



State Early Childhood Advisory Councils

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Background

The Vital Role of State Policy

No state currently has the ideal comprehensive early childhood system to meet the needs of the 21st century. Current programs, policies and services for young children and their families often operate in isolation, at cross purposes, or without enough resources to meet critical needs. State policy is at the heart of the fundamental changes needed.

Although a great deal is known about what policies will make the most difference for young children, many states lack the capacity to properly implement those policies. While the federal role in supporting high quality early learning can and should increase, states have long been leaders on the issue. Successful state policies in the education arena will often build off federal policies and use federal law for leverage.

Federal Legislation: Head Start Reauthorization¹

Section 642B of the *Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007* mandates that the Governor of the State shall

Designate or establish a council to serve as the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care for children from birth to school entry...

The Governor may designate an existing entity in the State to serve as the State Advisory Council, and shall appoint representatives to the State Advisory Council at the Governor's discretion.

The legislation indicates that the federal government will award grants to support the work of Councils, which would be required to have certain members and work on specific tasks. Under the legislation, it appears that states are required to create Councils regardless of whether the federal government provides funding.

¹ The federal legislation refers to the creation in each state of a State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care. Councils that currently exist and perform the functions described in the legislation have different names in different states. Two prominent examples are Illinois' Early Learning Council and Washington State's Early Learning Advisory Council. For the sake of clarity, the Build Initiative and the Smart Start National Technical Assistance Center are adopting the language of the National Governors Association (NGA) and using the name Early Childhood Advisory Council.

The Purpose of State Early Childhood Advisory Councils

State Early Childhood Advisory Councils can serve a wide range of roles in a state, depending on the progress the state has made to date in its work on early childhood. Clarity about the primary mission of a Council is essential to shape decisions about its membership and scope.

In states that already have a strong commitment to serving young children, Councils can help coordinate among key players and develop a coherent agenda. In states with legislator and public support for early learning expansion, Councils can help channel energy productively into systems building.

In states unsure of their path in early childhood, Councils can help make life easier for elected officials by helping to develop a clear roadmap.

In states where the commitment to early learning is weak, Councils can generate enthusiasm with legislators and the public, and help strategize about how to strengthen commitment.

The Council provides an excellent opportunity to leverage federal investment. Federal law brings many of the right participants to the table, but does not demand that they work together to build or advocate for a unifying agenda. Leaders like governors and funders are well positioned to make that demand.

While Councils can be an outstanding forum in which to build support for early learning, task forces and councils are often created to avoid progress, not to further it. Funders and participants should ensure that their investments in Councils have some hope of affecting the process of policy change. Councils are not an end in themselves – they are a means to an end. Governors and funders with defined policy goals should think of strategies to use Councils to help achieve those goals. If the Councils do not have defined goals, they will not be part of a successful strategy toward comprehensive policy change.

Fitting In with Other Advisory Councils

In some states, numerous councils exist of varying productivity devoted to narrower early learning issues. Members of a new Council should recognize that their role is not necessarily to supplant those other councils but to help them succeed and ensure that they benefit from a new perspective.

