



# The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems through State/Local Initiatives

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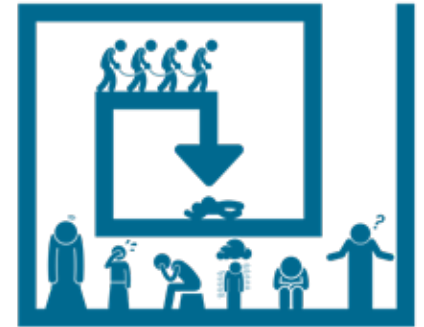
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# Introduction

Former Smart Start leaders Gerry Cobb and Karen Ponder originally wrote the BUILD publication *The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems through State/Local Initiatives* in 2014. We started revisions before the world weathered the COVID-19 crisis, the economic downturn it brought, and the racial inequities it exacerbated. Communities of color, indigenous communities, and others who historically have been and currently are negatively impacted by racism were also particularly negatively affected by COVID-19. These events, however, brought into sharp focus the need for state and community connections to better support young children and families. The re-energized and broader racial equity movement has called attention to the importance of bridging the divide between the marginalized families and communities who experience the problems in state-funded programs/services and the proposed and implemented solutions and programs. We also saw, however, that state systems can be flexible, innovative, and inclusive. The circumstances of 2020, and state and community responses to them, underscored the benefits of well aligned systems and equitable engagement, as well as the detrimental effects of misaligned, siloed, disjointed, and disconnected services, or no systems of care or support at all.




The early care and education system is made up of a multitude of systems, policies, and bureaucratic mazes that create numerous barriers to accessing services.

These disjointed and onerous systems and policies have directly contributed to the vulnerability of families, many of whom are overwhelmed and exhausted by their attempts to get their basic needs met and often feel powerless to change the support systems

upon which they rely. The state of our infrastructure has been laid bare: we can see that many of our “support systems” not only are not meeting the needs of young children and families, but hard-to-negotiate bureaucracies are contributing to the poor outcomes for children, particularly children of color, across the nation. In this way, many of our existing systems are contributing to the vicious cycle of oppression and exclusion that runs counter to our democratic values.

But there are also bright spots. Many states have tested a variety of state-local models of early





childhood governance to bolster their efforts to support families in developing their young children’s skills, abilities, and health and mental health before they enter school. Additionally, many state and community leaders are actively seeking solutions to the persistent disparities by race, ethnicity, home language, immigration status, and income. As the number of states that formally and deliberately link state and local work has grown, improvements have been made in systemic coordination and results for young children and families.

Similarly, responses to the economic, racial and health crises catalyzed by Covid-19 appear to have been more robust and tailored in states that have developed infrastructure at the community level. Leaders of these local entities are often trusted in their communities and can mobilize and allocate resources more quickly where they are needed than states that lack such infrastructure. State and local early childhood entities working in concert greatly facilitate circles of cooperation that move them closer to achieving the desired equitable outcomes for children.

**Throughout this document the term “state-local model” is used to mean any statewide system of county or regional coalitions that are a formal part of the state’s early childhood system.**

These coalitions work in partnership with the lead state early childhood agency as well as all state agencies and organizations that work on behalf of young children. They are often created by state legislation and funded in state budgets. Within their communities, local coalitions convene and form a partnership with other child-serving agencies and organizations for joint planning and action on behalf of young children and their families. These local coalitions are responsible for the direct services for young children within their counties or regions and work closely with local families and the state to find better solutions. Locally delivered services are especially critical for the children made vulnerable by the under-resourcing of communities, and families who face inequity, disproportionality, discrimination, and bias based on race, ethnicity, and social class.

Recognizing that many of our current systems have been built with a fundamental bias toward serving those who are privileged, state and community leaders must challenge themselves to work towards designing systems with equity for children and families at the core. Building systems is complex work, but the poorly functioning systems that exist now can be adapted to be responsive to the needs of families and young children.

Since families and service providers have important knowledge and experience to contribute to the systems of programs and services in which they participate, including them in designing better systems is critical to eliminating the biases that currently exist. We also know that change happens most significantly at the local level and intentional efforts that include families and caregivers as full partners in the work create stronger systems.

