



**Rising to the Challenge: Building Effective Systems for
Young Children and Families, a BUILD E-Book**

Build
INITIATIVE
Strong Foundations For
Our Youngest Children

Preface

Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge (ELC) is the major federal funding initiative seeking to support states in developing high quality early childhood systems, especially targeted to children with high needs. Launched in 2011 as a joint initiative of the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, there have been three rounds of major grants under the ELC, with 20 states now participating and funding that totals just over \$1 billion.

This federal initiative had particular meaning to the BUILD Initiative and its founders, members of the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative. For more than a decade, BUILD has served as a catalyst for change and a national support system for state policy leaders and early childhood systems development. Not only did BUILD’s work help shape the federal initiative, but it was also the fulfillment of the founders’ most fervent hopes—that states could create detailed blueprints for an early childhood system, with budgets to support significant infrastructure development. BUILD staff, consultants, and many colleagues in the field rose to the challenge and provided extensive support to states as they applied for, and now implement, the federal opportunity.

The Early Learning Challenge supports states in their efforts to align, coordinate, and improve the quality of existing early learning and development programs across the multiple funding streams that support children from their birth through age five. Through the ELC, states focus on foundational elements of a state system: creating high quality, accountable early learning programs through Quality Rating and Improvement Systems; supporting improved child development outcomes through health, family engagement and vigorous use of early learning state standards and assessments; strengthening the early childhood workforce; and measuring progress.

Thirty-five states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico applied for the 2011 round of the Early Learning Challenge grants with nine states initially and then five more selected from this pool for funding. Sixteen states plus the District of Columbia responded to a new 2013 third round of grants; six were selected.

Round 1: California, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Washington

Round 2: Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Oregon, and Wisconsin

Round 3: Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Vermont

Since the launch of the ELC, grantee states have rapidly moved from concept to implementation. Through this E-Book, we share learnings from the initial implementation of the efforts, highlighting experience, trends, and reflections stemming from the significant federal investment in this strategic work. The chapters are authored by experts who have worked in tandem with state leaders to gather information. By documenting the experience of the states, captured through interviews with state leaders, *Rising to the Challenge* provides a source of learning for all fifty states and territories and puts into practice our leadership commitment to continuous learning in the best interests of the children and families to whom we are all dedicated.



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Chapter
1

**State Systems Building
Through Governance**

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Introduction

Governance at the state level plays a powerful role in the design and operation of the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (ELC). The federal funders of the ELC, recognizing the systems leadership role of state government, restricted this historic competition to states. As an early childhood systems development and reform effort, the ELC provides states with an essential opportunity to embed governance as part of the solution for addressing the early learning needs of young children and their families. This paper explores state governance in the context of the ELC's mission to improve school readiness supports and outcomes for young children. Governance is a cornerstone for the Challenge's work to "support states that are leading the way...[to] implement coherent, compelling, and comprehensive early learning education reform" with "an integrated system of high-quality early learning programs and services."¹

State leaders see a deep connection between their governance work and the mission of the Challenge to foster a strong early learning system that consistently and equitably delivers high quality. Rolf Grafwallner, Assistant State Superintendent, Maryland Department of Education, notes the systemic contribution of the Challenge: "We are using the Race to the Top- Early Learning Challenge as the catalyst to reform our system on a number of fronts." Likewise, states leaders endorse Washington Department of Early Learning's Director Betty Hyde's comment that governance—and all the rest of the work-- is "built on the insight that quality is the sole focus for all that we do."

This chapter explores the governance work reported by fourteen state leaders. This information is meant to help early childhood leaders and advocates understand the Challenge's impact on governance for early learning, both within state governments and between state government and other participants. This chapter does not address all of the experiences in all the participating states; we sought a cross-section of states that were deep enough into implementing their plans to provide meaningful experience and insight.

This paper documents the experience and perceptions of state leaders from Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Ohio, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin. Eight states were



originally identified for interviews in consultation with the BUILD staff, review of ELC applications and public reports, consultation with experts, and the author's knowledge. These states reflect differing approaches to governance. States that have been at the forefront of governance reform for early childhood make up a large portion of the successful competitors in the Challenge. While these states are a relatively small fraction of all states, they are disproportionately participating in the Challenge, which suggests that states with early attention to governance reform were better positioned to create plans that successfully assured a focus on improved early learning quality and access for young children. Seven states agreed to participate and interviews were conducted late in 2014.

For consistency, a standard protocol was developed and used to interview states leaders. We asked the designated lead of the ELC for each state to identify the appropriate people to interview. The advisory committee for this project vetted the protocol. Fourteen people were interviewed for this paper, including 2 individuals from a governor's office; 1 chair of a state early learning council; and 11 senior staff in executive branch agencies. All participants were provided with the interview protocol in advance of the interview and reviewed interview documentation for accuracy.

¹ "Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Program Purpose," accessed April 19, 2015, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/index.html>.