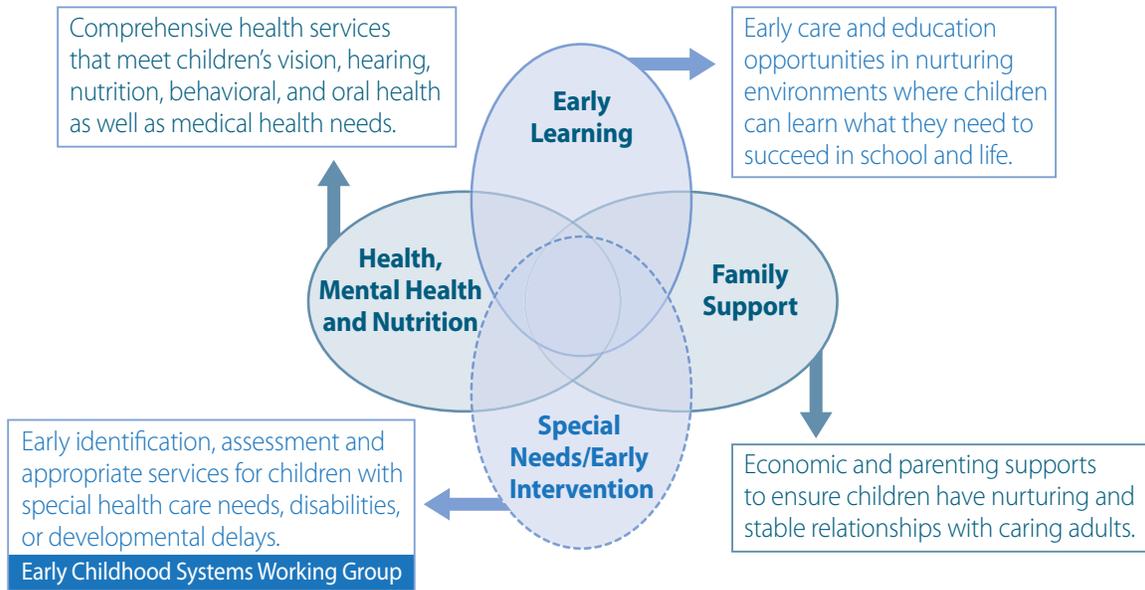
If political leaders do intend for a new Council to supplant any existing councils, they should make that clear in the new Council's authorizing legislation or executive order. If the Council's relationship with other state recommendatory bodies is poorly defined, it will be hard for the Council (or the other bodies) to operate effectively.

What is “Early Learning”?

The breadth of a Council's scope will depend heavily on the policy landscape in the state, and the number and role of other advisory bodies working on related issues. In some states, “early learning” will be more narrowly defined to focus primarily on early care in education. In other states, a wider definition will encompass health, mental health, and family support. In many states, there will be tension as to which approach to take.

The Early Childhood Systems Working Group has prepared a framework for thinking about how early learning issues interrelate with health, family support, and special needs.

Early Childhood Development System



Membership on a Successful Early Childhood Advisory Council

Membership is a critical issue for Early Childhood Advisory Councils. To be effective, Councils need to engage a diverse group of leaders carefully selected to achieve the Council’s stated purpose.

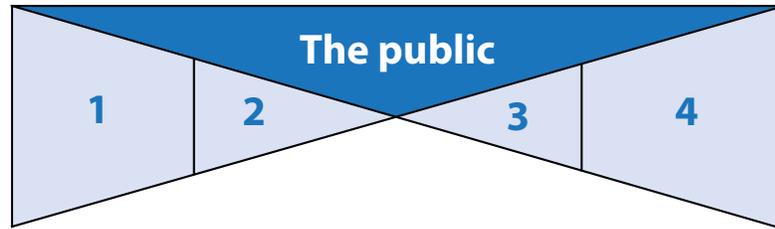
The Head Start Reauthorization legislation states that the Council shall include the State Director of Head Start Collaboration and “to the maximum extent possible” should include representation from the following:

- The state education agency
- The state agency overseeing child care
- Local education agencies
- Institutions of Higher Education
- Local providers of early childhood education
- Head Start Agencies, including Indian Head Start and migrant and seasonal programs
- The state agency responsible for IDEA, part C
- The state agency responsible for children’s mental health and health care

In addition, the Governor may make discretionary appointments.



A Model for Thinking about Council Membership



One can think of four types of actors involved in the policy process:

"1s" – Powerful, general-purpose elected and appointed officials who:

- must decide on a wide range of issues and move quickly through them
- may care about early learning but may not be steeped in the policy details
- are heavily influenced by political imperatives
- examples: Governors, legislative leaders, state board of education chairs, state superintendents

"2s" – Political translators who:

- can be internal or external to the state policy infrastructure
- understand the pressures on the "1s" and are trusted to help them navigate the pressures
- have content knowledge to help them balance policy and politics
- can be viewed warily by those skeptical of the policy process
- examples: empowered gubernatorial advisors, knowledgeable legislators, lobbyists

"3s" – Policy translators who:

- can be internal or external to the state policy infrastructure
- have regular contact with "the field" and strong program knowledge
- many may come from a program background
- may have a nuanced understanding of the political process but often aren't political themselves
- examples: state early childhood program staff, state child care oversight staff, policy analysts at advocacy and membership organizations, business and community leaders

"4s" – Program personnel and line staff who:

- are directly involved in educating children
- have no direct, personal involvement in the state policy process
- rely on membership organizations to keep them informed of policy process

Some individuals can play roles at more than one level. For example, if powerful legislators have substantial content knowledge, they can function as both "1s" and "2s". The public pressures all of these groups in different ways.