Therefore, designing inclusive local structures that purposefully connect and collaborate with state infrastructure is a key strategy for advancing equity.

This paper highlights the significant benefit of developing a statewide community-level infrastructure as a core component of a statewide early childhood system. It provides an overview of the key lessons BUILD team members and systems-building partners have learned over the years. The recommendations and reflections stem directly from the learnings from more than 20 models across the nation and highlight the most successful elements from the 12 most successful states, including lessons learned over the past 25 years from these states and communities. This document begins with core principles of inclusive systems design. It underscores the importance of alignment and communication and offers eight key elements of approaches that are working well in state/local models across the nation.

Ultimately, this document is written for people who care about and are interested in bringing equity and alignment into local and state systems of care, health, and education. State and community policy leaders are the primary audience, as they lead state and local efforts to bring greater alignment into the systems within which they work. We also think this document can be helpful to anyone who cares about and has a leadership role within policy and practices that intersect with children and families at any level of the systems related to health, care, and/or education at the community (town, city), county, regional, or state level. The goal is to share successes and lessons learned with those who are envisioning or working toward creating a statewide system that connects the state's work on behalf of young children with the early childhood work of communities, so that all children and their families are included and have the experiences and resources they need to thrive.




# State-Local Infrastructures are a Critical Part of Early Childhood Systems Development

**STATE-LOCAL INFRASTRUCTURES ARE A CRITICAL PART OF EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT.** At the root of all state-local early childhood partnerships is the desire to improve services and supports for young children, including programs and policies that are not working well, and to create new programs and strategies where they are needed. State and local partnerships are generally focused on advancing public policy and investment for early education, health, and family engagement and on getting better results for young children and their families through a variety of community-based programs and strategies. State-local models of early childhood systems differ in their scope and approach due to the variations in history, context, political environment, and leadership.

While states should have goals and expectations for equitable systems, change happens most significantly at the local level through intentional efforts, practices, and policy decisions. A strong partnership between the state and local entities provides the best opportunity to meet the needs of all children and families.

Creating **formal** connections and building partnerships between the state and local communities is a hallmark of state-local systems work. Building strong connections among communities, and between communities and the state, unifies the work on behalf of young children, but it takes time and requires ongoing support. This work pays off, as states that have built intentional infrastructure between the state and communities have greater capacity to mobilize and respond quickly to challenges and opportunities.





# Core Principles that Guide the Work of Inclusive Systems Building

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- **Children and families live in communities** and most federal and state funding sources are administered at the state level. Therefore, state and local-level systems must be aligned and sufficiently funded so that local structures can respond to the diverse needs of children and families in their communities.
- **Family and caregiver voice must be central to local and state efforts.** Families are experts on their children and children thrive and grow within families. Meaningful family engagement involves including parents and caregivers from the beginning to benefit from their experiences, ideas, and assets, and to hear about their interests and most pressing needs. It also involves engaging them throughout the process so that they can offer potential solutions to issues and set the direction for change.
- **A diverse array of families and service providers should be represented at all levels of leadership and governance.** The most successful state-local partnerships are moving beyond the idea of simply welcoming all forms of diversity and are now designing inclusive tables that share power and decision making with families and caregivers, especially those who have been marginalized.
- **Local engagement, decision making, and buy-in are critical for creating change.** This buy-in depends upon communities having a part in the decision-making process and upon the state respecting and placing value on the voices of community members. There are imperatives that the state must set and monitor—including setting standards and promoting equity to assure local control is not discriminatory. However, local leaders are not simply implementers of programs or policies designed and mandated by the state. Local leaders benefit greatly by partnering with families (especially those furthest from opportunity) to design strategies, services, and programs that best meet family needs within the community.
- **Systems thinking is essential to guide the development of programs and services in communities.** Children and families living in households and communities furthest from opportunity often intersect with government departments and agencies, each with its own set of bureaucratic rules and regulations. This places unnecessary burden on families. State leaders can change this by coming at this work from a systems perspective that is family centered and not from a “*What programs should we fund?*” perspective.

