creation approach is how it might impact the relationship between birth to 5 and K-12. There is concern in some states that creating a standalone agency could lead to — or deepen — a divide between early childhood and K-12.¹⁹⁹ As noted in 6.A, multiple informants acknowledged that if the education world does not see early childhood as a key part of achieving its own goals — graduation rates, third grade reading, improved test scores — it will never focus on early learning. In many states, this is a significant challenge.

The politics of creating new agencies varies across states and across time. There are times when states create new and smaller agencies; states can then go through periods of agency contraction. Whether or not a creation initiative is feasible will depend heavily on where a state is in this cycle. If creation is not possible states may choose to consolidate in a single agency, with the idea that it may be possible to spin the consolidated ECEC enterprise out of its host and into a standalone agency in the future.



D. Interagency Connective Tissue

Regardless of the state's governance structure there will be a need for interagency collaboration. States are required by the federal Head Start Act to maintain a state advisory council to advise the state on early childhood issues.²⁰⁰ The council must include representatives from a range of key state and local constituencies in the early childhood system, including the state agencies for education, child care, IDEA programs, and health or mental health care.²⁰¹ Importantly, the state advisory council is a diverse body with leaders from inside and outside state government. And while it is a required state-level collaborative structure, it need not be the only one.

While all states are required to have a state advisory council, not all councils are effective.²⁰² Some provide a valuable forum for thinking about big ideas, but others are just places where people report their activities. When agencies are stretched thin they may choose to focus on what they are absolutely certain they are responsible for; it can be easy for agencies to see these structures as places where extra burdens are placed on them, rather than places they can go to for help with their existing responsibilities. In addition, some informants observed that their councils have seen tension between leaders who are focused primarily on ECEC and those with a broader CED frame.

Gubernatorial leadership plays a crucial role in the success of councils. Informants generally agreed that if the governor puts pressure on agency heads to work well together and with external partners, they probably will; if the governor does not, they probably will not, regardless of what structures are in place. This may be trickier in states where agencies are comparatively independent, but even in those states collaboration is usually possible if all agencies understand that early childhood is a gubernatorial priority and/or have faith in key early childhood leaders. Gubernatorial investment creates an urgency and a dynamic to which stakeholders frequently respond. Informants believed that governors are best positioned to create an action orientation for interagency collaboration, even if they are not personally involved in the council's work (which they generally are not).

Even when the governor cares about early childhood collaboration, there will be challenges. One of the most notable is the capacity to support collaboration, as discussed above. Multiple informants noted that interagency collaboration is unlikely to be successful without dedicated staff capacity focused on this work. There have been time periods where direct federal investment has supported collaborative work; multiple informants reported that collaboration has worked reasonably well in states when the federal government has paid for it, but when the federal tap runs dry many states do not prioritize this work.

Formal collaborative work has not always added value to the system, which is why states are not always eager to invest in it. Many state advisory councils have struggled to define a role that goes beyond a report-out circle. Informants noted that there may be a meaningful difference between the success of the formal structures and the informal ones; if leaders in the system trust each other there will be interagency collaboration, but if they don't, there probably won't be (or there will be the bare minimum required to appease the governor).²⁰³

For councils to succeed requires more than staff capacity. Informants identified the following elements of successful councils:

- ***The ability to help see a bigger picture.*** Sometimes higher-level leaders with broad portfolios have a narrow focus within CED (often pre-K) and need help understanding the parameters of the entire system.
- ***The ability to drill down on issues where councils can make a difference.*** Interagency structures can be more useful for some issues than others.²⁰⁴ Choosing issues wisely can help councils build credibility.
- ***Strengthening the state-local connection.*** Some states have been very intentional about including local collaborations in their state collaborative structure.
- ***The ability to strike a balance between forced conformity — an ever-present danger in collaborative work²⁰⁵ — and a disorganized free-for-all.*** This generally requires strong leadership that encourages respectful disagreement, which is very hard to maintain in some state contexts.
- ***Planning for continuity.*** Members of interagency structures from outside state government can play an important role in bridging between administrations during a gubernatorial changeover.²⁰⁶
- ***Connections at multiple levels.*** Councils can play a valuable role in bridging the worlds of policy and practice.²⁰⁷

Councils do tend to operate somewhat differently in states where there is a clear lead agency on early childhood — either through consolidation or creation. One danger informants raised is that when there is a clear lead agency the council may turn into essentially an advisory board for that agency, rather than a forum for the entire field. Some councils have had tension in determining whether to focus on ECEC or try to address the full range of health and mental health issues required in a CED system.