Whatever the purpose of the Council, it should include a mix of all four levels. The levels should not be thought of as hierarchical; all are essential to the policy process. The balance of membership should shift based on the purpose of the Council. For example, to generate enthusiasm and build public will, the membership should focus more heavily on “1s” to give the Council the visibility and political heft to move an agenda and on “4s” to provide grassroots visibility and credibility. If the purpose is to harness enthusiasm and define the policy agenda, the membership should focus more heavily on “2s” and “3s” to allow the translators to package consensus policy for already invested grass roots and political leaders.

Education policy change – including early learning policy change – often struggles when there is a lack of trust and cooperation between the political world (“1s” and “2s”) and the program world (“3s” and “4s”). Having strength at both the “2” and “3” levels is essential and it is also important that the Council facilitate cooperative work. When political leaders and advisors ignore the advice of program leaders, the result can be bad policy that is politically expedient. When program leaders try to do political work, the result is often a lack of political progress because elected officials and program personnel don’t connect comfortably.

In creating an Early Childhood Advisory Council, pay attention to the traditional K-12 infrastructure. Most K-12 membership organizations (such as teacher unions and associations of school boards, superintendents, and principals) will have an institutional position supportive of early childhood but no primary focus or expertise on early childhood. Participation on councils can help these organizations learn more and become strong allies. These organizations bring a valuable perspective to the table. They can help formulate policies that lead to a smooth transition from early learning to kindergarten. They also frequently have close ties to a great number of legislators as a result of their work on K-12 issues. On the flip side, failure to involve K-12 organizations early can lead to needless skirmishes that will inhibit progress.

Other key considerations when determining membership of Early Childhood Advisory Councils include:

- Racial/ethnic and cultural diversity is important to credibility and to meet the needs of each state’s diverse child population
- Geographic diversity is necessary in many states
- Higher education will be an indispensable participant, particularly relating to workforce development
- Other sectors active in a particular state may be able to make significant contributions
- Allow committees to engage individuals who are not members of the council—this lets organizations with a narrow focus to target their involvement most effectively

One tactic that may be used to broaden representation is to allow committees to engage individuals who are not members of the council. This allows for some organizations to use several different people as representatives and allows for organizations with a narrow focus to target their involvement most effectively.

Staffing Early Childhood Advisory Councils

The ongoing work of coordinating and implementing an early learning agenda requires staff support. It is unclear whether federal funding will be sufficient to truly support the work of Councils. Even if federal funding is available, it may be provided to state agencies who do not feel pressure to go beyond the Council’s basic mission of coordinating services. For Councils to reach their true potential, funders will likely have to provide support for staff work to help the Council.

A local advocacy organization, if it is credible, can provide staffing support to a Council, which may be a way to help develop capacity in that organization. For example, in Illinois the Early Learning Council has been staffed by the Ounce of Prevention Fund and the deep respect for the Ounce’s work by Council members has been a key component of its success.

The Role of National and Local Funders

In supporting the work of developing an agenda, funders can help define the broad parameters of the agenda, to ensure that it is one that they support. The Build Initiative funded work in Illinois that led to the creation of the *Preschool for All* plan, and a similar model can be used in other states.

Different funders may seek to support different kinds of projects with relation to the Council. In addition to support for ongoing staff work, some funders may wish to support the development of specific research or policy papers, or public awareness materials. National funders can work with individual states or a network of states, potentially helping states develop new and innovative policy directions. Local funders may also be able to work with Councils to fund specific projects of interest to them or even to fund participation on the Council by a local interest or advocacy organization. In some instances, foundation funding can be used to bring a national perspective to local issues – but in many others, it can be used to help develop capacity locally. Foundations can help drive progress through leveraged investments.