- Since young children and families connect to many child- and family-serving systems, **a cross-sector approach to systems building is critical.** These sectors include early care and education, public health, mental health, child welfare, Medicaid, housing, transportation, and others. State and local agencies must work together across all sectors to make best use of resources and achieve the best outcomes possible.
- **State-level leaders need to value and fund a system that is responsive and dynamic so that state and local programs and services can work together to meet the changing needs of each and every child.** Statewide community-level coordination ensures the reach and scale necessary to serve children and families well. For a system to be successful, it must be both top-down and bottom-up with strong feedback loops. It takes strong leadership to understand and support that ideal balance. Responsive state-local approaches leverage local champions and build advocacy capacity within the state as well as ensure successful local implementation. **A state-level entity must support the development and implementation of local or regional early childhood entities to foster their success.**
- **Using disaggregated data is essential to identifying disparities, gaps, and over-saturation.** Data illuminates the needs of young children and their families and helps ground the coalition's focus in ways that achieve the mission and purpose of the state-local collaboration. Using both qualitative and quantitative data throughout the process helps make continually informed decisions and helps tell the story of progress made over time.
- **Use a public/private approach at both the state and local levels.** Stronger systems are built when government and the private sector work together and maximize both public and private funding and human resources.







# Getting Started: Integration and Alignment between State and Local Communities

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Historically, the planning of early childhood programs and services has been managed primarily at the state level, based on the guidelines for federal and state funding. States then direct funding to the local level for designated programs to serve specific categories of children and families. (Head Start is an exception to this, with funding going directly from federal to local programs.) The two most common reasons that states begin to consider formally connecting state and local work are:

- (1) To respond to the voices of parents and providers who are frustrated with trying to navigate the myriad programs and services that operate with different rules and guidelines.
- (2) To address the challenges and gaps in services that stem from a lack of alignment between the state's programs and services.

The states that have created a statewide approach to state and local early childhood systems development share a commitment to making connections to and among community infrastructure, families, programs, and the state's early childhood system governance. Despite variations across states, these statewide community-level efforts share some characteristics and strategies for developing successful partnerships. No two state-local systems are exactly alike, but one major commonality is reported by both state and local leaders as critical to their success: the state and local entities are integrated and aligned, and formal feedback loops exist between the state and local entities, which helps to assure successful alignment.

The early pioneers in statewide systems building found that a statewide early childhood system is better achieved, and young children and their families are best served, when there are direct linkages and formal feedback mechanisms between the state and local systems, allowing for two-way communications on a regular basis. Susan DeVenny, who led South Carolina First Steps for many years, reiterated this. **“One of the most important parts of our state and local work is the ability we have to learn from each other, which fosters better decisions in Columbia and in every community.”**

States have often found that because of the complexity of the undertaking and the significant needs that exist, when creating a state-local model, **it is important to acknowledge the**

**parts of the system that are already working and to build on existing strong, effective structures and programs.** In assessing what is already working well, leaders need to hear from and get the perspective of the families that the system and programs serve. The next step is working to fill gaps and address unmet needs. This approach saves time and money that would otherwise be spent recreating what is working well and provides an opportunity to revise and expand where needed. Creating local structures that are intentionally built with the people who have been historically marginalized is the best way to dismantle the inequitable structures that exist in early childhood systems.

Creating formal connections and building partnerships between the state and local communities is a hallmark of state-local systems work. Building strong connections among communities, and between communities and the state, unifies the work on behalf of young children, but it takes time and requires ongoing support. This work pays off, as states that have built intentional infrastructure between the state and communities have greater capacity to mobilize and respond quickly to challenges and opportunities. The most enduring examples include an administrative structure with statutory or gubernatorial authority granted to the locale for getting specific results and outcomes for children and their families. These local entities, which are typically non-profit or government organizations, include local governing bodies, typically boards or councils, whose members may be specified by the state in statute or rules. States that utilize this type of model include:

- Arizona: First Things First
- North Carolina: Smart Start
- South Carolina: First Steps

