

Updating the “Ovals”: A Guide to Our Rationale

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This paper was prepared by Rachel Schumacher for the Build Initiative.

Many state leaders are engaged in efforts to increase the quality, coordination, and efficiency of services supporting young children and their families. The Early Childhood Systems Working Group (ECSWG) seeks to help states implement a system of systems that can provide an integrated continuum of policies, services and programs across early learning, early intervention, health and family support so that children and families thrive. Since 2006, a group of individuals from a diverse array of national organizations has met voluntarily to engage in a peer learning community and develop resources, as needed, for the early childhood field.

The most well-known contribution of the ECSWG is a simple graphic (often referred to as “the ovals”) depicting the intersection of critical early childhood service systems. A companion piece described core elements necessary to create a comprehensive and coordinated early childhood system. The ECSWG intentionally disseminated these graphics via a PowerPoint presentation and invited members of the field to use them as needed to further system-building efforts.

Since their creation, the ECSWG graphics have been widely used and adapted by national and state stakeholders to understand, communicate, and support policy improvements for states' systems. Variations on the “ovals” and “elements” concepts may be found in state planning and policy documents around the country. They have proved to be a powerful tool to convey a vision of a comprehensive early childhood system.

Now, members of the ECSWG have completed a process of revising these graphics. Those who endorse this revision are listed below. The ECSWG hopes these revised graphics will continue to fuel conversations about state early childhood system-building. This document has been prepared to share the rationale for this revision and explain key changes to the early childhood field.

Why Revise Now?

The revision process began in the fall of 2010. A number of factors influenced the decision of the members of the ECSWG to revise the 2006 graphics. The group wanted to:

- **Clarify some of the concepts or terms.** Some members of the group who work closely with state leaders on early childhood systems building noted that they have received repeated questions on the same points, indicating certain concepts or terms in the slides were not clear. For example, showing a dotted line around the Early Intervention oval caused confusion about whether or not this oval was a genuine part of the system. The “research and development” concept in the core elements did not seem to resonate with state leaders, and needed better definition and linkage to recognized state functions.

- **Incorporate lessons learned.** States have engaged in numerous approaches and gained new insights on enhancing their early childhood systems since 2006. ECSWG members were in the process of studying state developments in system building and publishing new analyses. The group wanted to update the graphics to reflect the lessons learned.
- **Reflect the evolving understanding of system-building in states.** When the graphics were first developed, a main goal of the ECSWG was to encourage states to move beyond efforts to better integrate early care and education systems to consider connections to health, family support, and early intervention. As this concept has become more commonly applied in state systems work, the ECSWG members wanted to ensure that the graphics continue to reflect aspirational goals and define the types of specific activities needed to truly promote quality, alignment, and efficiency within and across systems. Following this update to the graphics, the group sees a need for tools that outline specific options for states in more detail.

What Has Changed?

The ECSWG reviewed the original graphic thoroughly to ensure it clearly conveys members' thinking about building comprehensive early childhood systems in states. The revised version articulates guiding values and principles; focuses on the results of a comprehensive early childhood system; and updates the definitions of required functions of such a system.

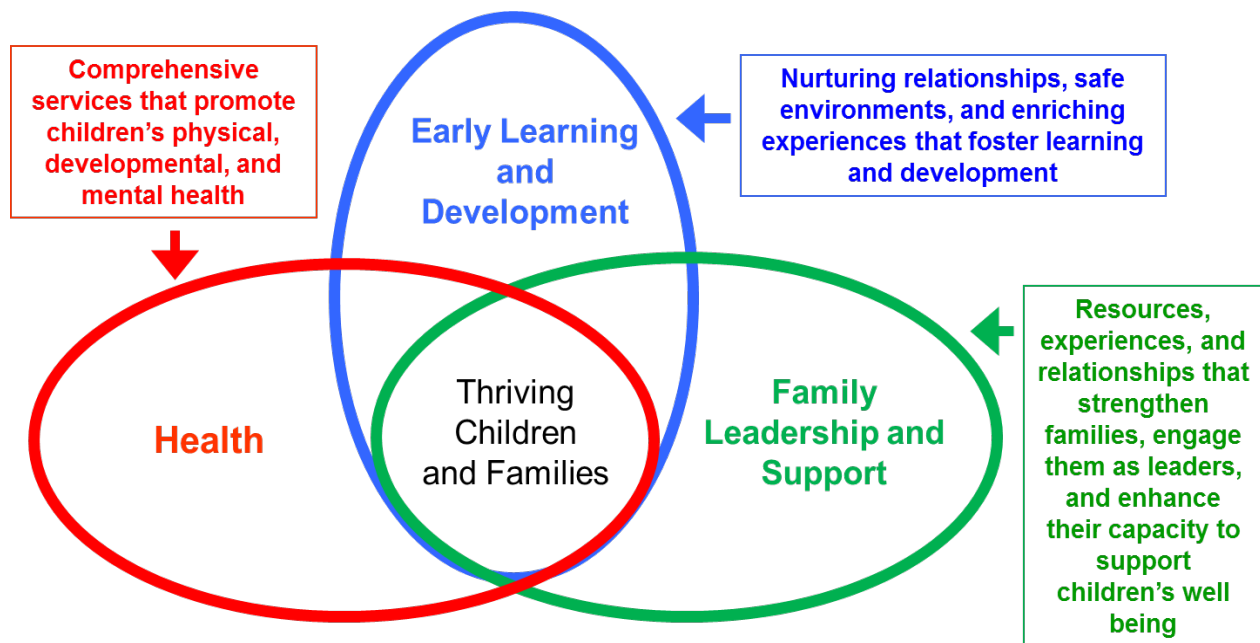
Articulates Guiding Values and Principles