Summary of Findings

State leaders are taking risks, and trying out new and creative solutions in their governance work. In brief, the following key findings surfaced:

- 1. State leaders believe that integrated governance improves services for children through greater focus, consistency, and inclusion of all developmental domains.**
- 2. One size does not fit all.** Three types of governance structures emerged among the ELC states.
- 3. For states already moving to address governance functions, the Early Learning Challenge accelerated momentum.** New structural solutions were advanced and accelerated as part of the work of the ELC.
- 4. The ELC accelerated progress in connecting state and local leaders through local coalitions.** States advanced localism as an important component of governance, especially for those with a more stable, centralized state governance model.
- 5. The ELC helped states expand stakeholder involvement, often in collaboration with the state's Early Learning Council.** States moved to deeper inclusion of stakeholders in their planning and implementation work.
- 6. Improved governance becomes a foundation for better service to children and their families by means of policy integration within early learning, between birth to five and K-3, between higher education and early education, and between health and education.** State policy integration and alignment is occurring and states are experiencing their improved governance approaches as a foundational support.
- 7. The ELC helped states build their capacity for greater operating efficiency.**
- 8. Some states believe that positive changes in governance, the system, and services will be sustained while others are concerned that the timelines are too short to sustain progress.**

Context for Governance in the Early Learning Challenge States

The designers of the Early Learning Challenge recognized the state as a critical systems leader for creating a strong, viable approach to quality early learning and development. The broad framework of the ELC provided states with significant latitude and discretion on governance issues and approaches. Within that framework, participating states are making choices about governance approaches and how to structure their program design, development, and administration to improve early learning services for children.

The ELC opportunity came at a time when state leaders increasingly are focusing on the spectrum of services that are part of early learning and development, and are seeing disconnects in their organization and administration of these programs. While the ELC did not require states to make structural changes in governance, it did recognize that a diffuse, fragmented approach would not help advance the system and child outcomes that are at the core of the ELC. To compete for funds, states were required to bring together key executive branch organizations, forcing them to address governance for the ELC itself. This laid the groundwork for further governance reforms as part of their ELC plans, if the states believed this would help them achieve their goals for children. There were several paradigms that states could draw from to inform their governance goals, priorities and next steps, and to determine how much focus should be on governance in order to reach their goals for improved services for young children and their families.

In short, governance for the ELC is truly about state decisions, leadership and perspective about how best to use governance to improve outcomes for children through state systems and services. Our interviews indicate that



state leaders believe that governance is a critical component of an effective early learning system and that state-level organization and administration are consequential. They chose to focus time and attention on governance as part of their overall strategy. They believe that they are making progress in key areas, such as cross-program integration and alignment within government, as well as with external, non-governmental stakeholders who inform policy and implementation frameworks and decisions.

Finding 1: State leaders believe integrated governance improves services for children through greater focus, consistency and inclusion of all aspects of children’s learning and development.

States were asked to report on their biggest accomplishments and gains from their participation in the Early Learning Challenge, taking into account the role of governance in helping to achieve these gains. Concrete, practical work to improve quality service and access for young children and families ranked high, particularly the development and implementation of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). The states see governance as central to this accomplishment. Local coalitions, leadership, expanded stakeholder involvement, policy integration and coordination, and improved capacity are other areas in which state leaders indicate governance matters in better serving children. The QRIS itself is seen as a big win for children because it brings programs and services together for children and allows for closer movement toward a system with a single framework of high standards and quality. Governance provides backbone support to better meet children’s needs.

Finding 2: One size does not fit all.

Three types of governance structures emerged among the Early Learning Challenge states: (1) coordination through a governor’s office across multiple state agencies; (2) one lead agency coordinating several “peer” agencies; and, (3) one consolidated agency. State leaders in the featured states, regardless of which of the three types of governance they employed, all placed priority on their policy agenda—

achieving quality services for children— and see governance as a means to realize their policy agenda. We deliberately included states with a variety of approaches to overall early learning governance in this chapter, ultimately identifying three models among these states.

- *Governor’s Office Serves as Coordinator Across Agencies:* **Illinois** and **Ohio** represent this approach, where the Governor’s Office is in a coordinating role across multiple state agencies that focus on early learning as well as other aspects of child development included in the framework for the Early Learning Challenge.

- *One Executive Agency Tasked with Coordination:* **Colorado** and **Wisconsin** represent this approach.

Both of these states, similar to Illinois and Ohio,

have multiple Executive Branch agencies playing a prominent role in planning and implementing aspects of the ELC.

However, Colorado and Wisconsin are distinguished from Illinois and Ohio insofar as one of these Executive Branch agencies is charged with coordinating all of the participating state agencies in the ELC, creating a peer-to-peer model.

- *Single Consolidated Agency:* Three states—**Maryland, Oregon** and **Washington**—have a single consolidated agency serving as home to the ongoing early learning work, and this agency naturally houses the ELC as well.