In some states, the structure is an independent council that operates through a local nonprofit organization that acts as its fiscal agent. Colorado Early Childhood Councils, Oregon Hubs, and Vermont Building Bright Future Coalitions are examples of states with this model. In other states, the structure is part of local government, such as First 5 California, which is part of each county's government. Iowa Early Childhood offered several options to their communities in building local structures. The communities could choose a nonprofit organization (new or existing) or a quasi-government entity through which to receive state funding. According to Shanell Wagler, director of Early Childhood Iowa, **"The benefit of having options was**



**that communities could build upon what they already had in place and were not required to create a new entity if the existing organization could meet all requirements to receive state funds.”**

These models are not static and there is often a developmental continuum. For example, states that started their state-local work to coordinate across the communities often moved to a decision-making coalition and then progressed to an integrated model with more functions added over time.

**ALIGNMENT IS A KEY OUTCOME OF THE WORK TO CONNECT STATE AND LOCAL-LEVEL SYSTEMS-BUILDING EFFORTS.** In the states that inform our reflections and recommendations, systems’ alignment begins with having common goals at the state and local levels, which are regularly reviewed and measured with the intention that policies be equitable and consistent at all levels. This kind of coordinated systems alignment includes having common, aligned data collection and reporting systems; building a continuum of child, program, and provider standards; and putting in place a statewide plan and measurement system for achieving common outcomes for children and families. When states address alignment challenges, parents, providers, and local early childhood entities must be included to inform the solutions.



# Critical Communication: Feedback Loops between State and Local Partnerships

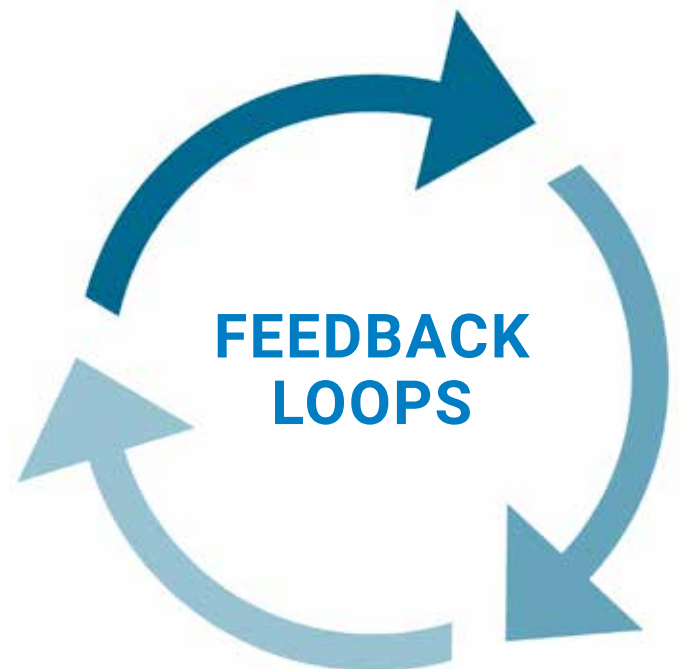
A feedback loop in an early childhood system is a communication mechanism that allows for input, reaction, and correction between the state and local level on an ongoing basis.

A key feedback loop that states address through local systems work is between families and the state and local partnerships. The users and providers of services know best about what works for them and can be key informants of, and partners in, the early childhood system.

States have taken a variety of approaches to building these feedback loops. For example, family participation is a requirement of some state and local planning groups and committees. In other states, family members are invited to join planning groups and committees to offer their opinions and advice and are supported to make participation possible. Some states and local partnerships set up recurring family focus groups so that family voices can be heard on policy and program development issues.

In addition to families, some state and local partnerships also develop opportunities to get feedback from the people who provide services to families and children directly, such as child care providers, home visitors, public health nurses, and pediatricians.

Feedback loops are a means to improving quality and responsiveness to the needs and interests of families and providers, aligning policies and practices, and reducing administrative burden.






