



**Strong Foundations For
Our Youngest Children**

**Texas
Early Childhood
Coalitions
Focus Groups
Summary**

SEPTEMBER 2023



The BUILD Initiative is a national effort that advances state work on behalf of young children (prenatal through five), their families, and communities. BUILD staff partner with early childhood state leaders focused on early learning, health and nutrition, mental health, child welfare, and family support and engagement to create the policies, infrastructure, and cross-sector connections necessary for quality and equity. BUILD provides consultation, planning, and tailored implementation assistance, learning opportunities, resources, and cross-state peer exchanges. These efforts help state leaders improve and expand access to quality and promote equitable outcomes for our youngest children.

The findings and BUILD Initiative recommendations in this summary outline options for the state to improve support for early childhood coalitions in providing services and resources to children, families, and communities. The recommendations do not reflect the opinions of the Early Childhood Interagency Work Group or its member agencies. We thank the coalitions and families who participated in the focus groups and for sharing their experiences.

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Texas Early Childhood Coalitions Focus Groups Summary

BACKGROUND

The state of Texas aims to ensure programs, policies, and practices are informed by and responsive to beneficiary voices. Centering beneficiary voice includes listening to and learning from families and providers who work with families with young children.

The Texas Early Childhood Interagency Work Group is committed to centering the voices of families and communities impacted by local community, state, tribal, and federal policies and practices. The group asked BUILD Initiative to organize focus groups to learn about the early childhood coalitions' experiences in meeting the goals of young children, families, and communities; services and practices that work or do not work well for families and populations the coalitions serve; and how the state could enhance its relationship with and responsiveness to early childhood coalitions.

Over three months in 2022, the Early Childhood Interagency Work Group partnered with BUILD to conduct focus groups with early childhood coalitions across Texas. BUILD's Sherri Killins Stewart Ed.D directed the design and implementation of the groups. A total of 13 coalitions across 38 counties representing over 70 members were encouraged to include in the focus groups family members who sat on the coalitions. With family members on two of the 13 coalitions, a total of four family members participated in the focus groups alongside other professionals. After the initial round of focus groups, coalitions were invited to a feedback session to review and provide additional feedback on the findings and recommendations. The focus groups aimed to:

- Leverage and learn from the existing early childhood coalitions across the state.
- Understand the relationship and communication between local and regional early childhood coalitions and state government leaders.
- Strengthen relationships and establish feedback loops among state agency partners, early childhood coalitions, and the families they serve.
- Identify areas where parent and community voices are being heard and leveraged across the state.
- Understand the wants, needs, and desires of parents of young children and the practices coalitions use to connect with parent voice.

The following early childhood coalitions participated in the focus groups:

- Early Childhood Action Network (Ector County)
- Early Childhood Coalition of Greater Wichita County (Help Me Grow Wichita County)
- Early Childhood Coalitions of Gregg County
- Help Me Grow North Texas
- Family & Community Coalition of Montgomery County
- Family Leadership Council (Help Me Grow El Paso)
- First Three Years / Houston Infant Toddler Coalition & ParentingHelp Collaboration (Harris County)
- Galveston County Community Resource Coordination Group
- Healthy Mothers & Babies of Jefferson County & Jefferson County Children’s Non-Profit Networking Group (Port Arthur)
- Make the First Five Count (Help Me Grow Rio Grande Valley)
- Operation First Five (Randall and Potter Counties)
- ReadyKidSA (Help Me Grow Bexar County)
- Success by Six (Help Me Grow Greater Austin)

While there is not a central, statewide definition of what counts as an early childhood coalition, there are commonalities across the coalitions. All of these early childhood coalitions work across multiple stakeholder groups, attempting to convene across the bounds of any single organization. They also convene to better support children and families in their communities, whether through joint service delivery or program design, improved resource referrals, or coordinated outreach efforts to community members. The organizations participating in these coalitions work with children anywhere in the age range of birth to eight, and some organizations also work with families in the prenatal stage of their children’s lives.