For most of these states, ELC governance is identical to their ongoing governance for early learning, suggesting that the ELC followed the lead that the states had set for governance. Duke Shepard, who was the governor’s labor and human services policy advisor in Oregon², makes the point that the ELC’s focus on systems building allowed states a choice to focus more narrowly on grant governance or on governance more broadly. To him, that choice was obvious. He noted, “You can set up something for the grant or use the grant to reinforce what you are doing, and that is the pathway we chose.” Even state leaders whose ELC governance does not mirror their overall early learning governance echo Theresa Hawley, Director of the Illinois Governor’s Office of Early Childhood Development, who said, “The Early Learning Challenge complements the role of the state agencies and their priorities.”

²Subsequent to his interview, Duke Shepherd left state government.

“ Leaders place a priority on their policy agenda—achieving quality services for children—and see governance as a means to realize their policy agenda.

The structural and systemic focus of the ELC led most of these states to incorporate it into their overall early learning governance approach. However, no state has yet created a single administrative or governance body with oversight of and authority over its entire early childhood development agenda, which spans early learning and health. States acknowledge the daunting nature of that work, and in some instances, they are taking advantage of the ELC to tackle this on a project basis.³

Overall, the states with greater consolidation, such as Maryland and Washington, are emphatic about the value add of their model for fully embracing the vision of the Early Learning Challenge. They are dubious about whether they would have made the rapid progress expected through the ELC without their consolidated governance model. Liz Kelley, Director, Office of Child Care for Maryland, put it this way: “The Challenge validated our approach to governance. It makes it easier to move when we’re in one place.”

The states with the consolidated model approach believe it provides them additional opportunities to work on new and bigger strategies for early learning, such as regionalization of governance and more robust cross-sector partnerships with health, higher education and K-12 education. For example, Oregon sees the consolidation of functions into one state agency for early learning as critical to its larger vision for the future. Consolidation makes it easier to focus on regionalism and to attempt a strong integration of health and early learning. Washington, as well, considers its centralized, consolidated state agency as critical to engaging in a focused, deliberate strategy to support regional and local leadership. For Washington, the ELC highlighted the need to prioritize community engagement, but its consolidated, single state agency for early learning allowed this to happen in a smooth and coherent manner. Community engagement is now taken more seriously in the state’s governance structure.

The states using a coordination approach, whether through a lead agency or through the governor’s office, see the ELC as providing them with a great opportunity either to initiate or to sharpen their approach to inter-agency coordination. In addition, these states consistently indicate that their

coordination models allow them to readily identify additional capacity needs in the governance structure. Illinois’ Theresa Hawley put it this way, “We are not very centralized and we are taking our time on that part within government. We do not want to lose the public-private nature of our system with an outside government strategy and influence, but we are seeking to strengthen our inside government approach” through the ELC. This has not been an easy task for the states. Those with multiple agencies, such as Ohio, have had to focus intensively and consistently on distributive leadership concepts. They report that this is both essential to the work and hard to accomplish. In summary, the states with consolidated governance report that it has facilitated rapid progress and simplified decision-making. For states with coordinated governance, leaders report that the ELC provides a practical opportunity with resources to expedite coordination.

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Finding 3: Some states were in the throes of governance change, which the Early Learning Challenge helped to accelerate.

New structural solutions were advanced and accelerated as part of the work of the Early Learning Challenge. Several states noted that they were already in the process of making governance changes, and that the Early Learning Challenge helped to accelerate these changes. They had previously identified gaps and conceptualized solutions. They gained momentum from this opportunity to move forward with implementation of their solutions. State leaders report that the ELC provided the impetus to move forward and go from concept to implementation. The ELC helped them to solidify and accelerate this work.

Oregon provides two strong examples of using the ELC to accelerate a shift in governance that had been moving more slowly. Oregon previously had eight different coordinating entities for early childhood, i.e. stakeholder advisory councils or committees, with similar goals and missions. They used the ELC to make the case for a less disjointed approach to the organization of government, and collapsed these eight entities into one board for early childhood. Oregon is also working to put early childhood education on

³ See also, Jill Sells, “Early Learning-Health Connections” in *Rising to the Challenge: Building Effective Systems for Young Children and Families, a BUILD E-Book* (2015).



par with elementary and secondary education in order to place a higher priority on early learning. Oregon created a new office that brought together all aspects of early learning to address the disconnections and to facilitate this overall policy goal. According to the governor’s staff, the timing of the ELC accelerated its governance restructuring, which is crucial to this goal.

Colorado, at the time it applied to participate in the ELC, was seeking to position its Department of Human Services as the lead agency for early childhood. Its key leaders wanted to incorporate many early childhood programs into the department. The Early Learning Challenge helped to propel this agenda forward. While Colorado was not initially successful in winning state legislative approval for this effort, its participation in and commitment to the work of the ELC helped the state leaders to persevere. They used executive decision-making to solve their governance gap and to move programs to the Department of Human Services. Stacey Kennedy, Director, Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge, in the new Office of Early Childhood at the Department of Human Services notes, “It’s been an exciting and important move in our state. It has created a tremendous amount of support for collaboration and really important alignment activities.”