One defining attribute of councils is that they are inside-outside structures, with representatives from state government and its public and private partners. For that reason councils are most likely to succeed if they focus on issues that actually benefit from inside-outside collaboration, but there isn't always agreement about what those are. Leaders in state government could make better decisions about many issues with the help of thoughtful outside perspectives, and often could move projects forward more efficiently by developing allies through external consultation. But that requires trust among leaders inside and outside of government, which is not always present in states.

These councils often surface substantial tensions between government insiders and their outside partners. If funders and advocates think they are running the government, leaders who are actually inside government will lose interest in collaboration — but if funders and advocates think that government leaders are tuning them out or are insufficiently grateful for their advocacy and capacity-building efforts, they may try to put additional pressure on these leaders, which only accelerates the cycle of frustration. Both advocates and funders find themselves weighing multiple considerations when serving on councils:

- **Advocates** — including independent advocates, professional membership organizations, grassroots organizers, and others — have a tricky balance to strike; they want insiders to trust them so they can help work through complex problems, but they also need to maintain independence to sustain credible advocacy. Some advocates have suffered from getting too close to particular government officials, which may limit their ability to be effective when those officials are replaced. The advocacy role can look different in states with a coordination model, which often lacks strong internal leadership; when none of the state agency staff who are solely focused on early childhood is senior enough to maintain a real relationship with the legislature, the advocates often take primacy in that role.
- **Funders** also have their own balance to strike. In some states, philanthropy has played a valuable role in supporting systems building, advocacy, and capacity through sustained investment. In other places, however, funders are perceived as fixated on their own projects, and the power of the purse may mean that those projects get prioritized even when they are not widely desired within the field.

All collaborative structures involving more than one agency are dependent to some degree on intra-agency collaboration — which can be a struggle, as described in 4.B. There are often disconnects between the high-level leaders of agencies and the people focusing primarily on early childhood. Where that is the case an agency may have a hard time collaborating, and external partners may get inconsistent messages.

In addition to councils, multiple informants touted the benefits of having a collaborative structure that is solely for leaders inside government. Because these collaborative structures sometimes focus more on the managerial level than the policymaker level, these groups are often focused more on the nuts and bolts of implementation — which multiple informants cited as valuable. But one challenge informants identified with these kinds of collaborative groups is that of empowerment. If the participants in a multi-agency group are not empowered to act, then most meetings will end with participants needing to go back to their agency to seek approval for some desired course of action — and in too many instances that approval takes so long to get that by the time it is obtained, the issue has mostly passed. This can lead to missed opportunities or fragmented decision-making. Informants emphasized the importance of establishing collaborative managerial tables where participants are empowered to act on group decisions within some defined scope of authority.



QUESTION 7

If a decision is made to change governance how should the state manage the process, and what capacities are needed for that process to be successful?

The states that have successfully executed transitions in governance have done so because they planned carefully for the change and applied adequate capacity to the process. Most state governments are not known for their skill in executing change management processes, which can lead to deep skepticism in the field that a transition will be managed effectively.²⁰⁸ There are, however, practices that states can engage in that increase the odds of success. Multiple stakeholders who have been through transitions described the process as difficult but rewarding — and offered suggestions on how other states can manage the process most effectively.

A. Engaging the Entire Field

One essential element of success is mapping out the impact of governance changes on stakeholders throughout the field. Governance changes might have the largest impact on employees being moved from one state agency to another, but the overall impact extends to the entire early childhood field — including the stakeholders identified in 2.B. States need to have plans to manage the impacts on all concerned. Providers and communities should be engaged to ask about their practical and cultural concerns, and those concerns need to be taken seriously. The total cost of the process should be estimated up front so that resources can be obtained to provide ongoing support.

In mapping out a transition process states should establish clear expectations of which processes will engage the whole field — and which will be internal to state government. The process of executing a transition is different than the process of deciding on whether or not to have one in the first place, but the importance of mastering the inside-outside dynamic remains. There will be some decisions in the transition process that require the engagement of the entire community, and others that will require a “safe space” for state employees. Mapping those out at the beginning will help everybody understand their expected role throughout the process.

As part of the costing-out process, states will need to decide whether to engage outside help in the change management process. There are private firms that specialize in this kind of change management, and engaging one might help the state minimize the negative disruption caused by the change. Hiring a firm can add to the up-front cost, but it could be worth it for the downstream impact. Local philanthropies might be willing to bear this expense as a one-time cost with a long-term benefit.