The focus group conversations were structured into five parts: strengths and accomplishments, challenges, gaps and opportunities for growth, relationship with the early childhood state system, and family voice and community engagement. The following six key themes emerged:

KEY THEMES

- Theme 1 | Early childhood coalitions rely heavily on rich partnerships to meet the needs of families and communities
- Theme 2 | Early childhood coalitions value centering beneficiary voices
- Theme 3 | Rural accessibility continues to prevent families from receiving needed services
- Theme 4 | Responsiveness must be at the core of serving families and communities
- Theme 5 | Adopting a whole-family focus increases the overall well-being of young children, as doing so supports caregivers
- Theme 6 | The role and value of fathers’ voices in the lives of young children must be acknowledged

Early childhood coalitions rely heavily on rich partnerships to meet the needs of families and communities

Ensure sustainable collaboration is at the core of local early childhood systems

FINDING

Coalitions understand the importance of working in partnership with other child- and family-serving organizations to meet the needs of children, families, and communities. Siloed grants can lead to competition and prevent whole-family needs from being met. A few coalitions shared that funding restrictions or other barriers, such as geography or age categories, make it challenging to support families through coordinated efforts. Coalitions are interested in funding and strategies that support [whole-family approaches](#).

RECOMMENDATION

Government funding should account for the cost of supporting collaboration and partnership. When possible, reduce competitive grants and incentivize partnerships. Partnerships are needed within and across county lines since families are mobile.

"We know each other, we can call each other on the phone, you know, we're at that level where we trust each other, and we can work together and collaborate on so many levels."

"We share resources. We share knowledge because we have to; there's no way we can all do this alone."

"As we develop that trust, and those relationships and knowing what each other does, we begin to see each other not as competitors, but as how we can complement each other and expand our capacity just by having our relationships."

"The needs are so great here that everybody comes together... it's more a concern for the families and the children and making sure that we do as good of a job as we can of meeting their needs."

Early childhood coalitions value centering beneficiary voices

Create an infrastructure to build consistent feedback loops with communities using existing programs and coalitions to engage families

FINDING

Leveraging family voice is a priority for early childhood coalitions and critical to the design, implementation, and monitoring of programs, services, and initiatives. Several coalitions have adopted and are implementing family engagement strategies through parent champions, parent advisory councils, surveys, hiring individuals with lived experience, and including family seat(s) in their membership structures. Coalitions not adopting beneficiary voice practices spoke of them as aspirational and affirmed a desire to center the voices of families and communities.

Many coalitions have found creative ways to center and lift family voices. However, intentional practice or a method of sharing those voices with state leaders is needed to inform statewide programs, policies, and practices. Feedback loops between community providers and families without a visible pathway for communicating with the state's early childhood system perpetuate inequities, misalignment of resources, and missed opportunities.

Many coalitions identified families with whom they were not connected. Staffing resources and capacity, historical mistrust, transportation, and service deserts were the shared challenges of serving immigrant, African American, Latino/a, Black, and rural families.

RECOMMENDATION

The Early Childhood Interagency Work Group and local coalitions should create a process that supports cross-sector commitment to beneficiary voice and uses feedback loops through various state programs, funding sources, and initiatives. The Early Childhood Interagency Work Group could provide leadership in developing feedback loop protocols to ensure that inclusion of provider and family voice is deliberate, systematic, and coordinated across programs.

Identify resources and staffing to develop a formal external process for communicating with the Early Childhood Interagency Work Group. The Interagency Work Group and coalition leadership can co-design a strategy to reflect the shared commitment with clear expectations of roles and responsibilities. The staff should primarily work with people outside the agencies and have pathways for communicating with state leaders.

Intentional efforts at state and local levels should seek to increase geographical reach to low-opportunity communities. While the coalitions interviewed were carefully selected based on geographical area, only a fraction of the states' coalitions were included. The selection process in the future should account for providers and families in areas without formal coalitions. The Early Childhood Interagency Work Group should identify coalitions that serve young children who were not part of the initial round of focus groups and concentrate on areas of low opportunity, tailoring outreach to immigrant, Black, and Latino/a families, as well as rural-based families who may live in communities not represented by a coalition.

"I don't feel like I'm just a token, or just someone on the team, so they can check off that we got a family voice that we use... I feel we're being used, and they come back and let us see what they've done with our words and discussions."

"My goal is that our voices continue to be used, but then go further, you know, just don't start with us and the project we're working on. But whatever projects they have from this time on utilize both parents and youth, not just moms, but dads as well, in some of these programs, like these health programs, for women having children, but the dads are also part of that. Their mental health and their physical health should also have things intertwine with their successes as well."

"We believe very deeply in listening to the voice of the parents we serve and trying to direct our programs based upon the needs of our parents. And that's informed a lot of how we manage our programs."