In **Ohio**, the ELC gave an opportunity to refocus and rethink how government could carry out its work. This allowed the state to address a crucial governance gap. At the time that Ohio applied to participate in the ELC, Ohio had disbanded its early childhood cabinet. It did not have a unifying structure focused solely on young children across

the human services and education agencies. Stakeholders within both the early childhood and business communities wanted the governor’s office to provide focus and leadership. The ELC provided the right opportunity and good timing for that, resulting in the designation of a dedicated policy leader for early childhood in the governor’s office who could work with and across all the state agencies. As Alicia Leatherman, former Assistant Deputy Director of the Office of Family Assistance⁴ said, “We leveraged the federal opportunity very well.”

Finding 4: The ELC accelerated state linkages to local coalitions.

States advanced localism as an important component of governance, especially for those with a more stable governance model.

As part of their efforts to have an aligned, effective system that can deliver high quality early learning opportunities to all children and families, states see the need to create and/or improve local governance as well as stakeholder involvement. While the specific rationales the states

” The system as a whole benefits from having local stakeholders take on leadership roles and influence policy and program.

use to explain this work vary, the state leaders interviewed for this chapter share a common understanding that the system as a whole benefits from having local stakeholders take on leadership roles and influence policy and program. For some states, local and regional governance helps state government benefit from a broader set of interests and perspectives in setting priorities, determining policies, and administering programming. For other states, localism is less about administering programs and more about bringing stakeholders together to assure local coordination and a shared vision. For still others, the focus on expanded stakeholder involvement is seen as a practical way to assure a broad-based coalition for sustaining the vision and the work that they are doing.

States differ in their perception about whether this work is part of governance. When the states who do not consider this work to be “governance,” were asked why, they indicated that governance includes decision-making responsibilities for policy, and that if local work does not include decisions on policy, then they don’t consider it to be part of governance. Other states do not make this sharp distinction.

⁴ Subsequent to this interview, Alicia Leatherman left state government.

They believe this work is part of their governance structure and they call it essential. Regardless of how the state leaders characterize their stakeholder engagement strategies, building these connections is part and parcel of the work across these states. They consider it integral to their ability to make progress and deliver on their commitment to improved outcomes and services for young children.

Examples from the states illustrate the complexities of this work, and the wide array of approaches being used by the states to connect state and local leadership, and to expand stakeholder involvement.

Oregon introduced a new regional governance mechanism. Early Learning Hubs are regional administrative and coordinating entities for early learning programs; they do not directly deliver services. These Early Learning Hubs are intentionally non-governmental in nature. As Pam Curtis, the chair of the Governor’s Early Learning Council and a veteran appointed official, notes, “We had learned that our previous approach was too government-centric, and that we needed to make it more balanced; we need many players to move things along, and a mix of leadership. Our regional approach has the plus of putting metrics and accountability structures into place to meet goals and we are working to make our state-to-local partnership cross-sector in nature.”⁵

Colorado is known for an ongoing commitment to devolution and localism, with a strong system of local councils for local governance and leadership. However, the ELC offered Colorado an opportunity to change the focus and priorities for its local councils. It is moving from a view of the local councils as systems partners to one where they are implementation partners as well, consistent with Oregon’s approach noted above. Local councils are now providing the infrastructure to support the Quality Rating and Improvement System, Colorado Shines. While the ELC has marked a change in the focus of the local work, Colorado remains committed to a balanced structure with defined and meaningful state and local roles for its work.

In **Maryland**, the state created local early childhood advisory councils to complement the statewide Early Childhood Advisory Council. According to Rolf Grafwallner, the “local early learning councils have highlighted and brought together the various organizations that are now involved with the ELC at the

community level.” This is important because the state is promoting quality for all children, in all settings, involving integration across child care, Head Start and public schools. He continues,

“The new local councils provide a forum in which the locals work to impact the local school boards, the local county councils, and the local county executives, who must work together as we have at the state level, to have one lens, and one framework. We do not see our work to coordinate better on P-3rd grade as resulting in the [school] districts becoming the providers of all early childhood education. Local education [efforts] and [stakeholder] input is important to this. In other words, the state structures and agencies are head of the locals, so this is an effort to give more leadership and engage the locals more across the different viewpoints. The local councils advise the local school system, the county executive and the county council.”

In addition to providing opportunities for various local leaders to work together as peers on a common agenda, the local council strategy also promotes greater unity to support a common vision for Maryland’s early childhood work and to ensure that both public and private stakeholders are actively engaged.

Washington and Maryland’s work are in sync, both having developed new local councils. Washington’s work is fueled by outreach intended to have more local stakeholders come together to “add the voices of the people on the ground, to go from a central to a localized component for government,” according to Bette Hyde, Washington’s Director of the Department of Early Learning. Bette further noted, “This was stimulated by our public-private partnerships and the need to examine racial equity in the state.”

