

Early Childhood Governance Decision Guide

Many states have come to understand the importance of the early childhood years, and are seeking to provide high-quality services to young children and their families. But states have struggled with the fact that many of the existing programs for young children – including preschool and child care – are administered by different agencies. Some states have chosen to change their governance of early childhood, with the goal of making their system more coherent. This decision guide is meant to help states that are considering an early childhood governance change.

The guide is a complement to the report *Early Childhood Governance: Getting There From Here*, which provides more detail on each of the issues raised here. The structure of both documents is the same to allow for easy cross-referencing. The guide articulates key questions that states need to be asking, and presents considerations for answering those questions. Like the report, the guide is based on the premise that there is no single ideal governance structure, and that states should engage in a thoughtful process of weighing multiple tradeoffs in defining a governance structure that will work for them.

Key Questions	Important Sub-questions	Considerations for States
1. What process should states use to determine whether or not a governance change makes sense?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the process supported by high-level political leaders? • Does the process engage a wide range of stakeholders from state government, partners and customers of state government, communities, providers, families, and others? • Has the state clearly articulated the process for making a final decision about governance based on stakeholder feedback? • Are there dedicated funds to support the process? • Does the state have a plan for following up on the process after a decision about a governance change has been made? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The process of discussing governance change demands high-level leadership from the governor or key legislators. Without that leadership, the conversation is not worth it. • The process should involve broad representation to ensure that multiple voices are heard. • If there is not adequate support for the process, it probably will not lead to a useful result. Time and resources are needed to address these complex issues. If the state is not willing to dedicate time and resources to the process of discussing a governance change, it is unlikely that a governance change will have a meaningful positive impact. • If a decision to change the state's governance structure is made, the process of the change itself will require ongoing engagement and support.

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2. Is the state clear on its overall goals for the early childhood system?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the state’s “north star” for its early childhood system? • What are the state’s key values for governance? • What outputs is the state trying to achieve? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the state does not have agreement on top priorities and goals for its early childhood system, it should establish that agreement before changing its governance system – and then shape its governance system to support its top priorities and goals. • There are certain values for a governance system that maybe consistent across states: coordination, alignment, sustainability, efficiency, and accountability. • The outputs of an effective system will be high quality, equitable, sustainable, efficient, and continuous.
3. What capacities will be needed to achieve the state’s early childhood goals?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the state effectively performing the critical functions of an early childhood system? • Does the state have the personnel it needs to be successful at multiple levels – agency leadership, agency management, and front-line staff? • Is the state designing a governance structure for the early childhood system of the past – or is it looking toward an early childhood system of the future, with dramatically increased access and higher-quality service? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every early childhood system has critical core functions (itemized in Section 3.A of <i>Getting There from Here</i>) that it must be able to perform. • Many states have struggled to maintain adequate capacity at multiple levels of state government – and it needs its personnel to have different skill sets at each level. • There are multiple challenges to developing and retaining skilled personnel in state government, which the state may need to address. • State agencies need a culture of truth-telling to be successful, which is not easy to create or maintain. • No state has a fully realized system of high-quality early childhood services with access for all children who need it. If the state is willing to commit to developing that system – rather than tinkering at the margins of the existing system – then that commitment should shape its conversation about governance.
4. Of the capacities needed to achieve the state’s goals, which are most	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What functions will most likely need to be housed at the state level to be implemented well? Possibilities include the distribution of funding, the measurement of quality, shaping the requirements for professionals, and communications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State governments create incentives for local action, and provide capacity. To be effective states must be strategic about how they leverage those incentives. • Functions that benefit from scale and consistency are likely to be better off at the state level. Functions that benefit from

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logically housed at the state level and which are most logically housed at the local level?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What supports are states providing for local innovation? • How can communities put in place the structures needed for decision-making? • How can roles be defined for success at the local level? • Is the state prepared to manage the state-local relationship on an ongoing basis? 	<p>deep and ongoing engagement with providers and families are likely to be better off at the local level.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • States play an indispensable role in ensuring equity. • Local collaboration can be valuable, but it requires authority and capacity to be successful – and the state has a key role in providing that authority and capacity.
5. Given the capacities needed at the state level to achieve the state's goals, what is the ideal configuration of that capacity in a governance structure?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the state focused on birth to five or birth to eight? • Is the state focused on early care and education (preschool, child care, and Head Start), or on a broader set of services? • Is it important to the state to create elevated leadership? • Is the state looking to decentralize services through a regional model? • Does the state see benefits to consolidating early childhood programs into a single agency? If so, which agency makes the most sense as a host? • Does the state see benefits to creating a standalone early childhood agency? • What interagency connective tissue has the state created, and how might it adapt to a new configuration of programs across agencies? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The choice of a state-level structure will be influenced by how strongly the state wants to connect early childhood to education, and by which specific programs and services the state wants to include in a governance change. • Some states have strongly prioritized creating higher-level leadership as part of a governance change. • Some states deliver services through decentralized or regional services, which can impact how state government is organized. • States should consider whether there is a particular size of agency that is likely to be most successful in the state's political landscape. • How independently agencies operate should influence the governance structure. • Consolidating programs into a single agency can provide benefits for managing a complex system. • Any agency having new programs added to its responsibilities must be prepared to deal with new constituencies, which requires preparation for both practical and cultural changes. • Regardless of where a state chooses to place early childhood services, there will be a need for connections across agencies – and those connections require dedicated capacity to manage. • In thinking about connections across the early childhood system states should recognize that intra-governmental connections and inside-outside connections are both important, and may require different support structures.

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6. If a decision is made to change governance, how should the state manage the process of governance change – and what capacities are needed for that process to be successful?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the state engaging the entire field in costing out the process of changing governance? • Has the state thought through all of the practical and cultural challenges of moving state staff from one agency to another? • Does the state have in place an effective process for managing change on an ongoing basis? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most state governments do not have a strong record of successful change management. States should think about what capacity they will need to manage change effectively. • Strong management will be needed for the change process to be effective. • The issues that arise in a governance change include both practical and cultural issues, both of which must be addressed on an ongoing basis for the process to succeed. • Governance changes have a major impact on state government employees and on key partners. The transition process must address the needs of both to be successful.
7. In the final cost-benefit analysis, is a change in governance worthwhile?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the state prepared to pay the real cost of a transition? • How realistic are the benefits the state is expecting from a governance change? • Is the state really building capacity, or is it just hoping that programs will benefit from a change of scenery? • Is the state really prepared to manage its system differently, or is it just “moving the silos closer together”? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moving programs from one agency to another is not a substitute for building the capacity needed for those programs to succeed. • All of the decisions in a governance plan represent tradeoffs. The costs and benefits inherent in those tradeoffs may change over time, so the state should think about its ongoing process for managing the evolution of its governance system. • Change is difficult even when it is important and worthwhile. The state should not minimize the impact of a change on its staff or its partners.