Multiple informants cited philanthropy as an essential support for the transition process and a way to cover some of the costs, particularly if federal funds are not available. Some noted that during the transition process there were times when visible philanthropic leadership was extremely helpful, and other times when a quiet word from philanthropic leaders turned out to be meaningful.

Multiple informants emphasized the importance of clear and consistent communication throughout the transition process. They said that leaders of the process should identify a primary spokesperson who can provide updates to the field on a regular basis. They also emphasized the importance of ensuring that information collection from the field is done in a manner that is respectful of the burden data gathering can cause.

B. Managing the Process Within State Government

There are some special considerations that must be given to state employees impacted by moving from one agency to another. This narrative identifies some key issues states may want to address, but there will undoubtedly be others.

Some states have work rules that can have a major impact on any proposed shift of agency staff. If staff are being consolidated from different agencies that have different union representation, there may be legal barriers to that combination. Relatedly, informants noted that if larger agencies are required to send staff to a new agency they may use that as an opportunity to offload their weakest staff — unless entire units are being moved wholesale.

In any new configuration there will be a host of practical challenges to overcome. Staff will have different experiences and expectations relating to any number of administrative policies and practices; thoughtful planning will be needed to harmonize those experiences.²⁰⁹ Issues like IT systems, salary structures, and budgeting and accounting practices need to be resolved, and that can take a great deal of time. Some informants pointed out that the responsibilities for these functions can look very different for units of agencies as opposed to agencies as a whole, and when new agencies are created the capacity to manage those functions must be accounted for.



Beyond the basic execution of functions states need to consider the impact of these practical challenges on employee mindsets. Managers will need to be prepared to deal with all of these issues and budget their time accordingly. One informant pointed out that transitions can be hard for managers because they are often the bridge between political leaders and practitioners — which requires them to manage expectations in both directions at a sensitive time.

Management strength will also be needed to ensure that the programmatic benefits of any combination are actually realized.²¹⁰ Numerous informants made reference to governance changes that in effect “moved the silos closer together” without actually breaking them down. Many informants pointed to instances where programs currently within the same agency did not work well together, so combining them into a new agency did not achieve integration. Bureaucracies can place a high value on autonomy²¹¹ — so when portions of multiple bureaucracies are brought together, they may seek to maintain their autonomy.

Importantly, there is also a strong cultural element to any governance change.²¹² Affected staff who are accustomed to one culture must develop a new one, which can be a disruptive process — especially if they are upset at having been moved in the first place. In some states the bad blood from forced transitions lasted a long time. One informant noted that a division moving from one agency to another will likely need to maintain a strong relationship with its former agency, which places a premium on managing the transition collaboratively. Another informant said that when a new unit joins an existing agency, both the new and continuing staff may be anxious that in the transition their issues will not receive as much attention as they did previously.



Organizational cultures often contain numerous conflicting subcultures, and multiple informants talked about the importance of harmonizing the overall culture after a consolidation or creation with the actual functions of the new configuration; otherwise there is a high risk that essential tasks will be resisted.²¹³ Some informants noted that divisions nested in larger agencies moving to a consolidated or newly created agency may have gotten used to a lot of autonomy — especially if the political staff overseeing that division had a broader portfolio — so it might be a jarring change for that division to move into a new agency where oversight by political leaders is much tighter. Over time executives must strike a balance of trust and accountability for the new configuration to be successful.²¹⁴

The nature of these dynamics can be shaped by the politics preceding a governance change. Informants identified instances of governance change that were driven by a perception that a particular unit or agency was performing poorly. When that is the case staff from that unit or agency may feel attacked, and for good reason. In these situations the receiving managers should have a clear plan for addressing that sensitivity as part of the development of a new culture.

These factors play out both internally and in the state’s relationships with its primary partners. Historically agencies have worked with very different kinds of partners, including state education agencies focusing on school districts and child care agencies focusing on community providers, as discussed in 6.C. The cultures of those communities are very different, so an agency that becomes responsible for working with both needs to be attuned to those cultures in order to succeed. This, too, requires management capacity and focus. One informant noted that mapping out overlapping constituencies early in the process may help a newly combined unit or agency maintain a focus on its key constituents and their experience.