Judy Reidt-Parker, the Director of Policy at Start Early, reminds us of what it takes to make and maintain these critical connections:

**“This requires establishing ongoing processes and protocols through which leaders meaningfully connect with, learn from, and communicate with individuals and groups with vested interests. This includes parents, teachers and staff, legislators, and community members. Engagement must be deliberate and systematic, and stakeholders should influence the decision-making process all the way through. In addition, systems leaders need to develop relationships with culturally specific organizations and neighborhood leaders to plan the best methods for gathering input from specific communities. Not only does this increase the likelihood of a more equitable system, it also will result in a system that resonates with the families and providers that participate – generating more engagement and a higher quality result.”**

This feedback process is used to adjust policies and practices at the state and local level so that more desirable outcomes are achieved. Feedback loops in states range in their availability and effectiveness. To function well, these loops require a deliberate and well-communicated plan between the state and local partnerships. When the feedback loops are working well, the state leaders can learn about community work from those who are closest to children and families and use that knowledge to improve their work. They can also engage with local leaders about policies and programs before making decisions that affect communities. Also, local leaders can learn about the state’s goals and work, and better support the state’s work at the local level. Effective feedback loops and ongoing communication were essential when North Carolina added a pre-K component to its early childhood system. The local Smart Start organizations and their leaders played a key role in advising the state, which resulted in a pre-K program that aligned with Smart Start and other programs and services and was launched and operating in record time.

Most states with local partnerships develop a network of local leaders who come together regularly for interaction, learning, and problem solving. State leaders attend the network meetings, share information about their state-level work, and ask for feedback on programmatic and policy issues. They also ask the local leaders to share local successes and struggles so that the state can learn from lived experience and have policies and practices that are reality-based and responsive. The structure of these networks typically changes over time with the growth and development of the state and local work and as new needs arise.



# Eight Key Lessons Learned from States that have Aligned State/Local Systems

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A growing group of states has been involved in state-local collaborative models for several years to improve alignment and responsiveness. Below we outline the states' emerging promising practices and lessons learned for the benefit of other states that may be interested in pursuing this approach.

## 1. Actively Engage Families and Service Providers in Planning and Decision Making

Research in both the public and private sectors has identified several benefits associated with expanded stakeholder engagement in governance. Stakeholders' interests and needs shed light on the range of factors that underlie policy problems, decisions, and implementation. Engaging with those most directly impacted by a policy or program brings critical and relevant local information into the decision-making process, so those decisions are less likely to result in unintended consequences and more likely to fit better into existing contexts.

One of the highest values that state and local leaders described in their work is the importance of learning directly from families themselves. Building local connections is a way to hear family voices, assess and address the needs and challenges of all children within a geographical area, and foster work between local communities and the state to share family feedback and help inform family-friendly policies and programs. Having families involved in decision making has significant benefits. It:

- Creates more successful decision making.
- Fosters understanding of the diverse cultural and linguistic needs of children and families and can provide space for collective brainstorming about how to best address individual needs.
- Increases efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery.
- Improves risk management practices, allowing risks to be identified and considered earlier, thereby reducing future costs.

- Improves processes for systems building and policy development that consider knowledge, experience, and multiple perspectives by leveraging stakeholder expertise and perspective.
- Encourages sensitivity to policy and delivery design that meets community needs and ensures achievement of objectives.
- Enhances community confidence in policies and initiatives undertaken.
- Increases accountability for investment of public resources.

Including the perspectives of the people who work directly with children and families is also important and helps achieve benefits similar to those gained by including family voice centrally. While parents and families can talk about their needs and what policies and practices work best for them, early childhood care providers (such as family child care providers, child care center- and school-based teachers) and program administrators also bring valuable perspectives as they interact with multiple families over time.

Care providers also have a unique perspective, as they work with multiple families at the same point in their children's development. For example, center-based child care teachers may work with 24 families a year. Over the course of many years, those educators will see trends in both child and family needs and how they change over time. They are also uniquely positioned to give feedback about how specific interventions and resources are being effective and to identify what else may be needed. Similarly, a home visitor who has been working in a community for an extended period of time will see not only the needs of individual families with whom he/she works, but trends across time and within geographic locations. These kinds of care providers are keenly attuned to how state-level policies (such as licensing regulations) impact their ability to provide high-quality services and are likely to be invested in the systems-level improvements state and local policy leaders seek.



