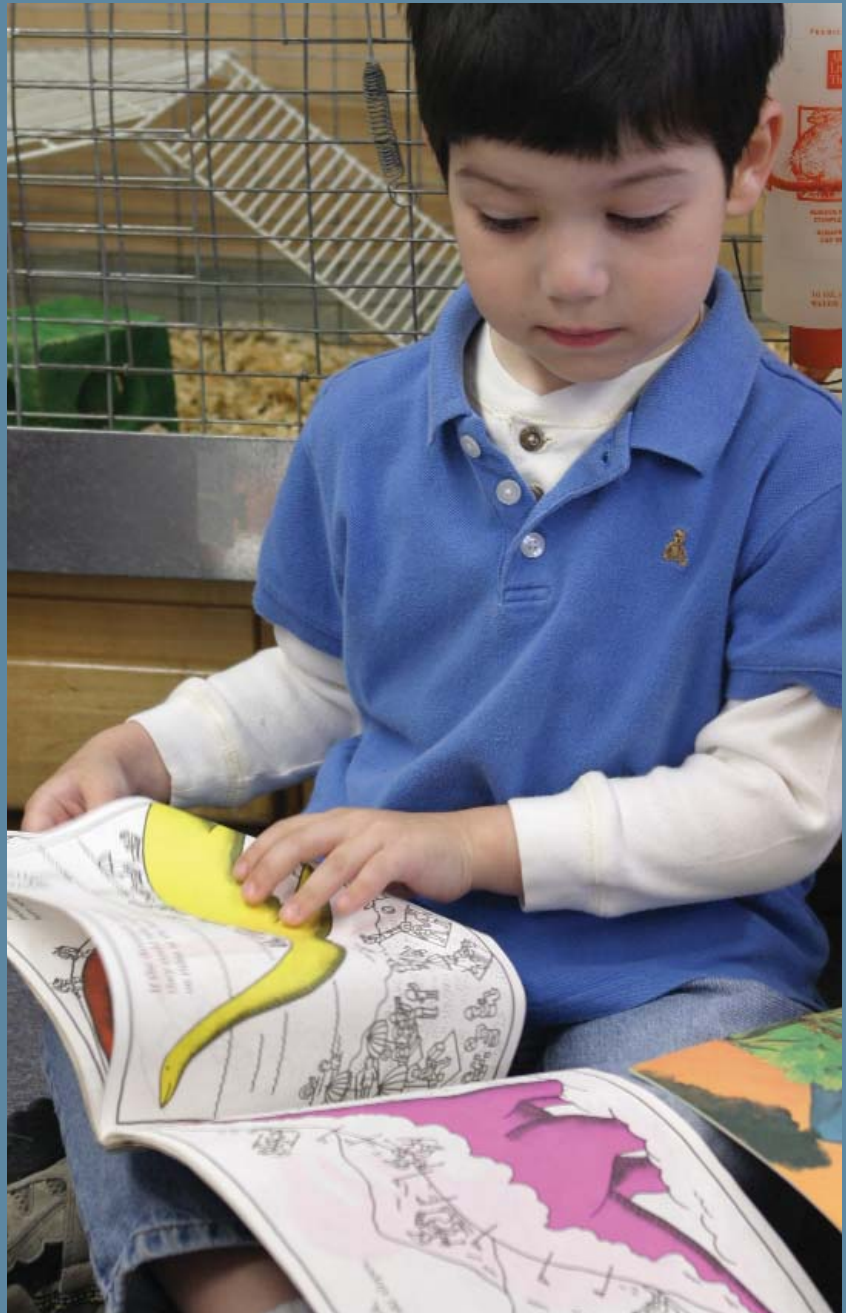




Common Vision, Different Paths

*Five States' Journeys toward
Comprehensive
Prenatal-to-Five Systems*



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National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

pre[k]now

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Common Vision, Different Paths

dear colleagues

America's future rests on the shoulders of today's youngest children. Their early experiences will shape the architecture of their brains in enduring ways and build the foundation – whether strong or weak – for their own development and that of our nation.

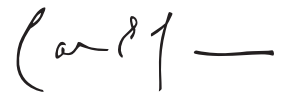
This report is written by two leading national early childhood organizations, ZERO TO THREE and Pre-K Now, which are perceived by some as competing for scarce attention and resources and as advancing incompatible agendas. It is our shared belief, however, that we must transcend the fragmentation and conflict that sometimes divide the early childhood community. Ultimately, the success of our respective efforts depends upon the quality and scope of the opportunities our nation provides for its youngest citizens. To that end, we are joining together in the common recognition that all children need access to coordinated, affordable, high-quality early care and education, health and mental health, and family support services. We believe that developing cohesive systems of effective programs and policies requires a new level of national commitment to children in their earliest years.

Such work is not glamorous, but it is necessary. This report looks at strategies for effectively building the systems and providing the high-quality programs infants, toddlers, and young children need to thrive and succeed. It builds on the work of other initiatives, early childhood professionals, and institutions. Yet, by distilling the wisdom and experience of some of our country's most innovative early childhood leaders, this report intends to offer a fresh point of view and to encourage more states to commit to this difficult but critical work. Through proven, real-world strategies, elements of a prenatal-to-five system can be tackled incrementally without sacrificing a commitment to the broader vision.

Sincerely,



Libby Doggett
Executive Director
Pre-K Now



Matthew Melmed
Executive Director
ZERO TO THREE

Introduction

According to neuroscience and child development research, brain development proceeds at a faster pace between conception and the first day of kindergarten than during any subsequent stage of life. In the early years, basic capacities such as trust, self-confidence, empathy, and curiosity are established. How people think, learn, reason, and relate to others throughout their lives is rooted in their early relationships, experiences, and environments.

Strong and stable families are essential to healthy child development. Families are the center of children's lives, shaping the environments within which early development unfolds. Families, however, cannot do it alone. They are buffeted by larger social and economic forces and must rely on support and guidance from pediatricians, child care providers, teachers, employers, and a host of others to help them maximize opportunities for their children's development.

Through policies and programs, a nation expresses its priorities and values while setting a course for the future. As a nation, we embrace services for other age groups like Social Security and Medicare for seniors. Such programs are considered a right of citizenship and a mandate of government. Yet, we do not regard services for infants, toddlers, young children, and their families in the same way. Effective policies and programs are essential for strengthening and sustaining families and for promoting children's optimal development, which in turn is a crucial ingredient of healthy communities.