Given all of these challenges it is important that there be adequate managerial capacity throughout the transition. This was a clear theme among informants, including those who believed their state had attempted to provide adequate capacity to support a transition and those who believed their state had not. In considering the best way to provide adequate managerial capacity, states will wrestle with the issue of managerial continuity; some informants discussed the value of providing consistency through a transition, while others saw the transition as an opportunity to bring in new management for a fresh start.

One common cross-cutting theme was the importance of managerial skill in bringing together a newly combined unit or agency. Multiple informants from multiple states emphasized that the first leader of a newly combined unit or agency should have managerial experience within state government and be prepared to navigate the complex internal politics that will inevitably surround the change. The ability to win “bureaucratic knife-fights” is an indispensable skill to getting a new unit or agency up and running. Because the forces of maintaining the status quo will remain powerful throughout the process, leadership is needed to ensure that real change is able to take hold.

C. Setting a Timeline

Informants discussed the potential difficulties of setting a schedule for transitioning from one governance regime to another. On one hand, states engaged in transition may have a sense of urgency about moving forward, and they may want to avoid an awkward period where everybody knows a change is coming but has not happened yet. On the other hand, many of the transition processes take time to execute, so there can be value in creating the space for that transition to occur. Hiring staff can take some time, particularly if a new agency is being created — and the new agency will need capacity in a variety of roles, including human resources and finance.

New Mexico, the most recent state to create a new agency, set up a transitional period that lasted over a year. The legislation creating the new department authorized it to come into existence on July 1, 2020,²¹⁵ more than 15 months after the bill was signed in March 2019.²¹⁶ The department’s first secretary, Elizabeth Groginsky, was confirmed by the state Senate on January 31, 2020.²¹⁷ A similar approach was used in Washington state when the Department of Children, Youth, and Families was created. Its authorizing legislation passed in 2017 and set a launch date for the agency of July 1, 2018, with some functions not phasing in until July 1, 2019.²¹⁸ This approach may offer a potential model for states considering the creation of a new agency in the future.

D. Playing the Long Game

Systems change takes a long time,²¹⁹ and even the most thoughtful states do not get everything right on their first pass. Moreover, the process of governance change will likely surface numerous issues that were not accounted for in an initial transition plan. States should anticipate this learning process and put in place systems for evaluating progress and adjusting practices over time. This, too, may be a function that benefits from philanthropic support.

In managing the impact of governance change over time it is important not to focus solely on the state employees whose jobs were moved from one agency to another. The state will also need to attend to the state-level partners and employees who work with those agencies, as well as the communities and providers whose evolving needs will have to be addressed. Some of the changes impacting these stakeholders may be so gradual that they do not attract immediate notice. Therefore, it will be important to place a premium on communicating about the changes so stakeholders do not take important improvements for granted.

Given the duration of the process, an important aspect of the transition is expectations management. Some states have sought to make their transitions very public to create engagement; others have sought to make changes more quietly, so that the inevitable bumps in the road can be worked out without too much public drama. The right approach will vary depending on state context. Either way states should do everything they can to set realistic expectations at the outset of a governance transition, and then communicate effectively about the progress being made.

QUESTION 8

In the final cost-benefit analysis, what are the key considerations in determining whether a change in governance will be worthwhile?



Going through the process of discussing governance change does not obligate a state to actually change its governance. As explained under Question 2, the state should have a clear process for deciding whether or not change will actually move forward. Whoever the decision-makers are, they will have to weigh the potential benefits of a change against the likely costs. It is easy to overestimate the potential benefits and underestimate the potential costs, so it is important to be rigorous in this process.

All of the issues raised in Questions 2-6 will factor into the state's final decision. When the process is reaching its conclusion, states should keep in mind some additional important ideas:

- **Political leadership is critical.** One consistent theme among informants was that the high-level political leadership of governors, legislators, and agency heads is enormously important. Ideally states will have both active high-level political leadership and an elegantly designed system — but given the choice between one or the other, every informant asked chose active high-level political leadership. If states have strong leadership they should consider whether a governance change is the best use of their time and political capital; if they do not, they should think about whether the execution of a governance change is likely to be successful — and whether it is likely to lead to better political leadership in the future.
- **Structure matters in governance, but it is not determinative of program results.**²²⁰ Functionality is what matters most, not any particular structure.
- **What other states have done is instructive but not determinative.** Every state will have its own values, priorities, history, and context. If form is following function, that will lead to different forms in different states.
- **No structure will solve all problems.** As this report has hopefully demonstrated, governance is all about tradeoffs; there are no unalloyed goods that will receive unanimous support and then work exactly as intended.
- **Changing structures does not inevitably lead to policy alignment.** If the goal is policy alignment, states should be realistic about how likely it is that governance change will actually achieve that. It could be an essential contributor, or it could be an expensive distraction.
- **Moving ineffective programs is not the same as fixing them.** Sometimes states try to salvage low-performing programs by moving them to a new home, but that typically does not work without new capacity. Indeed, sometimes moving broken programs to a new agency puts it in the hands of staff who know very little about the subject area and how to fix it, and then distracts those staff from administering the programs that they actually understand.²²¹
- **Moving programs around without building capacity will not change outcomes.** If anything, moving programs around without increasing capacity might make it more difficult for them to function, making governance a diversion from the real solutions the programs need.