Provide support for early childhood coalitions to create intentional beneficiary voice and family leadership practices

FINDING

Despite most coalitions expressing value in community and family involvement, many described difficulties sustaining beneficiary voice and family leadership practices. Capacity and staffing were the most significant challenges in maintaining family engagement and beneficiary voice. Coalitions are interested in learning new ways to include and increase family engagement and leadership through beneficiary voice. Many of the coalitions interviewed reported having limited or no operational funding, which makes it difficult to sustain the overall operations of the coalitions, including outreach to families and community leaders. Without resources, coalitions cannot support the ongoing practice of including family voice across multiple populations, languages, ethnicity, and geography.

RECOMMENDATION

Provide resources to sustain practices for coalitions committed to establishing, enhancing, and expanding community and family voices and leadership by partnering with community providers. Community providers should reflect the communities they serve and work with and empower local organizations to drive conversations at the state level. In addition, selected providers will provide beneficiary voice education to families and communities to enhance understanding and participation. State identified beneficiary voice resources dedicated to support early childhood coalition beneficiary voice efforts should compensate family members and programs to support administrative functions and coordination of family feedback loops.

"I think there is a high need and value in family voice, but it's also quite difficult."

"We will bring at least two parents from our advisory committee onto the steering committee level of the collaborative...Our ultimate goal is to ensure we have parent representation at the highest level."

"Help the leaders of the coalition, just the work that it involves, and with administrative work and planning, you're using time from program services and agencies to keep the coalition going. And that is taxing, and that can be stressful as well...So with funding comes, hopefully, some staff, and other resources as well for administrative cost and building cost and events and marketing, funding for marketing, and all of those things that come with a good healthy coalition or program."

THEME 3

Rural accessibility continues to prevent families from receiving needed services

Expand access for rural communities

FINDING

Many children and families living in rural areas who could benefit from services cannot access services due to accessibility. While there are some in-home services in rural communities, resources are limited and usually not sustainable due to demand and workforce shortages.

RECOMMENDATION

State agencies should investigate strategies to leverage existing buildings as satellite offices to meet needs in rural communities that have low-density populations of children and families in need of services based on feedback from coalitions and census data. Staffing for a satellite office could be funded by the state, and coalitions can work together on a shared staffing model using existing or new staff. For example, six organizations could work together to provide 20-40 hours of staffing a week. The satellite office should offer evening and weekend hours. In addition to a satellite office, state agencies should partner to support and expand virtual services to reach families in rural communities, including connection costs and equipment for families. Research on best practices and current and past state-led rural connectivity efforts should be conducted to inform future initiatives.

"The people that live in the outskirts...it's hard for them to get to those services. So, programs that can take services to them to do home visits are very valuable."

"We have some real need in the rural areas because a large percentage of our county is rural. And so, people living, you know, 15-20 miles from the closest food bank, public transportation, or access to the internet."

"We are rich in resources in some areas, but still lack resources and mostly access to services with many people that live in the outlying parts of our county or our communities."

Assess and identify Wi-Fi dead zones and identify alternatives for service delivery

FINDING

Many children and families have limited or no internet access, making it challenging to access services and complete service-related activities online.

RECOMMENDATION

State agencies should partner with [Connected Nation](#) and coalitions to identify sustainable strategies to increase access to Wi-Fi in libraries or other public spaces in communities or low- or no-cost Wi-Fi and equipment for families in need of access to private and confidential services. Agencies should collaborate with internal Information Technology leaders to develop strategies to ensure each agency's website is accessible and mobile friendly, for families who rely on smartphones for Wi-Fi connectivity.

Develop a process to onboard new technology users

FINDING

For some caregivers, technology is ineffective for service delivery. For example, for the increased number of grandparents raising young children, obtaining, and applying for services via technology is challenging, which hinders their access.

RECOMMENDATION

The Local Workforce Development Boards should support caregivers in transitioning to online service delivery by providing training, equipment, tools, and Wi-Fi.

"There are huge areas that have no internet access. The school district takes buses that are Wi-Fi enabled and puts them in the community so the kids can have internet. I mean, it's brutal."

"Internet access is a big deal for us. This area around the border is a dead zone in many places."

"We have big issues with our digital divide; families don't have internet, you know, so everything is so digitized that how can they go online to fill out and renew their CHIP or children's Medicaid."

"We have many grandparents raising children...culturally, they're, you know, they may not use technology as many of us do. So, it's a little harder to reach them, especially as we had to change to virtual services for most of our programs."

THEME 4

Responsiveness must be at the core of serving families and communities

Ground policy, program, and initiatives in the voice and lived experiences of families

FINDING

Most coalitions were committed to integrating family voice in existing structures when appropriate. Coalitions are looking for opportunities to include family voice in meetings and community and statewide workgroups and coalitions. Participation goals include establishing family leadership, reducing the burden on families, minimizing silos, and encouraging rich community relationships.