While neither Washington nor Maryland has yet been able to make the new local councils part of their state law, each has worked to bring the regional voice into the state early learning council. For example, in Washington, regional council leaders participate in the ongoing state Early Learning Council, and their votes are taken separately and called out as part of the ongoing process.



⁵ For more information on the Hubs, as well as a deeper exploration of the local coalition approach, see Karen Ponder, “Local Systems Building Through Coalitions,” in *Rising to the Challenge: Building Effective Systems for Young Children and Families*, a BUILD E-Book (2015).



Finding 5: The Challenge expanded stakeholder involvement, often in collaboration with the state’s Early Learning Council.

States moved to deeper inclusion of stakeholders in their planning and implementation work.

States interviewed for this chapter proudly note one or more strategies for expanded effort to engage multiple stakeholders, including advocates, academics, cultural leaders, early learning leaders, families, foundations, health and human service organizations, higher education, librarians, museums, researchers, service providers, teachers and others. States do not have a uniform vocabulary to describe their work to expand stakeholder involvement. Some describe this as a commitment to public-private partnerships while others talk about an outside-inside strategy. One set of states sees expanded stakeholder involvement as an essential advisory and input strategy to support policy and program development and implementation. Regardless of the words used to talk about this work, all of the states indicate that engaging these stakeholders adds value to the work by expanding the number of leaders and advocates who help create and sustain policy, financing and implementation progress.

The early learning councils provide the most frequent way to expand stakeholder involvement. States uniformly view the councils as important to their work. Most have formal mechanisms for the councils to work together, make recommendations, and then formally vote on these recommendations, all of which facilitates system-wide governance. For example, **Ohio** reconceptualized its workgroup structure into four teams that mirror the ELC priorities, recognizing that these are now the state’s early

learning priorities. States are working with councils to inform both policy and implementation issues. For many states, the council’s role is critical to achieving sustainability. Stacey Kennedy, from **Colorado**, put this well: “When we think about the system and its governance, we see it [the council] as a public-private partnership that is advancing the vision. People understand the importance of the work and work to identify where they can best leverage their influence and their resources.” Colorado sees its council as a working body, led by co-chairs from the business, non-profit and public sectors, with deep roots going back to its establishment prior to the ELC. The council is well-positioned to lead on sustainability due to its history, as well as its public-private composition. Illinois sees engagement of the council as critical, with council members contributing significant talent that strengthens the overall capacity of the state to make progress. In addition, the council can assist with sustainability planning and advocacy.

Finding 6: Coordinated governance helped facilitate policy integration and coordination within early learning, between birth to five and K-3, between higher education and early education, and between health and early education.

State policy integration and alignment is occurring and states are experiencing their improved governance approaches as a foundational support.

A clear expectation of the ELC is a focus on integration and coordination, as these are important to effective, quality services for children and families. In this section, four areas are highlighted in which, as reported by

state leaders, governance structures and processes are advancing integration and coordination. Beyond these areas, states also reported greater policy and program coordination efforts, from a governance perspective, in critical areas such as family engagement, libraries, child welfare, and communications.

Policy Integration and Coordination within Early Learning

States offered several compelling examples of work to advance policy integration and coordination within early learning. States are concerned about policy overlap, duplication and contradiction, all of which they indicate contribute to inefficiencies and burdens for providers as well as families. As part of their governance responsibilities, they believe the ELC gives them a mandate to tackle this area. They report that governance is a key asset in helping to bring about greater consistency in policy.

In several states, the Quality Rating and Improvement System providing a good starting point for states to focus on integration. **Colorado**, for example, is working on reducing duplication of policies within the QRIS in order to secure school district embrace of the QRIS, and is exploring whether the best strategies are through guidance and implementation, rule-making or legislation. Illinois' broad vision of the QRIS serving all types of providers, from child care to schools to Head Start, ensures an integration focus, with standards and expectations no longer organized by funding stream but through the integrative framework of the QRIS. Ohio is bringing all of its various types of early childhood programs into the QRIS, and integrating work across two state agencies, each of which has separate administrative authority for school or child-care based QRIS, through joint training and shared responsibility for classroom assessment.

Maryland is taking this in another direction by linking provider participation in the state's child care assistance program to participation in the state's QRIS. Maryland is also integrating the QRIS with licensing, having licensing staff monitor the QRIS sites with a special check list and share results with the QRIS team. The QRIS provides another impact as Maryland starts to expand its pre-k program, which is expected to embrace mixed delivery in

its next phase. The QRIS highest performers will have improved access to the much better funded pool of resources associated with the pre-k program. Maryland's staff believes that the relatively easier climb to secure adequate pre-k resources and public investment serves as an incentive to the child care providers to maximize involvement with the QRIS, and to leverage the better financing associated with pre-k as part of the ongoing resources to support the full continuum of early learning.