- ***Resistance to change is to be expected.*** The early childhood field's scarcity mindset can lead to resistance to change from constituents of each specific program, even when those constituents are dissatisfied with how the program is administered. People fear loss more than they want gain,²²² and that fear will surely be on display during any process of considering governance change.
- ***Trust is an important factor in making a change worth it or not.*** Multiple informants argued that relationships and trust are the key to cross-program problem solving, and building that trust is not necessarily correlated with being part of the same agency. Although a decision about a governance change should take a multiyear view and not be driven solely by existing relationships among agency staff — good or bad — those relationships do matter and should be considered in the decision-making process.
- ***Defining roles is essential.*** Early childhood systems are complex, and many participants are needed to contribute to their success. Helping participants understand their role and contribution can bring valuable order and help lead to improved decision-making — both inside and outside state government.
- ***The scope of the change matters.*** In some states, advocates may want dramatic and sweeping changes with substantial anticipated benefits despite the potentially high costs; in others, they may want smaller incremental changes that are easier to accomplish but not likely to bring fundamental transformation. States may want to evaluate both and consider the incremental benefits in comparison to the incremental costs, finding a sweet spot that fits their context.
- ***Political symbolism matters.*** Some people will focus on that symbolism over operational priorities. This may be most common with elected officials who do not fully understand the functions of different agencies, but can also be important to some early childhood advocates — for whom the symbolism of a standalone agency is a powerful sign of the field's importance.
- ***Change comes at a cost, but so does the status quo.*** There is a day-to-day cost of inefficiency that states may have gotten so used to that they no longer realize they are paying it. Relatedly, in some states existing governance structures are not well equipped to deal with a true crisis, a consideration that was driven home in 2020 by the COVID-19 outbreak.
- ***The perfect should not be the enemy of improvement.*** States could spend an endless amount of time contemplating the ideal governance structure, but they will never find it. If they can reach consensus on something that is widely believed to be better than the existing structure, they should strongly consider acting. Nothing is permanent in policy, and states can make one change and then consider possible adjustments in the future. While there is a cost to changing governance and major changes should not be made too frequently, the states that have led in this area have seen the work as an ongoing process over the course of many years. States are constantly balancing the needs of the moment with long-term needs, and that balance should be expected to shift and evolve over time.

Changing governance will never solve all of a state’s problems, but experience has shown that it can change a state’s operations — and its conversations. As explained in the introduction, what matters most in early childhood is the quality of interactions between adults and children. If a state believes after careful consideration that a change in its governance will help increase the number of successful interactions between adults and children, then it should go ahead and plan for that change. If the state can then manage the change in a manner that achieves those benefits with reasonable costs, it will have performed a valuable service for children and families.



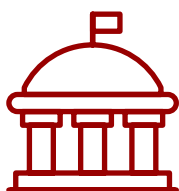
CONCLUSION

What will help states get there?



This report has focused primarily on the work of governance change within each state. But each state acts in a national context, and as a field there is more we can do to help states that are considering governance change for their ECEC programs and services. Currently, there is no common definition of what effective governance looks like and no established body of research on what impacts effective governance might have. Moreover, there is no organized system for identifying states that want help with governance and no centralized source of help they might obtain if they wanted it. These recommendations are meant to help advance the field to create better conditions for states considering changes in governance.

The Federal Government



The federal government has played an extremely valuable and constructive role in systems change. At times it has shown bipartisan support for flexible funding that can be used to develop at least some of the capacities needed for an effective governance system — from the State Advisory Council grants and Early Learning Challenge Grants through the current Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five program. Federal resources can also be useful to the ongoing maintenance of the system, through existing funding streams such as child care and IDEA and through technical assistance support such as the Child Care State Capacity Building Center.²²³ States will benefit from continued federal efforts to help them address the issues raised in this report, whether or not that work is part of a focused effort to improve early childhood governance. Federal funds should not push states toward any particular governance choices, but can support state decision-making processes and the implementation of state-driven changes.