Further, early childhood programs must serve a vast range of needs across a dramatically changing age spectrum. To be effective, these programs must be organized within cohesive systems

that coordinate and align delivery of a broad array of services. Unfortunately, the United States lacks a coherent and comprehensive vision for supporting families with young children.

As a result, states have had to find their own way on early childhood issues. Without a guiding, national vision, their approaches are often reactive, piecemeal, and fragmented. Programs are created in response to specific needs. They frequently are underfunded, serve only one specific age group, and feature separate funding sources, standards, regulations, and governance structures. Then, when a different need arises, the process repeats. Over time, a labyrinth of discrete programs develops, leaving children and families to navigate a landscape of varying and even conflicting standards and regulations, inconsistent quality and accountability, and uneven investment.

These challenges have stimulated a desire among stakeholders to articulate a vision that addresses the comprehensive needs of young children, including health and mental health, family stability, and early care and education. In recent years, more governors, legislators, and community leaders are recognizing the need to ensure children and families have access to comprehensive, high-quality

services that support and enhance early development. Their interest is fueled by a growing body of research, which demonstrates that investments in high-quality care and services yield significant social and economic benefits. To support and advance these efforts, ZERO TO THREE and Pre-K Now put forward the following vision as a guiding principle for policymakers and advocates at the national, state, and local levels:

“We envision a nation that supports the healthy development of all children within their states and communities by providing comprehensive, coordinated, well-funded systems of high-quality, prenatal-to-five services that foster success in school and life.”

By including both services and systems, this vision emphasizes the need to ensure adequate availability, high quality, strong oversight and accountability, and continuity of services across settings and age groups.

This report focuses primarily on how states are building comprehensive, coordinated systems for children, prenatal to age five. Five states – California, Illinois, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania – were selected for their diversity of programs and approaches. Through interviews with government officials, advocates, and other early childhood leaders in these states, the shared vision and practical strategies that lead to success in building prenatal-to-five systems were investigated. Although no state has fully realized this vision, the discussions revealed four cornerstones of successful system-building efforts – people, perspective, process, and product – as well as seven recommended practices for advancing a prenatal-to-five system.

the vision

An early childhood system is made up of interrelated parts working together toward the common goal: the healthy growth and optimal development of young children. Any effective approach to building a cohesive, high-quality system must include children at all ages along the continuum and must invest in the three areas research indicates are critical to later success: physical and mental health, family stability, and early learning. All children and families need access to comprehensive and coordinated services.

The Early Childhood System Builders' Workgroup, a group of national organizations providing technical assistance to state leaders on building early childhood systems, has conceptualized a comprehensive system, and the vision of this report is adapted from their work. The model early childhood system includes a broad array of high-quality, accessible, and affordable programs and services for young children and their families, including:

Physical and mental health services

- Health insurance coverage
- Prenatal care
- Primary and preventive care, such as well-child visits
- Guidance for parents to support children's healthy development
- Developmental screenings to identify physical and behavioral needs

Family support services

- Parenting education
- Economic supports to promote financial self-sufficiency
- Supportive work and family policies such as paid family leave
- Special supports for families in crisis

Early care and education

- Quality child care programs in a variety of settings
- Early Head Start and Head Start
- Quality pre-k for all offered in diverse settings
- Early identification and services for children with special needs

The vision, however, transcends a simple menu of programs. If services are not of high quality or serve only a small percentage of children, they cannot have a substantial impact on the lives of children and families, and they risk losing political and fiscal support. To achieve significant outcomes, services must be high quality, culturally responsive, accessible and affordable to all children and families who need them, and seamlessly integrated within an early childhood system.

Furthermore, to work in a coordinated fashion, services must be supported by an infrastructure that includes the following:

- Governance to provide the authority and leadership needed to develop an early childhood system;
- Standards to ensure and support evidence-based practices and programs, inform practitioners, and guide how services are provided;
- Monitoring to track program performance and results based on the standards;
- Ongoing professional development for the workforce and technical assistance to improve the quality of services;
- Research and development, including planning, data collection and analysis, and evaluation;
- A mechanism to help families find and access services;
- Sufficient financing to assure comprehensive, quality services; and
- Communications to build public awareness and political will.

Only through an early childhood system that includes both an array of comprehensive services and an infrastructure that ensures quality and coordination can *all* families have the support necessary to raise young children who thrive in their early years and throughout their lives.

Foundations in Research

The science of early childhood highlights the remarkable opportunity to optimize child development during the first years of life. According to a wealth of research, the most dramatic brain development occurs during a child's earliest years. No matter his or her socioeconomic or ethnic background, a child's early experiences and the environments in which they occur drastically influence the physical architecture of the brain, literally shaping neural connections.¹ For better or worse, these changes can last a lifetime.

Caring relationships with adults have a significant and enduring influence on a young child's development. Recent research found interactions between neural connections governing social and emotional development and those associated with cognitive functioning. In particular, scientists describe the importance of the "serve and return" process in which young children reach out to adults first through smiling and babbling and later through talking and playing. In turn, adults respond attentively and affectionately, making children feel secure and loved. This process helps children develop healthy relationships with other adults and with their peers while stimulating the neural connections in young brains that shape children's ability to explore their world, communicate, and learn.

Conversely, abusive and harmful environments cause the repeated release of stress hormones, which adversely affects children's brain structure and function, impairing healthy emotional development. Healthy relationships with adults, however, provide a buffer from mild and intermittent stress.²

These findings support the statement in *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy* that the "active ingredient" fueling children's development is their relationships with their parents, caregivers, teachers, and other adults.³ Throughout the early years, all children need consistent, warm relationships with adults who create socially, physically, and cognitively supportive environments. With this in mind, effective early childhood policies must accomplish two objectives:

- Help adults create nurturing, responsive, quality environments for children – whether at home, in child care centers, or in schools – that provide ongoing support in all aspects of development (physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and language).
- Offer a comprehensive array of well-funded, robust programs and coordinated policies that help families and professionals provide such environments.