The Work of the Council – Striking a Balance between Quality and Quantity

Finding a balance between quality and quantity in state-funded early learning programs is often a central struggle of Early Childhood Advisory Councils. Many advocates who specialize in early childhood will seek to improve the quality of programming for at-risk children, even if the added costs limit the number of children who can enroll at existing funding levels. But more politically inclined members may want to add as many kids as possible, even if quality is not high. Councils can be a good forum in which to negotiate the right balance.

A certain minimum threshold of quality is absolutely essential, and funders, as a condition of involvement, should demand that Councils commit to some baseline of quality in programming.

Generating Enthusiasm or Harnessing Enthusiasm?

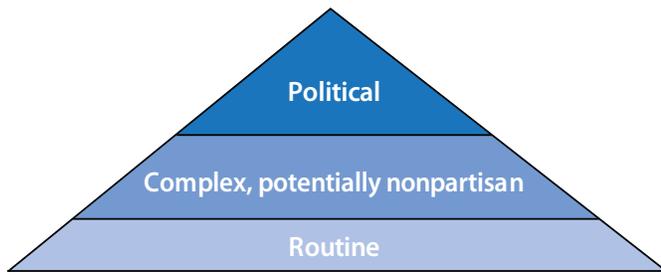
A Council focused on generating enthusiasm will want to focus on awareness and outreach, and explaining the importance of high-quality early learning. If enthusiasm is limited, then the pace of policy change may be slow. While a Council can seek to accelerate change, it should also use the time to develop the policy set for implementation when enthusiasm picks up.

A Council focused on harnessing enthusiasm must still work to improve public awareness, but will need to have a real sense of urgency about ensuring that the state is implementing the right policies. In a growing system, new stresses will be placed on infrastructure that may require legislative or administrative resolution.

In many states there may be tension between those who seek to use the Council as an advocacy engine and those who seek to use it for policy development. Ultimately, a Council can do both, and the balance may shift over time.

A Model for Thinking about the Right Issues for a Council

Key issues will undoubtedly vary from state to state, depending on the state's political culture and the early learning program's stage of development. Nascent Councils should identify issues that are critical needs, and that are well-suited for resolution in the Council forum. By choosing the right issues at the outset, Councils can develop a track record of credibility that will help them expand their scope.



There are three basic levels to the pyramid of issues a state legislature deals with:

- Top level: the most political issues, which often define party platforms and are addressed in campaign literature such as tax policy, gun control, tort reform.
- Bottom level: issues that are primarily local, uncontroversial or where legislation does not really make any impact.

- Middle level: issues that are not strictly partisan, but that involve significant complexities and require strong content expertise to resolve properly.

Early Childhood Advisory Councils may do their best work pursuing “middle-tier” issues where the expertise of Council members is most likely to shape sound public policy. Legislatures often struggle with these issues because they have many policy areas to keep track of and lack content expertise. It can be time-consuming to sort out due to the nuanced policy differences among advocacy groups. A Council can play a valuable role by working through these issues before presentation to the legislature. Many federal-state coordination issues are middle-tier issues as well.

Councils are Excellent Forums for Administrative Issues

Many issues relating to program infrastructure or resource distribution will be administrative rather than legislative. While engaging individual legislators in the work of Councils may be difficult, early learning–related program staff from state administrative agencies are core participants in the work of any Council.

Councils can be an outstanding forum for resolving administrative issues, because they pull together the relevant agencies and the most interested advocates. Council members from advocacy organizations must be sensitive to state agency prerogatives. But advocacy agencies can also help mid-level agency staff who would like to see some of the prerogatives adjusted, because those advocacy organizations may have better access to policy leaders than state program staff.