National Organizations

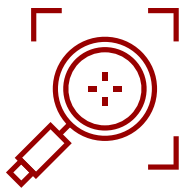


There are existing resources that states have utilized to support the process of governance change. National membership organizations like the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Conference of State Legislators, and the Education Commission of the States have all provided valuable assistance to state leaders, as have a network of other organizations and consultants. These organizations have provided support to states in structuring processes of considering governance change, addressing each of the questions that come up in that process, and supporting change management in those states that have pursued new structures.

There might be value in a more organized national effort that brings together these leaders and others as part of a coherent support initiative. An even more ambitious approach would see the creation of a center or organization focused on early childhood governance, which could then partner with these organizations to develop and advance a more coherent national agenda. Right now, the national field suffers from the same challenge as state systems: pockets of expertise that are inconsistently applied due to fragmentation.

In addition to in-depth supports for states engaged in the process of discussing governance change, there is real value in state-to-state peer learning — including creating opportunities to speak with each other, with staff and facilitation support. This can be helpful to state leaders both in deciding on a course of action and executing whatever course of action they choose.

Researchers



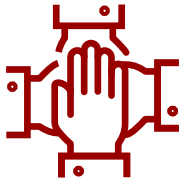
The role of research is critical here as well. This report was based on an extensive outreach process and literature review, but it is not a research report. Rigorous research on the choices and consequences inherent in governance — to echo Kagan and Gomez’s title — would provide much richer information for addressing many of the issues raised here, including:

- Potential differences among states that have used executive orders to make governance changes and those that have sought change legislatively;
- The relationship among politically appointed agency leaders; upper agency managers in large agencies that have oversight for early childhood as part of their portfolio; division managers solely focused on early childhood; and line staff;
- Which states are most effective at certain core functions of a governance system, and how lessons from those states could best be applied in other states;
- What contextual factors are most important to developing state, regional, and local approaches;
- Which interagency connective structures have worked, and what factors led to their success;
- What elements of the process of governance change turn out to be most important to the success of the updated approach; and
- Whether or not there can be a relationship established between governance and child outcomes.

Beyond these more discrete issues research could also include rigorous and formal evaluations of existing approaches, and how best practices in governance and decision-making in other fields could be applied in the early childhood context. A more specific research project or case study could focus on whether consolidated governance helped states respond more effectively to the COVID-19 crisis in the spring of 2020, which could be useful information to inform preparation for any future pandemics.

A national center or coordinated effort could develop a research agenda and then provide needed research capacity, but a research agenda could be advanced even without the creation of a center.

Philanthropy



Some of the efforts described above would benefit from national philanthropic support, but there is an essential role for state and local philanthropy as well. This report touches on the role philanthropy can play in supporting states considering changes in early childhood governance, but a deeper exploration of the role philanthropy has played in states that have made changes could provide better guidance for foundations in states that seek to make change in the future.

If any organized national effort is undertaken, it is important that it be respectful of local conditions. Numerous informants talked about engaging in national projects that left them feeling like the national funder was pushing its own agenda rather than meeting a perceived need in the state. The best technical assistance will be available to states at the high-impact times they need it and responsive to state needs without creating unrealistic expectations. This is particularly true in a field like governance where there truly is no single “right answer.” Moreover, any national philanthropic effort will need strong partners in local philanthropy who can help support their own state’s development on an ongoing basis.

Each state will have its own “here” and “there,” but the “getting there” can be a shared journey. The lessons learned in each state can inform future actions in others. While state context is deeply important, there is no reason each state should have to navigate this process on its own. Hopefully this report will help states evaluate their options — and make considered decisions that lead to more effective governance of early childhood systems.

Appendix

This report would not have been possible without the exceptional generosity of the many interview subjects listed below. To ensure anonymity and promote complete candor, all informants were promised that the final report would not use any content that could be traced back to a specific interview. Some informants sent additional documents following their interviews, some of which have been cited in this report. References to specific states in this report are either from public-domain documents or have been vetted by at least one representative of that state.

Interviews were conducted in individual and small-group settings. One roundtable of experts was held in August 2019, and another roundtable of state leaders was held in March 2020. A site visit was conducted to New Mexico in March 2020, after the state approved the creation of a Department of Early Childhood Education and Care in 2019 and before its scheduled launch on July 1, 2020.