RECOMMENDATION

The Early Childhood Interagency Work Group should collaborate across agencies to develop and strengthen policies and practices grounded in beneficiary voice. The policy should prioritize voices from Indigenous, Black, and other communities of color currently or historically marginalized by state programs and services. In addition, measures related to the use of beneficiary voice should be developed to evaluate the effectiveness of policy and practice.

The Early Childhood Interagency Workgroup and local coalitions should organize access to family voice when designing, developing, and implementing programs and services designed to benefit families with children birth to five. This could include investigating current state procurement processes that disincentivize beneficiary voice practices, such as not compensating family leaders. This effort is essential because if state funding doesn't allow for equitable compensation to family voice/leadership, then coalitions will likely struggle to sustain beneficiary voice in their practices.

The Texas Early Learning Council members should support the inclusion and centering of family voice in the Early Learning Council by focusing on communities without formal infrastructure and those historically marginalized by existing programs, services, or initiatives.

"It's looking at where we can insert parent voices as much as possible, even in statewide workgroups. Many of us are already in coalitions locally and statewide, so how can we bring that voice along? But then we do also need a separate setting where parents can voice what they need and, in a place where they feel like they're heard."

"Where can we bring these parent voices to, to more of these settings, instead of creating something all new?"

“Family engagement and voice were very important to us from the beginning. So, we decided to kind of divide that gear out. That was a historical moment. And we created a separate subcommittee for family engagement.”

“Often, we operate on those [providers’] voices as proxies for parents, and sometimes that leads us to missing the mark. Like sometimes, when we let adult problems get in the way of solving problems for kids in the way we think, this policy could be a problem. Still, I think we do that a lot, you know, I heard from, or this seems to be a problem for instead of this is what families need.”

Support providers in assisting families with basic needs

FINDING

Several coalitions discussed the challenges of working with families who lack the means to meet their basic needs. Service providers have had to prioritize basic needs, which can delay access to other needed services. Additionally, sometimes providers can’t reach families due to the inability to meet family needs, such as transportation.

RECOMMENDATION

Explore feasibility of creating a statewide process or leveraging existing data sources that service providers can use at each encounter with families to collect de-identified data that can be aggregated to document gaps in basic needs to inform funding priorities.

“There are quite a number of those families out there that can’t get some basic needs met because of no transportation or not driving.”

“It was very hard because those basic needs had to be met first. And so that was just like the biggest thing.”

“Of the families we serve in that program, approximately 70% have a family income less than 15k a year, then there’s a huge percent that has a family income of less than 10k. And what was even shocking to me was the increase in the number of families with an annual family income of less than 5k.”

Provide linguistically appropriate written materials

FINDING

Families served by the coalitions speak multiple languages. It is easier for families to obtain services and resources when information is communicated in their preferred language. Some coalitions expressed frustration over needing more staff who speak, and resources in, multiple languages.

RECOMMENDATION

State agencies should consider providing linguistic resources to ensure providers can provide information in the families’ preferred languages and support hiring and retaining bilingual and multilingual staff. State agencies should consider incentivizing a bilingual and multilingual workforce by supporting bilingual education for early childhood and family providers.

Develop a system to monitor resources and referrals

FINDING

When providing families with resources and referrals, service providers desire to build responsive relationships. Service providers also need relationships with other providers to make ‘warm’ referrals or connections to address trust issues and misconceptions and remove barriers to follow-through.

RECOMMENDATION

The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and local early childhood organizations should invest in supporting early childhood and family providers in addressing whole-family needs, which requires more than a one-time meeting with families. Caseloads should allow for time to build relationships.

“Making sure that we’re providing them the information not just in a paper, a flier, an infographic, or something but helping them and connecting them to the other person they want and making sure it’s in their language of choice.”

“We seem to struggle with reaching just the African American population. We’ve seen that when we did our community needs assessment.”

“[Disconnected] Black families and families that may be undocumented or immigrants, those with many fears and distrust of established systems.”

“Families that are undocumented...they’re so challenged with so many things, they’re afraid to seek services, they’re living in hiding.”

THEME 5

Adopting a whole family focus increases the overall well-being of young children, as it supports caregivers

Provide support and service to the whole family

FINDING

Coalitions have found that adopting a whole-family lens as a strategy for meeting the needs of young children has been the most effective. Family-focused strategies reduce the burden on families to engage with multiple providers and support caregivers caring for children.