Indeed, rigorous, randomized evaluations demonstrate that the most effective early childhood interventions are successful because they put these considerations into practice, beginning with the very youngest children. For instance, the Nurse Family Partnership and federal Early Head Start programs provide comprehensive services, from the prenatal period through age three – including nutrition, mental health, early education, and parenting supports – and have been shown to yield short- and long-term benefits for children and parents. Evaluations of the Infant Health and Development Program, designed to reduce developmental and health problems in low-birth-weight and premature infants, showed that providing home visits, parent group meetings, and center-based care fostered significant cognitive and social and emotional development in the infants. Similarly, both the Carolina Abecedarian Project and the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program offered multiple years of services; featured well-trained, well-compensated teachers implementing research-based curricula in high-quality, center-based settings; and provided supportive social services and referrals for families. Together, studies of these programs show that high-quality early childhood environments and nurturing relationships – whether at home or in group settings, in infancy or during the pre-k years – promote healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development.

As effective as these programs are, no one intervention can provide the wide range of services needed to ensure that all children develop to their full potential. As Kagan and Cohen note, states need more than just individual programs.⁴ They must build a *system*: a comprehensive array of quality programs, supportive policies, and coordinating infrastructure. Unfortunately, such efforts must overcome a history of fragmentation, turf issues, and limited resources.

A number of leaders in the field have explored ways states can work toward a cohesive vision:

- Bruner, Wright, Gebhard, and Hibbard offer guiding principles for building a coordinated early learning infrastructure;⁵
- Schumacher, Hamm, Goldstein, and Lombardi examine strategies to coordinate birth-to-three policies;⁶
- Mitchell documents three states' experiences of building an early care and education system and offers lessons learned;⁷ and
- Stebbins and Knitzer review early childhood policies around the country and call for a balanced approach that addresses the holistic needs of young children and their families.⁸

Their work highlights the need for coordinated program standards, service delivery, and policies as well as financing and governance structures. It also speaks to the importance of leadership to shepherd the process. In the end, an effective prenatal-to-five system is the result of sound research, thoughtful policy, and smart politics.

Cornerstones of Success

1 *people*

Leadership
Relationships

2 *perspective*

Common Vision and Goals
Context, History, and Culture

3 *process*

Strategic Focus
Opportunism
Research-Based Evidence

4 *product*

Alignment and Integration
Quality
Sustainability

In group interviews with representatives from the five states – California, Illinois, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania – four cornerstones emerged on which the successes of the states are built: people, perspective, process, and product. Though the strategies and systems of the five states differ, these cornerstones reflect shared approaches and principles that contribute to their prenatal-to-five accomplishments and can be replicated in other states.

Each cornerstone is divided into two or three components. Critically, these components must be understood as interdependent, informing and reinforcing one another within and across cornerstones. In every case, though some components may be more important in one state than another, they all play a role, and interview participants consistently referenced the interplay among them as the mechanism that drives their work.

Though seemingly basic at first glance, these strategies are often overlooked, their importance underestimated, or the commitment to them insufficient. Therefore, the cornerstones are offered as a new framework by which stakeholders can assess their state's progress to date, evaluate their current system and processes, and work more effectively.

Further, the discussion of each component includes challenges and tradeoffs that stakeholders frequently confront as they pursue an early childhood vision. Every state must contend with funding constraints, politics, existing agency and program regulations, and conflicting personalities and ideologies. Success in the cornerstones is neither easy nor quick. Yet, by committing to hard work and following the recommendations given in this report, early childhood leaders can – as many interviewees attest – overcome barriers, make tough choices, and achieve goals for children.

cornerstone **1** people

Interviewees consistently pointed to the importance of passionate, determined people working effectively together in an environment of mutual respect, patience, and compromise. To be realized effectively, this cornerstone must include people from both inside and outside government. The continuum of stakeholders should be broad, comprising elected officials, leading advocates, providers, agency administrators, faith-based organizations, and families. This “big tent” approach, although essential, can lead to conflict, and all participants must work to communicate effectively and resolve disputes. The best examples of this cornerstone at work include a strong foundation of long-time, traditional early childhood champions and a growing corps of diverse allies such as law enforcement, business, K-12 and college-level educators, labor, and seniors’ groups.

People – their **leadership** and their ability to form strong, working **relationships** – play a role in every aspect and at every stage of the process. As a key starting point for states seeking to create a prenatal-to-five system, identifying leaders and building a sense of community and cooperation can pave the way for ongoing collaboration. People also were cited as vital to sustainability by providing long-term support and consistent innovation.

Leadership

Perhaps more than any other single factor, strong leadership was named as the most effective catalyst for advancing a prenatal-to-five vision. In every state, communication and collaboration, effective politics, creative thinking, and a commitment to the best interests of young children characterized the concept of “leadership.” Interviewees cited elected state leaders such as governors and state legislators for their ability to promote and enact important policies. Consistently, governors were named as the most influential state champion an early childhood initiative can have.

Yet, in general, the concept of leadership went well beyond prominent elected officials. Powerful advocates; appointed leaders and middle managers in key government agencies; local leaders, both civic and elected; and committed grassroots activists were all mentioned repeatedly as integral parts of the leadership continuum. In addition, diverse champions such as law enforcement, business, philanthropies, and unions were invoked for their unexpected strengths and contributions.

Interviewees noted the importance of organized, ongoing outreach and education. Cultivating leadership takes time and patience and does not happen by accident. Seeking leaders from a broad cross-section of the state’s citizenry, including individuals, organizations, foundations, and corporations, is the best way to tap a state’s unique resources. At the same time, developing leaders has to be deliberate, strategic, and informed by an understanding of the state context.

Relationships

Each of the five state groups referenced the importance of effective relationships in advancing a prenatal-to-five vision. They specifically cited the need to find venues for stakeholders from across the early childhood spectrum to collaborate and communicate. Building and sustaining successful relationships requires an ongoing commitment to communication, inclusiveness, cooperation, and consensus. A long-term perspective and a focus on outcomes for children help cultivate inclusion, trust, and collaboration. As a result, stakeholders are able to hash out differences privately; align on key matters of policy, strategy, and priorities; and present a genuinely unified public face.

In every interview, participants acknowledged differences of opinion on a broad array of crucial subjects including policy priorities and funding allocations, and several noted that effective relationships can take years to build. Simply getting stakeholders with different histories, agendas, and philosophies to sit at the same table can be a challenge. Powerful disagreements are not resolved without confrontation and compromise, and substantive, sometimes heated debate behind closed doors is part of the process. Developing safe environments where frank discussion and respect are the norm is essential to success.