Family and care provider participants gain knowledge that helps them educate their communities about the importance of early childhood and provide information, education, and resources to other parents raising young children. Care providers and family members

may face barriers to participating in decision-making tables, but those barriers (such as child care, transportation, and translation) can often be removed by local leaders who understand the benefits of including families and providers in decision making. Being intentional about including family members and care providers at all levels of decision making within systems is an essential key to the success of effective systems building.

## 2. Assure Clarity and Ownership of Vision and Mission

A collective vision must be embraced by both state and local entities in state and community system infrastructure models. **A vision statement is the collectively held view of the future-what it will look like when all conditions are created so that the needs of children and families are met and they are supported to thrive.** A vision can be created at the local or state level and is most compelling if informed by the needs and aspirations of local communities and the acknowledgement that achieving the statewide vision requires a united effort.

Each local entity can then develop its own local mission, which includes more specific strategies to achieve the vision based on what is needed within each community. Iowa's vision, for example, is "Every child beginning at birth will be healthy and successful." This vision is supported by the state's anticipated outcomes of their early childhood work, as mandated in legislation, which are:

- Healthy Children
- Children Ready to Succeed in School
- Safe and Supportive Communities
- Secure and Nurturing Families
- Secure and Nurturing Early Learning Environments

Shanell Wagler, administrator of Early Childhood Iowa and one of the pioneer leaders in collaborative state and local work, said, **"Having a statewide vision that the state and community boards and multiple service providers are working jointly to achieve keeps us all on track and moving forward together."**





### 3. Develop Shared Frameworks to Measure Outcomes and Assure Accountability

When creating or reorganizing a statewide system of local coalitions, a question that must be answered early on is **“How do we measure the success of the local coalition work?”** both as a collective whole and as individual entities. Shared frameworks at the state and local level are a core component that allows communities and states to assure they are working toward the same goals and can connect the larger goals to specific indicators of success. This means coalitions jointly agree to specific indicators and track those results. Monitoring and measuring system, program, and child outcomes provides a mechanism by which local partnerships demonstrate their accountability to young children, families, funders, and state taxpayers.


Creating indicators of success and measurement systems is most easily done when developing local partnerships. It is especially challenging to put a measurement system in place when local partnerships are already funded and managing a variety of strategies that are measured in various ways. The need for a statewide measurement system is underscored when state leaders are educating policymakers and other funders about the state’s early childhood work and are working to gain ongoing support for the local partnership structure. Having the ability to articulate the value of local partnerships’ work, both individually and collectively, is critical to its sustainability.

Measures vary across states, but all seek to quantify improvements to the health and well-being of young children and their families. For example, with regard to healthy children, states often measure low birth weight, immunization rates, childhood obesity, and dental health. In the area of school readiness, states often measure early literacy skills, mothers’ educational attainment, the quality of early learning programs, and kindergarten readiness. With regard to safe and nurturing families, states typically look at, for example, incidence of child abuse, teen births, and family support programs. When the state and all communities are working together, indicators related to these areas show significant progress.

Additionally, when states and locales partner and are aligned toward the same outcomes and measures, it lays the foundation for both to engage in Continuous Quality Improvement

#### Measure Outcomes





(CQI) cycles. Sharing data at inclusive tables (i.e., tables that include families, caregivers, and program and policy leaders) and collaboratively exploring what should be extrapolated from the data, is a way of assuring that the system is constantly evolving to increase the quality of services and planning and that resources are distributed equitably to close opportunity gaps.

#### 4. Continuously Cultivate Leadership

Whether at the state or local level, leadership matters – a lot. Major struggles between the state and local communities are often a symptom of leadership problems. Below are some practices that can make a difference in improving state-local partnership leadership.