Values and principles can serve as critical guideposts to center state leaders' decisions and assess the extent to which the state system is doing what it intends for children and families across all of "the ovals." The ECSWG members sought to identify values and principles that are fundamental to meeting the needs of all children and families in a comprehensive early childhood system but not obvious from looking at the graphics alone. For example, our review of state-adapted graphics found several mentioned the importance of cultural competence and connections to communities. The new ECSWG graphics include the following list of guiding values and principles that states can use to drive the continuous development of a comprehensive state early childhood system:

- **Reach all children and families and as early as possible with needed services and supports.** To maximize the effectiveness of services, children and families at-risk of poor outcomes should be identified and receive appropriate services as early as possible in children's lives.
- **Genuinely include and effectively accommodate children with special needs.** Accommodating children with special needs should not be a system unto itself. Children with special needs are part of all the "ovals" and appropriate linkages and services should be integrated throughout the system of systems.
- **Reflect and respect the strengths, needs, values, languages, cultures and communities of children and families.** The population of young children is becoming increasingly diverse. In order to effectively tailor services to all children, state comprehensive early childhood systems should take steps to understand the diversity of their population and intentionally review all systems to ensure they are accessible and respectful of all cultures and communities.

- **Ensure stability and continuity of services along a continuum from prenatal to school entry and beyond.** Early childhood development throughout this period is critical to future health and success. State systems and policies should promote health, family strength, and early learning and development starting with expectant families and extending through the transition to school.
- **Ease access for families and transitions for children.** States should strive to make it easy for families to access and maintain services for themselves and their children within and across systems as well as smooth transitions as children age.
- **Value parents as decision makers and leaders.** Across all three systems, parents should be engaged meaningfully in making decisions about their children and contribute to program and policy improvement decision.
- **Catalyze and maximize investment, and foster innovation.** A state system should continually encourage cross-system efficiencies and dynamic, creative solutions to problems.

What Results Should A Comprehensive System Deliver?



Focuses on the Results of a Comprehensive Early Childhood System

The ECSWG had extensive discussion about the whether and how to change the graphic showing four ovals – health and mental health, family support, early learning, and early intervention/special needs. The members recognized that the simple image of four “ovals” has become widespread in the field, and that change would be difficult. On the other hand, members felt that the graphics would lose their power and effectiveness if they did not reflect forward-thinking in the field. Recognizing the 2006 version was developed by a group focused

primarily on early care and education, the revision process intentionally included new participation from leaders with expertise in health, family support, and early intervention systems (see p. 7).

After much deliberation, the ECSWG offers an updated version of the graphic and definitions, based on what we've learned and experienced since the originals were introduced in 2006. In the new graphic, the ECSWG made significant changes to:

- **Identify thriving children and families as the desired result of a comprehensive early childhood system.** Many have asked the ECSWG members what should be in the middle or the outcome of a comprehensive early childhood system in the graphic. The ECSWG believes the ultimate result of system building should be thriving families and children. States may want to add further meaning to that result as they define and coordinate leadership.
- **Define each oval according to the results those systems should deliver, not as static policy areas.** The ECSWG sought to define what each of the systems supporting a comprehensive early childhood system should deliver based on states' evolving visions for them. The new "ovals" graphic includes:
 - **Health:** Comprehensive services that promote children's physical, developmental, and mental health.
 - **Early Learning and Development:** Nurturing relationships, safe environments, and enriching experiences that foster learning and development.
 - **Family Leadership and Support:** Resources, experiences, and relationships that strengthen families, engage them as leaders, and enhance their capacity to support children's well-being.
- **Promote integration of all children with special developmental needs across the early childhood system.** The original graphic showed early intervention/special needs as a dotted oval to signify the need for more integration of those services within the other systems. At the time, the group believed a separate oval was necessary because special needs services were needed by only a subset of the full child population. The new graphic no longer depicts a separate "special needs" oval for two reasons.
 - *Expand the understanding of "special needs."* There were concerns that the phrase "early intervention/special needs" was too narrow; it was being interpreted as meaning the services associated with certain funding streams, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B, Section 619 services for preschool children and Part C services for infants and toddlers with delays or disabilities. Members of the ECSWG want to see the pressing needs of other "special populations" included – for example, children who are in families facing multiple challenges, children with parents who are English Language Learners, children experiencing homelessness, and children in the child welfare system, in addition to those who have developmental delays or disabilities.
 - *Acknowledge that special populations are present throughout the early learning and development, health, and family leadership and support systems.* The ECSWG wanted to articulate a vision of early childhood systems in which support services for children and families in these "special populations" would be systematically integrated in all service areas. Members also recognized

that children and families experiencing multiple risks to health, family strength, and early learning and development will need intentional system-wide planning across systems. Therefore, we included this concept in the fundamental values and principles and removed the fourth oval from the visual.