“ Washington views Early Achievers, the state's QRIS, as the quality framework for all of its early learning programs and has a strategic plan to assure that Early Achievers serves as the unifying framework.

Washington views Early Achievers, the state's QRIS, as the quality framework for all of its early learning programs and has a strategic plan that involves work with its child care licensing, child care assistance, and pre-k program to assure that Early Achievers serves as the unifying framework. Washington tackled family needs for full-day, full-year services by braiding funding of the state's pre-k program with the child care assistance program as one of the steps in this process. Washington credits the ELC with pushing it further to ensure that family needs are of paramount importance in the state's quality definition and approach.

Better alignment and integration through child care licensing features prominently in several of the ELC states, with **Maryland** and **Ohio** redoing licensing rules to achieve better integration. These states are raising the bar on licensing and infusing more quality measures as part of their policy approach. **Washington** is also exploring the use of licensing as a core part of its integration and alignment approach. Ohio now has an integrated data set, housing information for licensing and quality, as well as information for parents, in both of its agencies, in a consistent manner. In Ohio, both education and human services license early learning programs, and are continuing to do so, with the data set serving as the alignment link.



Policy Integration and Coordination between Higher Education and Early Learning

Higher education is critical to the development of the early learning system. Governance strategies for better coordination and integration are emerging through the work of the ELC.

Illinois and **Maryland** provide examples of states that have set out to achieve better coordination in this area. Illinois elected to approach this by investing resources to induce higher education institutions to revise their approach to their early childhood education courses. Articulation is another part of this work in Illinois. Illinois is also connecting its early childhood credentials with the state's licensing rules for birth to second grade teachers, seeking a unified pathway for all early childhood teachers that integrates key elements from traditional teacher certification as well as early learning credentialing. Maryland sought a new partnership with the state's higher education commission to work on these issues, in an effort to get buy-in from the state's oversight body for higher education. At the same time, Maryland also elected to invest some of its own early childhood research money directly into state higher education institutions in order to promote engagement and leverage expertise at the faculty level.

Policy Integration and Coordination between Early Learning and the Early Elementary Grades (P-3)

Another area in which states report that coordinated governance is a facilitator of improved integration and coordination is between early learning and the early elementary grades, often referred to as a P-3 approach. **Colorado's** Melissa Colman, Executive Director for Teaching and Learning at the Colorado Department of Education, notes that the ELC is causing her agency to examine "coordination across the traditional birth to five and K-12 way of looking at early education through a P-3 system lens that better supports children and families." At the **Maryland** Department of Education, which is home to Maryland's early childhood office as well as its elementary and secondary office, the state superintendent has insisted that the staff deliberately tackle the same issues in the early childhood, elementary and secondary divisions. This

means that issues such as standards, teacher effectiveness, and child level assessment are priorities within a coherent framework embracing early learning, elementary and high school. Of particular note in this approach is an effort to build continuity at the state level, within the state education agency, as well as across the state, to ensure the connection of early childhood mental health to the school-based positive behavioral health support approach. Maryland's structural focus embraces a comprehensive understanding of children's needs, development and supports.

In Maryland, the state level work noted above was not part of the initial planning for the ELC—there were plans for "on the ground" efforts to better connect local early learning, school and community leaders (through the local councils, previously described). However, the work within the state agency with greater interconnection was an outgrowth of the effort to move the idea of a P-3 frame from rhetoric to reality. Maryland saw an opportunity to leverage its own state government structure to advance this work, building a stronger connection between the state's priorities for K-12 education and 0-5 education.

“ At the governance level in Oregon, to assure accountable and visible goals, both the health and early learning agencies and their governing boards adopted kindergarten readiness as a shared goal.

Policy Integration and Coordination between Early Learning and Health

Early learning and health connections are occurring in many states, as more fully discussed in the chapter "Early Learning-Health Connections."

From a governance perspective, **Oregon** is seeking to integrate coordinated goals across its health and early learning sectors. At the governance level, to assure accountable and visible goals, both the health and early learning agencies and their governing boards adopted kindergarten readiness as a shared goal so the health board has early learning goals, and likewise, the early learning board has health goals.

Oregon is using the health system as the first point of contact for early childhood identification of risk, going well beyond risk of developmental delays and disabilities. They are working on a joint screening approach that could lead to health and/or early learning services. The health care community is taking the lead on this work, with results to be shared. Likewise, in **Washington**, the state agencies



are working together in new ways to address health and early learning as both fundamental and interdependent. In Washington, there is a conscious integration of education with health that involves the state health, education and early learning agencies coming together to assure that public health integration occurs. Some of the areas of focus include active outdoor play as well as screen time. Finally, in **Wisconsin**, the ELC funding was used for a new health and wellness staff position, which was created within the state’s children and family agency to assure content expertise and priority focus for incorporating health policy and practice into early learning.

Finding 7: The Early Learning Challenge helped build the capacity of the states to manage resources more effectively and efficiently.