Marit Andrews	Bruce Atchison	Leanne Barrett
Kristin Bernhard	Brittany Birken	Melanie Bronfin
Elizabeth Burke Bryant	Beth Bye	Miriam Calderon
Tracey Campanini	Beth Caron	Lori Connors-Tadros
Jenna Conway	Jon Courtney	Katie Dealy
Jill Dent	Harriet Dichter	Katie Dry
Pat Dunn	Shay Everitt	Danielle Ewen
Katherine Freeman	Rita Furlow	Barbara Gebhard
Kathy Glazer	Caitlin Gleason	Stacie Goffin
Jon Gould	Rolf Grafwallner	Elizabeth Groginsky
Scott Groginsky	Rachel Gudgel	Erica Hallock
Cara Harrison	Dana Hepper	Susan Hibbard
Steven Hicks	Ross Hunter	Bill Jaeger
Shannon Jones	Sharon Lynn Kagan	Ruth Kagi
Kristie Kauerz	Sherri Killins	Mandy Kimball
Kari King	Brenda Kofahl	Laurie Lippold
Joan Lombardi	Molly Magarik	Jana Martella
Alison May	Marina Merrill	Sara Mickelson
Georgia Mjartan	Allison Muhlendorf	Mary Nash Wilson
Amy O’Leary	Frank Ordway	Mariana Padilla
Nasha Patel	Gail Piggott	Bentley Ponder
Karen Ponder	Alejandra Rebolledo Rea	Judy Reidt-Parker
Kayla Rosen	Jason Sabo	Diana Schaack
Jon Sheehan	Tommy Sheridan	John Shikles
Siri Smillie	Linda Smith	Valisa Smith
Libbie Sonnier-Netto	Helene Stebbins	Becca Steinhoff
Dana Suskind	Kate Tarrant	Yasmina Vinci
Mark Waits	Albert Wat	Sarah Weber
Michael Weinberg	John White	Sue Williams
Tonya Williams	Lauren Zybyszinski	

Individual interviews were semi-structured. Participants were sent a list of questions in advance; most of the interviews roughly followed that structure, but the focus varied and some interviews ended up relatively far afield. Because the interviews valued flexibility over consistency this report does not attempt to draw comparative conclusions across states. The questions sent to informants were:

- How can states identify the critical issues they are trying to address in changing their governance structures, and then shape governance choices to address those issues?
- What are the most critical functions of state-level governance, and how can states build capacity to successfully execute those functions?
- How can states address the need for regional-, local-, and program-level capacity in their governance structures?
- How can states successfully manage the process of transition from one governance system to another? What kinds of leadership are needed to make the transition work?
- What kind of national-level supports will states need to be successful in changing their governance structures?
- What are some key research questions that would aid the field in developing improved governance?

A somewhat modified set of questions were sent to interview subjects on the New Mexico site visit:

- How have you engaged in the process of deciding on the governance change?
- What are you hoping the governance change will achieve?
- What capacities do you believe the Early Childhood Education and Care Department needs to be successful?
- How do you want the new Department to partner with other state agencies, communities, and early childhood providers?

The expert roundtable in summer 2019 was informed by a synthesis of anonymized informant comments, many of which are reflected in the final paper. The roundtable of state leaders in March 2020 was primarily informed by an earlier draft of the decision guide.

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²⁴ Hopefully none of you reading the report in full will reach the end and then throw the report into the fire. If you have in fact printed this report out to read it, please recycle it.

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²⁶ Kagan, S.L. Conceptualizing ECE Governance: Not the Elephant in the Room. In *Early Childhood Governance: Choices and Consequences* (p. 11). All emphasis in the original. During interviews, informants were asked to talk about governance without having been given a specific definition of what it is. Many informants asked about that and were then encouraged to use their own definition or to interpret the term broadly. One goal of the conversations was to see how informants think differently about governance, but for purposes of this final report, a single definition is used for the sake of clarity.

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¹⁰³ Many structural reforms end up not impacting teaching practice because they do not attempt to affect the instructional core. Elmore, R. *School Reform from the Inside Out* (pp. 11-12, 46-47). Quality rating and improvement systems that seek to measure practices within the instructional core in many ways represent a fundamentally different approach to improvement than those that do not.

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¹⁰⁹ Note that different states have different definitions of local. Some states have county-based systems, others have municipal or some other geography. This broader analysis is agnostic as to which of those is best and recognizes that the choice of which local actor should lead is very much a product of state history and practice.