This commitment to strong relationships among stakeholders is critical in keeping individuals, government, and organizations all moving in concert, whether building highly effective, coordinated, and focused public advocacy campaigns, crafting sound policy, or bringing programs to implementation.

Start with high standards. That's what quality product, people will buy it.

– Ramona Paul, Assistant State Superintendent, Professional Services,
Oklahoma State Department of Education

cornerstone **2** *perspective*

The second cornerstone that emerged is perspective. Consensus around a prenatal-to-five vision and a shared understanding of the communities and cultures they seek to serve shapes the perspective these interviewees bring to their work.

Within the stakeholder community, working together to create a **common vision and goals** is essential to maintaining strong relationships and prioritizing resources. At the same time, frank recognition of political, social, and professional contexts is central to devising strategies that can be effective at both the government and grassroots levels.

Devising a specific, shared vision and knowing the **context, history, and culture** of their states allows the interview participants to create and maintain a perspective that is at once ambitious and pragmatic.

Common Vision and Goals

In the most successful states, stakeholders share a clear, long-term vision, a set of goals, and core principles regarding a high-quality, comprehensive prenatal-to-five system. Interviewees reported that these shared ideas, together with strong leadership and relationships, support and sustain collaborations through policy disagreements, funding constraints, and political setbacks. Although vision statements are general in nature, the goals and principles of a state's vision must be concrete enough to avoid ambiguity and differences in interpretation. If the vision is too narrow, states risk overlooking critical programs and services and generating unintended consequences for the system, young children, and their families.

The process of building consensus is typically one of the first tasks stakeholders must undertake and is made more difficult when strong, working relationships are not yet developed. Indeed, several interviewees acknowledged that, on issues where consensus has not yet been attainable, progress has stalled. Taking the time necessary to reach agreement, however, can uncover differences of opinion and provide opportunities to resolve them, building trust and a sense of shared identity.

Representatives from each state agreed generally with the stated vision of this report as the ultimate objective. Maintaining that focus on meeting the needs of young children and families enables participants to negotiate trade-offs and agree on goals. In addition, participants spoke of mapping out basic values or principles around which the group could unite, such as quality and broad access.

Context, History, and Culture

Interviewees reported that intimate knowledge of their state's history and culture and its political, fiscal, social, and institutional contexts is a prerequisite to effective collaboration, system building, politics, and program implementation. In addition, understanding the existing early childhood landscape is crucial. The motivation for change often comes from recognition of gaps in current services and policies and their effects on young children's lives.

A thorough assessment of needs, resources, opportunities, and challenges leads to informed decision making. Fiscal realities may dictate phasing in full access to a program over time. A governor's or legislator's interest in a particular issue can guide a messaging strategy, such as linking job creation with the benefits of early care and education for workforce development. A state that strongly values county control needs initiatives that can be customized locally.

It is also important that stakeholders clearly understand federal policy and how it can impact a state's prenatal-to-five services. Federal programs can both enhance and limit a states' ability to realize an internal vision of a prenatal-to-five system. State interviewees expressed a desire for the federal government to be more of a funding partner, investing adequate resources in both services and infrastructure. They also wished federal policies were more in line with their vision of a comprehensive early childhood system and gave states flexibility to use funds in ways appropriate to their unique circumstances.

makes for success. Like in the marketplace, if you have a

cornerstone **3** process

For the groups interviewed, effective processes for advocacy campaigns, public policy work, system building, and program implementation were key to success. Each of the groups shared common ideas of how best to proceed through the complex and multifaceted task of pursuing a broad prenatal-to-five vision.

The cornerstone of process includes three components: a **strategic focus**, **opportunism**, and the use of strong **research-based evidence**. Directing resources toward the issues with the best chance of success, capitalizing on unexpected political and fiscal shifts, and demonstrating program effectiveness all help build support.

Process, then, must be deliberate but flexible, always with one eye on the short term and the other on the larger vision. This intentionality allows states to both build effective programs and cultivate the public and political will to sustain momentum toward the broader vision.

Strategic Focus

Even as the interview groups emphasized the “big tent” and the broad, long-term view, they also insisted on the importance of a focused approach. Understanding both individual areas of need and the political climate enables stakeholders to pinpoint specific goals on which progress can be made and around which successful strategies can be structured.

Reaching consensus around a particular focus is difficult work, with which all the profiled states continue to struggle. Because the early childhood field historically has been fragmented in terms of governance, settings, funding sources, age groups served,

and missions, turf issues are hard to transcend. In this context, conflict is a norm, and tradeoffs – such as whether a program should serve all children or only those at risk and whether to focus on infants and toddlers or pre-k-age children – are inevitable. Resolving these issues requires attention to the latest research and recognition of the state’s early childhood context, but it has as much to do with knowing what is fiscally feasible, can gain traction politically, and is most in line with public attitudes. These factors and the tough choices they present have led policymakers and advocates in many states to focus their initial efforts on early care and education with relatively less attention paid to other areas such as mental health or family leave.

Yet, pursuit of the larger prenatal-to-five vision demands that states not stop with one issue or age group. Focusing does not mean ignoring other parts of the system or advancing one at the expense of another. Some states identified a series of issues to be pursued consecutively, each success reinforcing the foundation on which the next could be built. The ideal process allows the state to prioritize strategically within a long-term plan that ensures balanced investments across programs and infrastructure supports.

Opportunism

Though strategically focusing on clearly defined goals is key to success in the five states, interview participants also cited the need to be flexible and capitalize on opportunities. New leadership in government, a surge of public interest in an issue, a major success in a neighboring state, or a swing in the budgetary outlook can drastically alter the landscape and present unexpected avenues for progress and collaboration.

Interviewees noted the importance of being alert and recognizing political, fiscal, and systemic opportunities, but they also insisted that evaluating opportunities in the context of ongoing work was equally critical. Not every shift of the wind warrants a course change, but in several cases the willingness to modify priorities in response to new conditions created unforeseen and even unprecedented momentum.

Research-Based Evidence

Effective advocacy campaigns, politics, and system building all demand strong research-based evidence. Interviewees pointed to the wealth of sound research on children’s brain development, the measurable impacts of high-quality programs, and the economics of investing early as the basis on which to educate policymakers and the public and to design and implement programs.