- **Emphasize the active role of families.** The ECSWG recognized growing interest in partnering with families and providing meaningful opportunities to engage families as leaders in the states, not only the recipients of services. Several states have adapted the original graphics to add definition to the roles of families in systems.

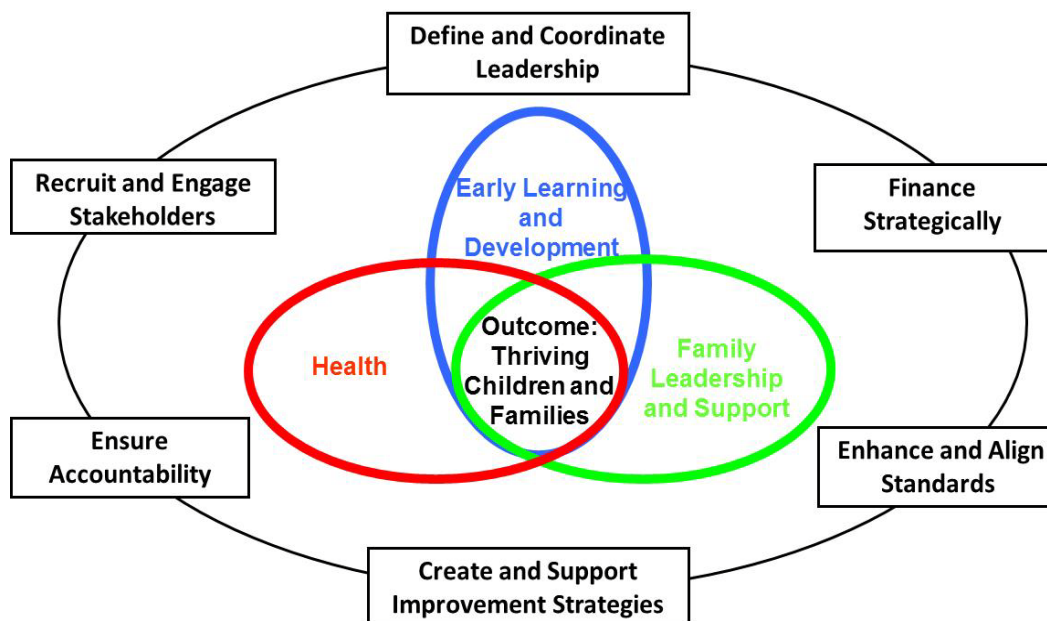
Updates the Key Functions of a Comprehensive Early Childhood System

Many members of the ECSWG wanted to update the graphic representing the “core elements” of a state early childhood system to reflect new experiences in state system-building activities since 2006. The overarching goals of the group were to ensure that the graphic described a vision of the future in state early childhood systems and that the language used under each activity made sense across all included service delivery systems.

The original graphic included seven categories, but the new one has been streamlined to six. In the new graphic, the ECSWG made changes to:

- **Define the functions necessary for states to have a coordinated early childhood system.** Rather than using the term “elements” this graphic uses the term “functions” and describes active steps states must take to integrate services for children and families. For example, instead of “financing,” the ECSWG calls for “financing strategically,” and instead of “monitoring” – “ensuring accountability.”

What are the Functions of a Comprehensive Early Childhood System?



- **Revise the functions and their definitions to reflect where states are heading in system-building.** The ECSWG made several changes to better reflect the aspirations states have for their systems. For example, the heading “standards” is now “enhance and align standards.” ECSWG members wanted to convey that the most forward thinking states are not just setting standards but building-in ongoing review and improvement of standards, as well as working to promote alignment within and across early childhood service systems.
- **Ensure cross-system relevance.** In several cases, ECSWG members felt that the original graphic used terms that could be interpreted as too specific to early care and education. For example, “provider/practitioner support” has changed to “create and support improvement strategies.”
- **Better depict the relationship between functions, systems, and desired results.** The revised graphic shows the functions of a comprehensive early childhood system circled around the system of systems, which in turn result in the central outcome of thriving children and families. This is meant to show that the functions act as the “glue” and support for connecting the three systems into a comprehensive system. Only when all these functions and systems are effectively connected can the desired result of thriving children and families occur.

Next Steps

The ECSWG plans to develop additional new tools to assist state leaders based on our revised systems and functions definition work. These will include materials to help frame state discussions, conduct a self-assessment of their early childhood system functions, and specific examples of state system-building policies and strategies.

For more information on the ECSWG see <http://www.buildinitiative.org/content/early-childhood-systems-working-group-ecswg>. To provide feedback on your state experience with ECSWG resources, please contact Kathy Glazer, the Build Initiative, kathyglazer@gmail.com.

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