Through the ELC, states are building their capacity through myriad strategies, such as adding essential new content expertise, creating new work teams, and changing their organizational approach. States are putting a lot of effort into this aspect of the work, noting that the ELC priorities have become state priorities that they anticipate will be sustained beyond the grant period. States are seizing the opportunity that the ELC represents to increase the efficient and effective use of public resources. The approaches are varied and creative: varied and creative: then alter as follows they include the use of work teams, deepening content expertise (with a focus on family engagement) and organizational restructuring that aligns policy priorities with organizational structure.

“ Through the ELC, states are building their capacity through myriad strategies, such as adding essential new content expertise, creating new work teams, and changing their organizational approach.

The most common trend across the states is the accelerated use of new leadership and management teams for strategic and implementation decisions. State leaders indicate these teams have been a major innovation for them and that they have led to opportunities for quick action, devolution of authority to the team, fostering meaningful cross-sector work, and practical internal structures when multiple agencies are involved in the work. When asked why they set up these teams, states provided three primary reasons: 1) the strict timeline for the work with many accountability measures; 2) the complex nature of the work; and, 3) as a strategy to facilitate buy-in and assure cohesion for all staff, including appointed leaders, senior executives, managers, and program staff. These teams were not a requirement of the ELC, although states were required to complete Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs). The perception of their value add is summed up by Pam Curtis, from Oregon,

who said, “The MOU is a promissory note to help us communicate the serious intent, but they are paperwork and we don’t rely [solely] on them.

The MOU presumes you have to drag everyone along and that is not our goal.” Similarly, another state leader said, “The MOUs are a starting point, but you have to get beyond a shelf’ document.”

Illinois created several new interagency teams that are coordinated by the governor’s office and that involve mid-level staff as part of their effort to help people form consensus across agencies. Illinois is broadening this approach beyond the priorities of the ELC. In the past, with many state agencies tackling early childhood, each individual agency would make independent decisions for its programs without regard to impact on other state agency priorities, policies or programs. According to Theresa Hawley, “The ELC helped us to see that there was always interaction with the agencies but not formally structured in a way to help with the decision making. We needed a leadership team to move from the vision and into the operations. This has helped us to strengthen our internal government role, and to make sure that we have the capacity and the supports for interagency work now.” This is proving especially useful in Illinois, which has traditionally had strong non-governmental input into its policy and program approach, and now results in a greater focus on building up knowledgeable, coordinated, effective and efficient state staff.

In **Colorado**, the lead executive branch agency hosts a weekly meeting for all team leads. One notable success for this team has been to have authority delegated to the team so that it can make its own decisions about ELC design and implementation issues. A companion executive management team is available, but it has entrusted both decisions and ongoing work to the group of leads for the various ELC initiatives.

Wisconsin created a cross-agency work team to complement a team of agency heads. With multiple agencies accountable for the success of the Early Learning Challenge, there is a greater interest in connecting across agencies through the work team and making joint decisions.

States have sought to deepen their expertise and capacity in order to promote more effective service delivery. Family engagement stands out as an area where states recognized insufficient capacity. **Ohio** and **Wisconsin** provide good examples. In Ohio, family engagement is now prioritized at the state council level, with lead staffing for this work from a result of a collaboration between the governor's office and an executive branch agency. In Wisconsin, funding from the ELC was used to create dedicated staff positions, including family engagement policy and program analysts within the child and family agency as well as the state education agency. These positions are critical to the outcome of improved services for young children, providing capacity for necessary cross-agency coordination and integration takes place. Prior to the ELC, Wisconsin did not have this capacity. Amanda Reeve, grant manager in the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, reports that having dedicated staff has helped pick up the pace of progress in agency coordination and integration to better meet the needs of families and their children.

States also used the ELC to rethink how they organized the staff within their own agencies to more effectively work on program and policy priorities. In **Maryland**, the state's previous work on the Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) had been buried in its government organization as a sub-part of the professional development group. In recognition of the importance of this work well beyond the funding cycle of the Early Learning Challenge, Maryland made changes in its organization, providing opportunity for QRIS to move up in the organization chart in order to better assure focused leadership and expertise in support of the QRIS.

Finding 8: Some states believe that positive changes in governance, the system and services will be sustained while others are concerned that the timelines are too short to sustain progress.

Many of the governance reforms and advances that we have noted previously did not involve direct expenditures of federal funding from the ELC. In that regard, their sustainability is not necessarily about resource allocation but whether they are effective in aiding the state's overall vision and early learning plan. In this section we address state perceptions about the sustainability of staff positions that they have created with ELC funds as well as concerns about the impact of the ELC timeline on the overall sustainability of the systems-reform approach.