RECOMMENDATION

Regional and local entities that serve and interface with families would benefit from intentionally working together to identify areas to coordinate service delivery to meet the needs of children and families.

“One of our early meetings was if we’re dealing with kids and children, you cannot leave the families out. They’re equally as important, if not more. So, we changed our name from the Children’s Leadership Council to the Family Leadership Council.”

“One of the successes of the coalition is that we don’t focus just on early [childhood]; it’s [the coalition] involving all of the other agencies, the veterans, the Fatherhood Program, this program, and that program, and all together as a whole makes it very powerful.”

“Taking that holistic approach, you know, don’t just stop with a child or mom or dad, but how can we get them all involved in different programs or services.”

“We have different agencies that are not necessarily early childhood. They provide free COVID vaccines, all that stuff we provide during the events. And those events have been very successful.”

THEME

6

The role and value of fathers’ voices in the lives of young children must be acknowledged

Support the inclusion of fathers or other male caregivers in state programs

FINDING

Coalitions expressed the need to raise up the voice of and support fathers in young children’s lives. Historically, supporting mothers has been the central focus of early childhood providers. Increasing the visibility and involvement of fathers will result in better outcomes for the whole family.

RECOMMENDATION

The Early Childhood Interagency Work Group and local coalitions should work together to ensure programs, services, and initiatives are intentionally designed to include fathers.

Where they are not already connected, the Early Childhood Interagency Work Group should connect local fatherhood-focused Department of Family and Protective Services grantees from the Fatherhood EFFECT (Educating Fathers for Empowering Children Tomorrow) program with known early childhood coalitions.

Department of Family and Protective Services should provide training on best practices in engaging with fathers and creating father-friendly programs through existing statewide early childhood professional development conferences and trainings.

“Once you get [fathers] involved, their voices are louder than anyone’s because they will tell you they’ve never been given or asked about their voice before.”

“When you’re in the early childhood space, you know, you tend to have many women involved, but we want to continue working at that in getting more male representation into our subcommittees and our decision-making groups.”

“We never want child rearing or early childhood system work to just be about women, and we know how important fathers are in raising young children.”

“I see there being more of a shift of fatherhood, just involvement in general, because I think that’s been such a space that’s maybe been neglected, like not only socially just but also in the resources that have been provided.”



SUPPORT FROM THE STATE

In addition to asking coalitions about their experience working with children and families, the Early Childhood Interagency Work Group was also interested in what support coalitions want from the state. “The state” was used to mean all agencies touching children’s and families’ lives and expanding beyond the state agencies that comprise the Early Childhood Interagency Work Group. The themes that emerged across the interviews included communication, data, navigation, and staffing.

Establish a process for transparent and consistent communication

FINDING

We heard from coalitions about the need to improve provider communication on priorities, including the process for setting priorities and how state agencies collaborate with each other to minimize duplication, competition, and confusion.

Develop program competence through regular communication and relationships

FINDING

While some coalition members described the communication, support, and technical assistance from the state as helpful, other members expressed frustration with the lack of program knowledge some state staff demonstrated.

“More transparency around setting their internal numbers and thinking about how those are set more collaboratively.”

“Our program specialists don’t know what we do. They don’t know our program. And that’s why again, that’s why we are asking, please give me one person or give us one or two.”

Ensure early childhood coalitions can access usable data from state programs

FINDING

Coalitions expressed challenges with accessing user data. In addition, coalitions are burdened by the lack of a streamlined way to access data and having to pull data together from various sources.

"Making data accessible and usable."

"We don't have a coordinated system around early childhood data in any way, shape, or form. So, to get any local data, we rely heavily on our partners to get the data directly from our partners. And there's no good way to get the data we need from a state perspective."

Create an accessible resource designed to support system navigation for providers and families

FINDING

Early childhood coalitions needed resources to help providers and families navigate support and services. Information about programs and services is communicated through word of mouth and relationships.

"Because it's so hard for us to navigate, I can't even imagine what it's like for families. There's no sustainable process in place."

"I think maybe even something as simple as a resource directory, giving the point of contact, agency, their location, their hours of operations, maybe even possibly, again, that documentation that's needed on their end."

Dedicate resources to support the coordination and impact of early childhood coalitions

FINDING

Coalition members across the focus groups shared the challenge of having the capacity to implement and support the work of the coalitions fully. While some coalitions have dedicated staff to advance collective initiatives, many do not.

"A position that would continue the work between our meetings of having great ideas and collaboration would be excellent because that puts feet to the ideas."

"Staffing for a centralized point of access for information and intakes."