Federal Law Helps to Define the Council’s Issues

Federal Head Start reauthorization legislation defines certain issues that Councils must address to qualify for federal support. Several general tasks are outlined including:

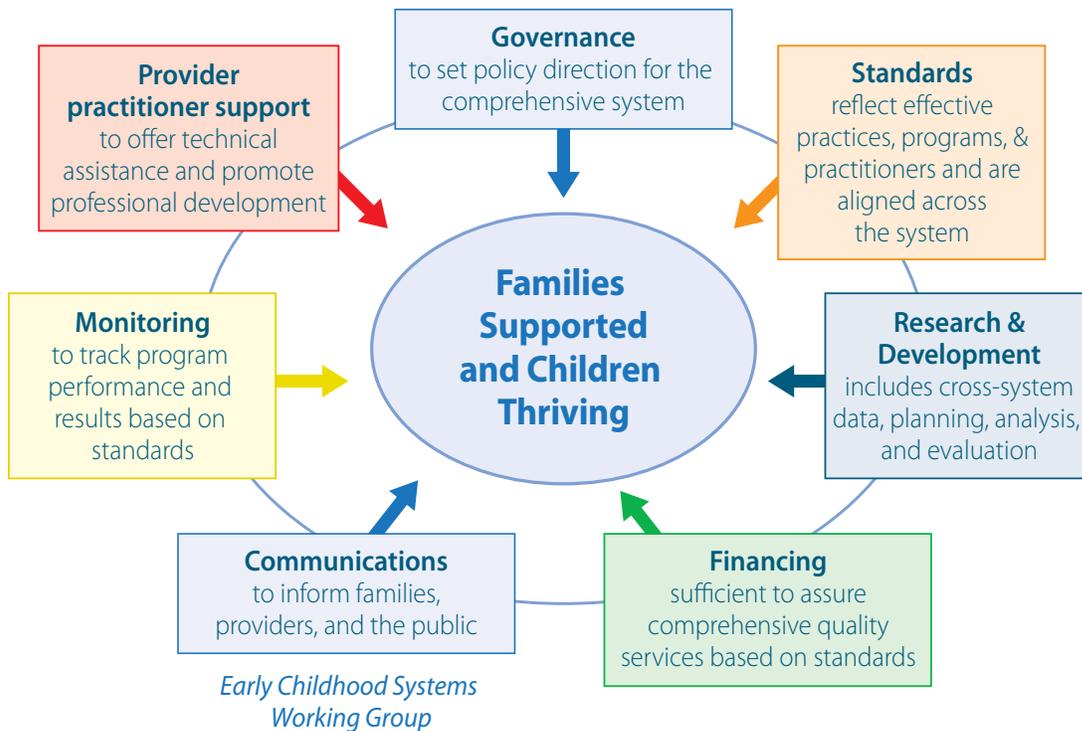
- Conducting needs assessments
- Identifying barriers to collaboration between federal and state programs
- Developing recommendations for increasing the participation of children in early childhood services
- Developing recommendations for a unified data collection system
- Supporting professional development
- Assessing the capacity of higher education to support the development of early childhood educators
- Making recommendations to improve early learning standards

The legislation does not describe the work of Councils in great detail, leaving flexibility for states to take different approaches to address these issues and to add others. The legislation clearly indicates that the Governor may assign additional duties.

Early Childhood Systems Working Group Recommendation

The framework developed by the Early Childhood Systems Working Group outlines the core elements of an early learning system. The framework can inform the work of new Councils and suggest possible committee structures.

Core Elements of an Early Childhood Development System



While existing templates can be helpful to new Councils, each Council should take the initiative to develop its own structure, so that members of the Council feel ownership over its work.

Developing a Strong Role for Councils – Putting the Pieces Together

Early Childhood Advisory Councils can be an excellent forum for setting state early learning policy in a credible and consensus-based manner. The role of Councils should be limited to those issues on which it can add value, but there are a host of issues on which good Councils can help drive state policy change.

Federal law provides a baseline of support for the work of Councils, but to reach their full potential they must go beyond the minimal requirements of federal law.

To develop a strong role and achieve their full potential, Councils must put together the pieces outlined in this paper:

- Create a shared understanding of why leaders are investing time and energy in its creation
- Recruit a membership that adequately represents key constituencies and is prepared to help develop and move an agenda
- Develop a work plan that focuses on issues that are essential to the field and on which the Council can speak credibly
- Reevaluate regularly the membership and mission to ensure that once a work plan is developed, the Council will continue working to see that the plan is implemented.