Five of the seven states interviewed are using ELC funding for staffing functions while two are not. (The two who are not using ELC money to fund staff positions both have consolidated governance.) In those states in which the governor's office is coordinating the work of the ELC, grant resources are financing governor's office positions. And, likewise, in all of the states that adopted any type of coordination approach, federal ELC money is being used to hire staff. In these states, staffing is used for a variety of positions: leadership to set the overall direction for the work, investment in staffing for the state Early Learning Council, and leads for projects and/or coordination across agencies. States that are investing in these positions are pleased with the impact. Some have expressed concern about how these positions will be sustained and are worried about losing the capacity, expertise and leadership that has been gained from them. However, some are mitigating the risk of non-replacement after the grant resources are gone by building





intentional redundancy to make sure that knowledge and skills are shared across the agency staff even if the ELC-financed staff positions are not sustained.

State leaders vary in their views about the sustainability of their improvements in governance as well as the overall work of the ELC. All of the states foresee the need for greater state investment in programming, as well as infrastructure, to maintain progress and momentum. These leaders report concern that sustainability in general may be impacted by the overall timeline of the ELC. Most of the states interviewed were not confident that the timeline was long enough, although one leader shared a strong belief that the timeline was appropriate, stating “We like the short timeline as a forcing element for sustainability and our policy framework.”

States cited three main reasons why the timeline should have been longer. First, states noted that they were starting from a point of fragmentation. For states that did not have previously unified governance, this was a significant theme. Colorado, for example, did not have a history of a strong central governor’s office approach or a single agency that was in charge, so time was needed to negotiate and create a system and cultural shift. Alicia Leatherman, from Ohio, noted “Government can take a long time. There are a lot of chess pieces moving.” Given the difficulty and complexity of this work, states are concerned that the fundamental systems shifting that the ELC promotes won’t be fully realized before the extra federal resources are gone.

” Even for states with a history of consolidated governance, some were skeptical about the four to five year window for the ELC.

Even for states with a history of consolidated governance, some were skeptical about the four to five year window for the ELC. Maryland’s leadership noted that the QRIS brings a new model into child care, moving child care from a private business to a public-private model. From this systems perspective, there is a question about whether a four to five year timeline is sufficient for child care to make the shift. And, as a corollary to this, that same issue also applies to school districts that are being asked to work with the community early learning programs on a peer basis, which requires a similar cultural and systems shift.

Finally, some states expressed concern that the timeline was too short to build up staff capacity, and to sufficiently cultivate talent and leadership to assure quality implementation and sustainability over time. Ohio noted that its decision to engage multiple state agencies and the governor’s office is operationally demanding, requiring a lot of time. To achieve the ELC’s purpose with regard to systems reform and the enrollment of low-income children in high quality programs, Ohio questions whether the timeline for embedding staff capacity to support the effort is truly sustainable.

Beyond the concerns that states expressed, they all agree on the high value of putting together clear goals and strategies as part of the ELC and they believe that these will continue to have an impact on their states long after the federal financial investment. Interestingly enough, states did not feel that the time period of the ELC was too short to cultivate necessary legislative, political and

community leadership and buy-in to the goals and values represented by the ELC. Several states indicate that the ELC helped to change the conversation with the legislature, bringing greater awareness and understanding and, for some, early wins in terms of expanding investment in the early learning system.

Conclusion

States are actively experimenting with governance as part of their commitment to systems reform. They see this part of their work through the Early Learning Challenge as critical to achieving an equitable, strong system that can foster quality services and improved outcomes for low-income, at-risk, young children. States are thoughtfully and creatively working on governance issues, appreciating the complexity and impact of this work, and leveraging the opportunity of the Early Learning Challenge to test out new strategies in service to stronger systems and outcomes. The ELC provides an opportunity to address previous fragmentation and to make a shift to a new culture and way of doing business.

States recognize the leadership responsibility to align the whole system, not just develop a new federal program. For those involved with state level governance, this is their lens and they appreciate the support from the ELC to think and act broadly about best ways to move a quality agenda for children, families and the larger community. When asked about their vision for future federal initiatives, all of the state leaders indicated that a focus on systems and innovation—and the work to have governance serve the mission, not get in the way of it—is critical.

About the Author



Harriet Dichter has a multi-decade track record of innovation, partnership, and accountability in early childhood—at the local, state and national levels. As Pennsylvania’s founding Deputy Secretary, Office of Child Development and Early Learning, she gained national attention for the state’s unique new solutions and partnerships. As founding Executive Director, Delaware Office of Early Learning, she accelerated the pace, quality, and accountability of the state’s comprehensive work in early childhood. In the national non-profit and foundation sector, she served as a leader for the Ounce of Prevention Fund and its policy advocacy affiliate, the First Five Years Fund, and worked as staff at the Pew Charitable Trusts. At the community level, she developed her policy, planning, implementation, leadership and advocacy skills in diverse organizations including local government, where she directed the Maternal and Child Health Office of the Philadelphia Department of Public Health; United Way, a child policy and advocacy non-profit; and legal services. Harriet is a graduate of Yale (B.A. *summa cum laude*) and the University of Pennsylvania Law School (J.D. *cum laude*).



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