The importance of research-based evidence was invoked in four distinct contexts. First, proving a need: Statistical analyses of children and of gaps in services are highly effective in winning champions on early childhood issues. Second, identifying areas of public concern: Strategic polling helps to focus advocacy efforts and to highlight unanticipated opportunities. Third, arguing for a program: Compiling credible research literature on interventions and child outcomes is central to gaining support from stakeholders for appropriate, high-quality programs. And fourth, evaluating systems and proving effectiveness: Ongoing, rigorous evaluations are critical to documenting outcomes and providing accountability to policymakers, taxpayers, and children and families.

cornerstone **4** product

Ultimately, having public policies and providing programs that improve children's lives is the only reason to do this work. Thus, the fourth cornerstone was product: those programs, services, and systems that participants are working to create. Though there is overlap, each state currently offers a distinct selection of programs for young children. The common threads, however, are the features all programs and systems must share in order to achieve positive outcomes for young children: **alignment and integration, quality, and sustainability.**

Without these components, interviewees argued, systems lose public and political support and, most importantly, risk failing young children. By emphasizing this cornerstone, states can build programs and policies that succeed, which in turn creates a favorable environment for other areas of the prenatal-to-five system.

Alignment and Integration

Not surprisingly, alignment and integration were invoked throughout the interviews as central to realizing the vision of a high-quality, comprehensive, prenatal-to-five system. As new programs or initiatives are developed, the best strategy is to align them with existing systems rather than creating parallel efforts. Yet, this poses tough challenges, such as how to reconcile and link the needs of babies, toddlers, and pre-k-age children and how to connect

with health and mental health systems to address the physical, social and emotional needs of young children and their families. Quality standards and philosophical approaches may differ in programs that serve similar children.

The most successful states stay focused on the goal – the best outcomes for children prenatal to age five and supports for families – while traversing these divides. Participants cited the need for a system-wide view that identifies possible unintended consequences of new initiatives and different governing structures and considers their impacts on different elements: financing and resources, quality, access, family participation, infrastructure and coordination, governance and leadership, and evaluation. Continual feedback within the stakeholder community helps ensure that everything is closely aligned and focused toward the overall vision and goals.

States that create agencies or reorganize administrative structures also must understand that such efforts are not a substitute for investing in quality programs and services. Rather, new structures should be used as a platform for coordinating high-quality early childhood programs across the system. When undertaken strategically, reorganization can be a means to achieving good outcomes for young children.

Quality

Interview participants consistently referenced the importance and power of quality. High-quality programs generate measurable gains for children and families, which in turn garner the public and political support needed to advance the larger vision and sustain the system.

Interviewees cautioned against addressing quality only at the program development stage. Rather, it must be a continual consideration when advocating for, designing, implementing, and sustaining programs. This is not easy. States constantly grapple with the tension between investing limited funds in smaller, high-quality programs or in serving greater numbers of young children. Even when a commitment to quality is in place, maintaining that quality while expanding program availability presents difficult logistical and financial challenges. All five featured states consider quality to be paramount to achieving the promised, research-supported benefits of early childhood services. These states are constantly working to address tradeoffs between quality and quantity.

Additionally, interviewees from all five states remarked on the importance of a qualified, adequately compensated workforce to provide high-quality services and programs. This presents an enormous challenge when working toward a coherent, integrated early childhood system. In the absence of meaningful federal support for workforce qualifications, states must deal with differing workforce standards and unequal compensation for programs such as Head Start, child care, pre-k, as well as programs for children with special needs.

Ultimately, of course, quality is a priority not for its value as political currency but as the essence of child outcomes. The vision of a comprehensive system for children and families can only be realized if services are first of sufficiently high quality to generate long-term benefits and are then scaled up to reach large numbers of children.

Sustainability

Even as they heralded new initiatives championed by governors or key legislators, interview participants noted their ongoing efforts to build sustainability into the system. Elected leaders and administrators will come and go, but high-quality programs need to survive and grow.

Sustainability partly depends upon maintaining political will. Strategic advocacy keeps early childhood issues in the media, on electoral platforms, and on legislative agendas. Strong standards support quality, and rigorous evaluation demonstrates effectiveness. These, in turn, cultivate champions in government and build public support. When these elements are in place, programs are better insulated from spending cuts or policy shifts. Additionally, when systems are well aligned and integrated, support for one element can translate into support for the system at large.

It is no surprise that adequate funding for a high-quality, comprehensive, and coordinated system of services is a



significant challenge. One interviewee noted that a key to building political and public support is to clearly demonstrate results and impacts. Leaders in the featured states are adept at using research that shows long-lived economic benefits from investments in quality services and supports for young children, and they back this up with a commitment to quality standards and accountability.

Through strategic use of the research, more states are partnering with private foundations and businesses to increase and sustain investments in early childhood services. Although all five featured states engage in public-private

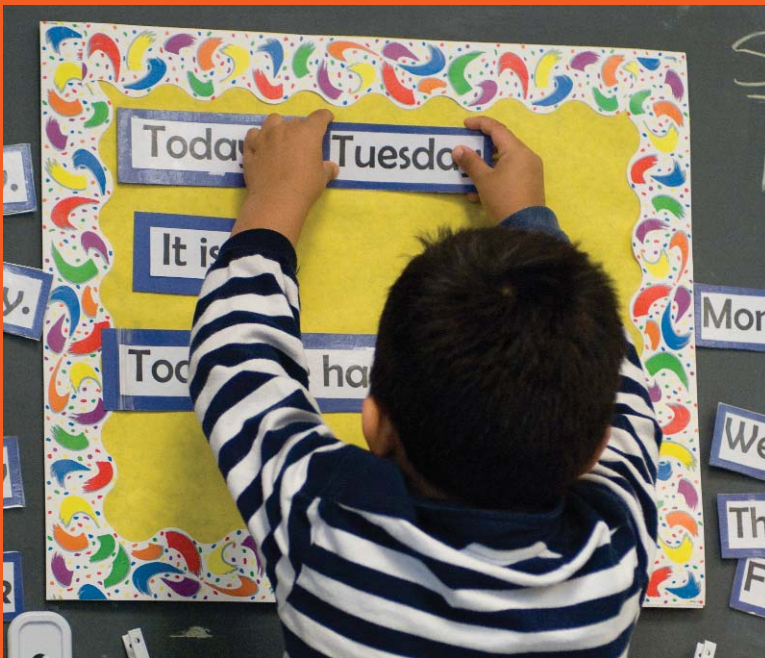
partnerships at the state and/or local levels to leverage funds for the longer haul, comprehensive, high-quality programs are still woefully underfunded. There is a need for much more financial investment from state and federal governments that gives state leaders the flexibility to realize the vision of this report: access to comprehensive, coordinated, well-funded, and high-quality services within their states and communities for all children and families.