- **Build and nurture leadership at all levels of the system.** Resources need to be invested in leadership development both inside and outside government. Build strength all along the continuum – the governor’s office, legislature, state agencies, advocacy organizations, local partnerships, local programs, and the public.
- **Engage diverse leaders at the state and local level.** Intentionally including a broad diversity of perspectives (regarding, e.g., race, language, role within the system, geography, income) is the best way to build strong systems. Helping to build diverse leadership in multiple places and at different levels through knowledge building, training, and confidence-building assures the work is shared across many stakeholders and does not rest entirely on the people with positional power. These many different kinds of leadership serve different functions both inside and outside government and are needed for sustainability.
- **Lead strategically.** Take the time to assess the needs of the individuals at the community and state tables and be strategic in filling gaps with people with lived experiences in all parts of the system. Make sure the voices of people with lived experience of the programs and services under discussion are truly well represented. Doing this allows for systems to have the most direct communication from user to policy maker, providing real-time feedback about what is and is not working within the system. Be thoughtful about filling gaps in diverse leadership; take the time to assess the needs and match them with the knowledge, skills, disposition, and experience needed; ensure that selected leaders can form and maintain strong working relationships. This requires an ongoing commitment to communications, inclusiveness, cooperation, and consensus.
- **Provide opportunities for leadership continuity.** Systems development occurs over time and requires leaders who understand and value the development of their own and others’ skills and knowledge to help ensure the early childhood agenda keeps moving forward.

## 5. Provide Technical Assistance and Support


Due to the variations in leadership and resources, some communities want a lot of state support and others want and/or need less, but all state and local leaders agree that support is necessary for all local coalitions to succeed. While communities know and understand their families and value their local decision making, they also value new information and learning from others. Technical assistance to help make that happen does not mean just informing community leaders about effective program practices; it also means engaging with them and helping them better understand effective systems-building approaches and supporting them to become strong collaborators. State and local leaders consistently underscore the need for a state-level infrastructure that supports technical assistance for local partnerships; leaders from almost every state we have worked with called this out as a key to their success.

Leaders vary in experience, abilities, early childhood and systems knowledge, and collaboration skills, and they want to make informed decisions about what is needed for their communities' young children and families. Because of these variations and differences, technical assistance needs vary by locale. Some local partnerships need help with developing a comprehensive early childhood plan, for example, while others need advice about specific early childhood programs and research-based strategies and best practices. Support for community needs assessment, collaborative strategic planning, and cross-sector systems building is seen as critical by most leaders with whom we have worked. Technical assistance and support that meets the varied needs of all local partnerships should be easily accessible to all partnerships.



## 6. Support Public Education and Advocacy


Advocacy is *essential* to efforts to advance and sustain a system- building policy agenda and to secure the financial resources needed to support these efforts at the state and local levels. State-local coordination enables more effective advocacy at both the local and state levels. Advocacy is needed at both levels to demonstrate public support and assure the systems can meet the needs of children and families.

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- Local collaboratives must play a leading role in a state’s advocacy and public education efforts and, in fact, both state and local infrastructures are critical to the advocacy work that is needed.
  - Local collaboratives often need training and technical assistance in developing their advocacy plans and strategies. During their early development, North Carolina Smart Start local partnerships were supported by the state to develop annual local advocacy plans, which were implemented in each county.
  - The state support entity can play a leadership role in the effort by developing common messages, materials, and other tools, which can then be localized by each local partnership. States can also provide training to local collaborative leaders about how to mobilize volunteers to advocate with their legislators throughout the year in the legislative district and in the state capital during legislative sessions. But because the “All politics is local” approach is a key to success in politically moving an early childhood agenda, the state’s efforts should include creating template messages that local collaboratives can customize with local data and success stories.
  - At the local level, coalition leaders and volunteers should be the “go-to” for the legislators in their districts on all early childhood issues. Local leaders should regularly meet with their legislators and arrange for opportunities for volunteers, such as child care providers, parents, and other community members, to talk directly with legislators.
  - At the state level, the entity that leads the systems-building initiative should be the “go-to” organization for legislators with questions on early childhood issues. This group should coordinate and support ongoing statewide efforts and special events designed to educate about early childhood issues and promote the policy agenda.