¹¹⁰ For a discussion of the benefits of decentralization and looking at the bureaucracy from the ground up rather than the top down, see Wilson's *Bureaucracy* (pp. 3-14).

¹¹¹ The book *On the Road to High Quality Early Learning* provides some examples of states that have formalized local structures. Wechsler, M., Kirp, D., Tinubu Ali, T. Gardner, M., Maier, A., Melnick, H., and Shields, P. (2018). *On the Road to High-Quality Early Learning: Changing Children's Lives*. Teachers College Press. Local structures highlighted include those in Michigan (pp. 33-35), North Carolina (pp. 170-173, 189-195), and West Virginia (pp. 77-99, 93-95).

¹¹² Dichter, H. State Systems Building Through Governance. In *Rising to the Challenge: Building Effective Systems for Young Children and Families, a BUILD E-Book* (p. 8); Cobb, G. and Ponder, K. (January 2014). *The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems through State/Local Initiatives* (pp. 26-29). Build Initiative. Retrieved from <http://www.buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/NutsandBoltsNBFINAL.pdf>.

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¹¹⁴ For a helpful summary of how Head Start connects with other ECEC programs across the states, see Maxwell, K., Warner-Richter, M., Partika, A., Franchett, A., and Kane, M. (2019). *The Connection Between Head Start and State or Territory Early Care and Education Systems: A Scan of Existing Data*. OPRE Report #2019. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/cccepra_head_start_and_ece_connections_aug_2019.pdf.

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- ¹¹⁶ Cobb, G. and Ponder, K. *The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems through State/Local Initiatives* (p. 35).
- ¹¹⁷ Cobb, G. and Ponder, K. *The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems through State/Local Initiatives* (pp. 6-8).
- ¹¹⁸ Cobb, G. and Ponder, K. *The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems through State/Local Initiatives* (pp. 11-12, 20).
- ¹¹⁹ Wechsler, M., et al. *On the Road to High-Quality Early Learning: Changing Children's Lives* (pp. 169-173).
- ¹²⁰ David Campbell and Michael Fullan make an argument for a K-12 governance structure focused on coherence and systems thinking. They argue that districts lead from the middle because the problems faced in practice are too complex for leaders at the top to provide coherence, but bottom-up change is too piecemeal. They call on districts to become the heart and soul of initiatives, not only administering programs but influencing what goes on at the state level as strategic leaders. Campbell, D. and Fullan, M. (2019). *The Governance Core: School Boards, Superintendents, and Schools Working Together*. Corwin. States should consider the possibility that early childhood could benefit from this “leadership from the middle” in a similar manner.
- ¹²¹ Regenstein, E. *Why the K-12 World Hasn't Embraced Early Learning*.
- ¹²² Tyack, D. and Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (pp. 60-61). Harvard University Press.
- ¹²³ Tyack, D. and Cuban, L. *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (p. 125); Dahill-Brown, S.E. (2018). Challenging, Building, and Changing Capacity in State Education Agencies. In Hess, F.M. and McShane, M.Q. (Eds). *Bush-Obama School Reform: Lessons Learned* (p. 160). Harvard Education Press; Schultz, K. (2019). *Distrust and Educational Change: Overcoming Barriers to Just and Lasting Reform* (pp. 3-4). Harvard Education Press.
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- ¹²⁵ Kenneth J. Meier has explained the importance of creating incentives to attract talent, have strong administrators, and inform parents in the K-12 education context, arguing that the quality of management makes a substantial impact. Meier, K.J. (2011). From Theory to Results in Governance Reform (pp. 361-368). In Meier, K. J. *Governance Reform from Theory to Results*.
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- ¹²⁷ Mehta, J. (2013). *The Allure of Order* (pp. 23-24). Oxford University Press.
- ¹²⁸ Mehta, J. *The Allure of Order* (pp. 25, 40, 121-123).
- ¹²⁹ Mehta, J. *The Allure of Order* (pp. 25, 40, 121-123).
- ¹³⁰ Schultz, K. *Distrust and Educational Change* (pp. 3-4).
- ¹³¹ Schultz, K. *Distrust and Educational Change* (pp. 125-126).
- ¹³² Gutman, A. *Democratic Education* (p. 85).
- ¹³³ One example of an initiative to bring together community leaders is the Smart Beginnings initiative in Virginia (<https://www.vecf.org/what-is-smart-beginnings/>).
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