State Profiles

Though each of the five states has approached its work with an eye toward realizing the long-term vision, they have done so in distinct ways. They selected different starting points and built from those according to blueprints that take into account their unique needs, resources, and political realities. For example, Pennsylvania developed a quality rating system and standards that were used to improve early care and education programs statewide, while Oklahoma began by providing high-quality pre-k for all and then leveraged that program's political support to advance other elements of the prenatal-to-five system.

Of course, none of these states – indeed, no state – has realized the full vision of a comprehensive prenatal-to-five system. In every state, significant gaps in quality, access,

and coordination remain. The vast scope of services and coordination required to fully address the developmental needs of children prenatal to five and their families is daunting. In policy terms, it is almost impossible to consider as a whole. The twin tasks of educating policymakers and the public about the value of a systemic approach and shepherding manageable, winnable pieces and programs through the political process, at times, can seem at odds. As states increase the scope of high-quality programs they offer and the extent of alignment among those programs, they will be better able to demonstrate the advantages of a systemic approach to prenatal-to-five services.



California

people

California's commitment to early childhood services spans more than six decades, dating back to 1943 when child care was first funded to support the war effort. Traditionally, California's programs for young children have been centrally administered by state agencies. More recently, two initiatives have spurred new thinking on child and family issues. In 1998, California voters approved a collaborative state and county infrastructure, known as First 5, which includes a state Children and Families Commission and local commissions in all 58 counties. Then in 2002, the state legislature passed the nation's first statewide paid family leave law.

Strong **leadership** has been instrumental in the development of innovative programs at both the state and local levels in California. One of the state's most impressive victories for young children and their families was the passage in 2004 of the nation's first paid family leave act. Advocates built a broad coalition, including seniors, doctors, early childhood professionals, unions, women, and even businesses. These groups mobilized the grassroots to raise awareness and cultivated legislative champions such as the bill's sponsor, State Senator Sheila Kuehl.

While state leaders have successfully advanced individual programs, developing a statewide coordinated system of comprehensive services for children and families has proven especially difficult in this uniquely vast and varied state. In order to better integrate state and local efforts, concerned advocates, led by film director Rob Reiner, introduced Proposition 10 to encourage creativity, minimize duplication, and maximize dollars. Proposition 10 created the First 5 structure to help foster communication and build **relationships** among decision makers within the early childhood community. Though progress has been greater in some counties than others, one interviewee noted, "I'm amazed at what First 5 has done as a convener." In 2006, advocates led another campaign to implement pre-k for all through a ballot initiative, Proposition 82. Members of the early childhood community had differing perspectives on the initiative. In the end, it did not pass even though most voters indicated general support of pre-k for all children.

perspective

California is vast in size, spanning nearly 164,000 square miles, and rich in geographic, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity. The state has significant Hispanic (35 percent), Asian (13 percent), and other ethnic populations among its 35 million people, with one in four citizens born outside the United States and 42 percent speaking a language other than English at home.⁹ The state also has the nation's largest population of children ages birth to five – roughly 3.2 million – exceeding the next-largest population by nearly 1 million children.¹⁰ First 5, with its local focus, represents an historic effort to address the state's unique **context**. The state and county commissions develop strategic plans based on extensive community input from families, service providers, and advocates. The plans outline how counties will coordinate resources and programs to promote child development and school readiness. One interviewee noted, "Efforts to address diversity are integrated into each First 5 program."

At the same time, the size, diversity, and geographic disparateness of the population make effective collaborations both highly complex and very expensive. As a consequence of First 5's focus on local flexibility and control, less attention has been paid to creating a statewide **common vision** of comprehensive and integrated services.

California

process

The California Department of Education's (CDE) Child Development Division, with its focus on early care and education, is interesting in that it administers both the state's child care and pre-k programs with a total of \$2.5 billion in state and federal funding. Agency officials recognized that this structure presented an **opportunity** to combine funding streams to better serve working families. Using child care dollars together with pre-k resources, for example, CDE is able to expand the standard part-day pre-k programs to offer a full day of service across a variety of settings.

First 5 initially pursued a varied menu of programs, including health and parent support, but later developed a more **strategic focus**, investing heavily in school readiness programs. As this more focused approach begins to pay dividends, First 5 hopes to incrementally broaden its scope toward a more comprehensive and integrated system, serving children prenatal to five. First 5 augments the state's early childhood infrastructure and is not subject to the

same regulatory and administrative constraints agencies face. This allows flexibility to tailor dollars and programs and supports innovation at the local level, which can then be brought to scale statewide. For example, when several counties created local pre-k-for-all programs, the state commission responded with matching grants to encourage other county commissions to do the same.

Research-based evidence has also been critical to raising the profile of early childhood issues in California. The RAND Corporation has conducted a number of state-specific economic analyses and needs assessments of early education, including pre-k. Elsewhere, the expansion of the Children's Health Initiatives – which provide health care to low- and moderate-income children not eligible for other state coverage and give families a single point of entry to the state health insurance system – has been fueled by an independent evaluation of Santa Clara County's initiative that found increases in access to health and dental care of 40 percent and 51 percent, respectively.¹¹

product

CDE's **quality** improvement initiatives date back more than 20 years with workforce development, training and technical assistance, and a system of resource and referral agencies. One of the areas where the long-term commitment to quality is especially evident is in infant and toddler care. For example, the Program for Infant and Toddler Care, a comprehensive provider-training program, was developed in 1985 in collaboration with the nonprofit research and development organization, WestEd. Since then, this collaboration has produced early learning guidelines, program standards, a curriculum framework, a developmental assessment, and professional development initiatives, including a statewide network of infant and toddler specialists. This system is aligned with parallel elements at the pre-k and early elementary levels.

The First 5 model is most effective when it works in collaboration with state agencies, **aligning and integrating** its limited, flexible funding with more substantial state dollars. For example, CDE child care quality funds have been supplemented by First 5 to support selected initiatives including workforce training and retention through matching grants to 46 county commissions. Similarly, First 5 partners with the state's Department of Health Services and county agencies to expand access to health care by providing support for local Children's Health Initiatives, which operate in nearly half the counties.¹²



California Spotlight: Paid Family Leave

Much work, however, remains to be done. Although among the first to be state-funded and third in the nation in total program enrollment, the state's targeted pre-k program currently serves only 11 percent of three and four year olds and does not require teachers to have a bachelor's degree. Additionally, stronger connections need to be made between early care and education and other service areas, such as health and mental health.