## 7. Provide Adequate Staffing at all Levels

Another important lesson from states with statewide community coalitions or partnerships is the importance of having paid staffing at the state and local levels to support and carry out the local collaborative work. The primary responsibilities of state-level staff (in state-local systems building) are to listen and learn, support, monitor, and provide technical assistance to advocate for the systems-building changes, policies, and funding needed to support local efforts.

States provide staffing to directly support local efforts in a wide variety of ways. Iowa’s system initiative, Early Childhood Iowa, is an example of an effective approach with limited funding for state staffing positions. While there are only three administrative state staff positions per se, six state agencies, including Human Services, Education, Public Health, Economic Development, and Workforce Development and Management, also have



provided staff support for the local work throughout Early Childhood Iowa's 22-year history. This allows for greater capacity to support state and local systems-building efforts in more direct, intensive, and ongoing ways.

Having paid staff at the local level is critical to building sustainable local early childhood partnerships and systems. Some states that provide funding for local staffing also specify minimum qualifications and levels of staff skills, education, and experience. While staffing patterns at local partnerships range from few to many, based on funding and functions, states agree that having some level of paid staff is necessary. If the goal is to create effective local early childhood systems on a statewide basis, resources dedicated to supporting staffing for these local collaboratives must be funded on a statewide basis.


## **8. Scale-Up and Sustainability Finance**

Sometimes states begin this state/local work on a pilot basis to test and refine their model. However, to build momentum and strong advocacy, it is important to have collaboratives in place statewide. Some states create their local entities all at once while others add new collaboratives over several years, bringing them into the system in phases. The important thing is that there is a clear plan and that the energy and momentum are maintained.

To expand local collaboratives, it is important to use the successes of local entities that are already in place and getting results to make the case for sustained investments. Local entities sometimes need to test out new programs or services, based on unique needs within their communities. Other states have learned that when communities are funding limited pilot projects, they learn valuable lessons that assist them in making better funding decisions. State-funded functions typically include, at a minimum, a local needs assessment, coordination, planning, and collaboration to reduce duplication of services. While some local entities provide direct services, others determine the most appropriate community organizations to provide the services, allocate the funding to them for specific outcomes, and monitor their results.

Funding must be sufficient and secure for local entities to gain momentum and improve the outcomes for their children and families. States with the most success have sufficient on-going allocations and the funding is believed to be an important part of the state's overall early childhood system.

Long before Covid-19 and its consequent crises, the discrete sectors and programs serving young children and families had been confronted with significantly unstable funding and a deep historical disconnect from the true costs of quality services. Though these programs are attempting to address complex social problems, they have been consistently destabilized by the persistent lack of a well-funded and robust system that aligns and integrates investments- particularly in the prenatal-to-five period. This



has forced siloed practices in the development and delivery of programs and resulted in complex and onerous management structures which discourage the collaboration or business practices necessary to create a comprehensive prenatal-to-five system in states and communities.

Addressing these challenges and the significant needs that exist in the fiscal space requires a strategic approach that sets a vision for how to increase investments, better align current investments, and develop funding and governance structures that maximize efficiency and minimize burden.

Broad-based fiscal strategy work must include a place for this multi-level analysis and the threading of fiscal and programmatic information together in a way that will support and guide stakeholders to answer questions related to policies and regulations of funding streams, and levels of investments. These strategies must also include on-going analysis about whether investments are successfully targeted to children and families that are most vulnerable and at risk. Therefore, the approach to fiscal work must be steeped in systems development theory and strategies and use a systems framework to allow for multiple discrete approaches to fiscal work (e.g., mapping, cost modeling, ballot measures) to align under a broad vision for effective fiscal strategies impact.

## Conclusion

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Building democratic, equitable governance, institutions, and processes is an ongoing effort. As early childhood leaders continuously seek to dismantle barriers to opportunity and create family-friendly processes, developing evermore effective state and local connections is critical. The examples in this brief are aimed at inspiring leaders and other readers to consider how to improve the two-way communication between families, providers, and community leaders and the early childhood state system in which they are engaged.

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