Sustainability is also a challenge. First 5 is intended as a mechanism to sponsor community initiatives and encourage creativity, not to be a long-term funding solution. Therefore, part of their work is finding sustainable funding sources for thriving programs. This is especially pressing since First 5 is supported through tobacco tax revenue, which is in decline. Communities have allocated local funds to continue successful programs. Philanthropies, such as the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, are also stepping in to help support and expand quality programs over the long term.

In 2004, California became the first state in the nation to offer paid family leave, providing support for families during children's critical early development. In any 12-month period, employees may use up to six weeks of paid leave to care for a new child (by birth, adoption, or foster care) or a seriously ill family member. The policy entitles employees to roughly 55 percent of their wages, and the maximum benefit increases annually, commensurate with average state wages.

The California Paid Family Leave Act applies to more than 13 million workers statewide – public and private sector, full and part time, citizens and non-citizens – or about 10 percent of the nation's workforce.¹³ Benefits are extremely flexible, allowing workers to receive paid leave on an hourly, daily, or weekly basis, according to families' needs and schedules. Paid family leave is offered in addition to the federal Family and Medical Leave Act and the California Family Rights Act, which provide 12 weeks of unpaid family or medical leave. Further, paid family leave can supplement other state disability coverage, particularly for pregnant women and new mothers.¹⁴

The policy also carefully balances the needs of workers with those of businesses in the state. Workers must wait seven days before receiving paid family leave, and employers may require workers to use up to two weeks of vacation time. In that case, however, one week of the vacation time qualifies as the seven-day waiting period. In fact, one study found that the policy has economic benefits for employers by increasing the likelihood that workers will return to their jobs and, so, reducing turnover costs.¹⁵

The policy was designed strategically to minimize duplication across state programs. Paid family leave was built incrementally on top of the State Disability Insurance program. Both programs are funded entirely through employee contributions. Instituting paid family leave as an expansion of disability insurance allowed the state to align related programs under a single governing infrastructure. In addition, research indicates that because employees are less likely to receive public assistance while on leave, the state reaps significant savings.¹⁶

Government is usually incremental until a perfect storm arises, until there's a groundswell, and that's when you get a new direction. Generally, change is incremental until opportunities arise or new leadership emerges.

– Michael Jett, Director, California Department of Education, Child Development Division

Illinois

people

Illinois has a strong history of collaboration around early childhood issues, beginning in the 1980s. A variety of catalysts have spurred the effort to build a more coordinated early childhood system, including governors and legislators from both sides of the aisle, advocacy organizations, state government allies, foundations, community and provider groups, and the media. Advocates and government officials work together in partnership through the Early Learning Council and the Birth to Five Project (Illinois' Build Initiative) to vet policies and address issues prior to seeking support from the legislature and the public.

Illinois has solid **leadership** throughout the early childhood community. State leaders commit to cooperating over the long haul and build working **relationships**. For many years, a strong group of advocates has worked toward a prenatal-to-five vision in the state. The state's three leading advocacy organizations – Illinois Action for Children, Ounce of Prevention Fund, and Voices for Illinois Children – have enjoyed continuity of leadership, enabling them to sustain momentum across administrations and legislatures. Similarly, private philanthropies – the Irving Harris Foundation, The McCormick Tribune Foundation, and the Joyce Foundation, among others – have made strategic, sustained investments in Illinois' public policy and advocacy work.

Politically, efforts to provide high-quality early childhood services have benefited from a long-standing commitment by bipartisan legislative champions. More recently, supportive gubernatorial administrations have championed

impressive program development. During the 2002 elections, advocates reached out to candidates to build support. Since that time, Governor Rod Blagojevich has been a national leader on early childhood issues, greatly expanding one of the country's top pre-k programs, funded through the Early Childhood Block Grant, which includes an 11 percent set aside for evidence-based programs serving infants, toddlers, and their families. Funding for this innovative block grant has increased steadily and significantly over the past few years, and the state has transformed its targeted pre-k program into Preschool for All, which is slated to offer services to all three and four year olds by 2011 and to expand child development and family support services for at-risk infants and toddlers and their families. Additionally, under Governor Blagojevich's leadership, Illinois has become the first state to provide affordable, comprehensive health insurance for every child.



perspective

Advocates in Illinois, both inside and outside government, have a common goal and core principles such as high-quality services, equitable access, and a birth-to-five **vision**. These shared beliefs are reaffirmed regularly and are not up for compromise. When necessary to maintain the integrity of their core principles, they walk away from potential funding or partnerships. One interviewee advised, “Begin with the end in mind. Focus on a common goal, the needs of young children and their families, and keep your eyes on the prize.”

While remaining true to the core beliefs that unite them, stakeholders consider the state’s **context** when choosing strategies. Illinois has a statewide rather than county-driven system of government. Understanding that, Illinois leaders have focused on making existing funding streams work better statewide rather than creating local planning bodies. Development of relationships with middle managers in state agencies, who frequently span the administrations of elected and appointed officials, has also proven to be a key strategy.

Given Illinois’ statewide system, establishment of a state-level governance structure was a logical goal. In the early 1990s, advocacy organizations sought creation of a Ready to Learn Council to develop an early learning plan for the state, but opponents prevented the bill from coming to a vote. A decade later, with support from the governor and bipartisan legislators, the Early Learning Council was established by statute and charged with developing a high-quality early learning system available to all children birth to five.

process

Illinois leaders connect the dots between early childhood and current policy issues in **focused and strategic** ways. In the past few years, pre-k has been an issue with political traction. Illinois advocates took advantage of that environment to launch a campaign for pre-k for all three and four year olds. They used pre-k as their lead issue, but they strategically linked services for at-risk infants and toddlers to the increase in high-quality early education programs. Through an approach that is at once focused and balanced, considering all the needs of young children, Illinois has made a huge commitment that will improve the lives of children and their families. As Preschool for All expands, so will the state’s services for at-risk pregnant women, infants, and toddlers. Further, state leaders are building upon their pre-k success and replicating the focused approach to advance other parts of their broad prenatal-to-five vision, most recently health care for all children.

In Illinois, unions have long been a significant political force, and stakeholders have taken advantage of this asset. Recognizing an **opportunity**, early childhood leaders engaged unions in generating support for prioritized spending to improve child care. In 2005, Illinois became the first state in the nation to unionize home-based

child care providers through an executive order signed by the governor and codified by the legislature. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the state negotiated a 39-month contract, providing increases in child care subsidy reimbursements, a tiered reimbursement system, and health insurance assistance for family child care and family, friend, and neighbor care providers. Expanding on an advocacy campaign – Equal Access to Quality Care – to improve the child care reimbursement rate for all providers statewide, SEIU used the established framework to make gains for home-based providers. In addition, a substantive increase for child care centers was enacted, even though centers are not part of the union. Over \$64 million was netted in across-the-board rate increases for all Illinois child care providers, regardless of union affiliation.

These efforts are bolstered by access to accurate data. In an effort to inform planning and resource allocation processes, a diverse array of stakeholders came together to design the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map. This web-based database combines information about early care and education services with demographic information by multiple geographic units of analysis. The resulting data have provided compelling **evidence** of how children are served in Illinois and where resources are most needed to fill service gaps.

Illinois

product

Illinois' vision of a prenatal-to-five system is comprehensive. Stakeholders think systemically about how to meet families' needs. As new programs and initiatives are developed, intentional efforts are made to **integrate** with the existing system, growing it thoughtfully to both expand access and improve **quality**. For example, the new Preschool for All initiative empowers families with a range of choices and "lifts all boats" by providing additional funding and ensuring consistent quality standards for early childhood programs in a variety of settings. Funding for infrastructure supports – monitoring, technical assistance, training, program evaluation, and professional development – are incorporated into the Preschool for All budget to ensure that programs can meet high quality standards.

To assure that this thoughtful work will be **sustained**, Illinois interviewees pointed to three areas of focus: continued and concerted advocacy to maintain visibility of the issue and to take advantage of political leadership; accountability and evaluation to make the case that programs are effective; and professional development to continually build a pipeline of quality staff. Using quality as a foundation and embedding innovations such as the birth-to-three set aside into the existing system helps Illinois sustain accomplishments over the long term.

Illinois Spotlight: Social and Emotional Health

Illinois has successfully leveraged public funding by incubating ideas into initiatives and then embedding them within state-funded programs. The Government Interagency Team of the Birth to Five Project, composed of senior staff from various city, state, and federal government agencies, engages in cross-agency planning to address gaps in and barriers to providing high-quality, coordinated early childhood services. In 2002, the group reviewed agencies' policies on developmental screening, including social and emotional health screening, and began working on improvements. Their work was furthered by the creation of a strategic plan to reform the children's mental health system in 2005 and through participation in The Commonwealth Fund's Assuring Better Child Health and Development II (ABCD II) initiative.

Today, hundreds of training sessions on developmental screening, which include social and emotional health issues, have been held for health care professionals. The Medicaid agency has changed their policies to encourage social, emotional, and perinatal screenings. Developmental screenings are conducted by Preschool for All programs funded with education dollars, and referrals are made to health and other needed services. All foster children in state custody are assessed for social and emotional issues. To meet identified needs, the state provides over \$1.5 million for mental health consultation to early childhood providers serving infants, toddlers, and pre-k-age children, including those in child care and early intervention programs. Recent efforts focus on ensuring access to perinatal depression screening and on increasing children's mental health treatment. The power of a number of state agencies focused on a common priority – the social and emotional health of young children – has led to increased services for families in Illinois.

Look for every opportunity and be flexible and nimble enough to take advantage and shape the opportunity in order to move your agenda forward.

– Nancy Shier, Director, Kids Public Education and Policy Project,
Ounce of Prevention Fund

North Carolina

people

North Carolina has a long and strong collaborative history around early childhood systems and has effectively institutionalized a systemic vision. As one interviewee noted, “We must be patient and persistent and be in it for the long haul.” This long-term view and commitment to collaboration have given rise to several national models for program development, quality improvement, and system building.

For more than a decade, North Carolina has had tremendous gubernatorial support on early childhood issues. In 1993, with strong **leadership** from then-Governor Jim Hunt, the state pioneered Smart Start and established the Division of Child Development in the Department of Health and Human Services to oversee state-funded programs and collaborate with local communities. Then, in 2001, Governor Mike Easley introduced the high-quality More at Four pre-k program, and four years later, the Office of School Readiness was created to consolidate pre-k administration.

State agency officials, research organizations, advocates, local providers, and community stakeholders work together and with political leaders through a variety of venues such as the Early Childhood Governance Work Group and the local Smart Start Partnerships for Children to provide leadership and coordinate services. This culture of

collaboration has fostered enduring **relationships**, which, in turn, have contributed to the state’s significant achievements. As one interviewee noted, “We’ve had strategic thinkers who collaborated well and worked both inside and outside government.”

However, unlike some states, North Carolina does not have one overarching, cross-agency, governance structure. Although the various coordinating groups have common membership and vision, difficulties arise when communicating to policymakers and the public about how the groups collaborate to build a comprehensive, integrated system. Concerns were raised by interviewees about their ability to sustain the work over the long term without a more formalized structure. This has impelled the planning and coordinating groups to be very intentional about how they collaborate and communicate.



North Carolina

perspective

Early childhood leaders in North Carolina operate under a shared, comprehensive, coordinated vision that interviewees described as “widespread” with “cross-system goals” and including well-funded elements of a quality early childhood system. Interviewees agreed that leadership and relationships make this **common vision** and direction possible, citing a deliberate effort to align agendas and improve services across the prenatal-to-five spectrum. Today, Smart Start serves as the “organizing element” for this shared vision. As a public-private partnership, Smart Start has leveraged over \$200 million in private support since 1995 from approximately 75 foundations, businesses, and individuals. Other parts of this system include child care, Head Start, More at Four, Early Intervention, child care health consultation, mental health, family support, parent education, quality initiatives (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.) scholarships, WAGE\$, quality star-rated licensing), financing, professional development, evaluation and accountability.

process

North Carolina’s early childhood leaders are very intentional about how they plan, develop, align and integrate, evaluate, and fund elements of their early childhood system. Interviewees declared, “We look at **opportunities** to move incrementally, and we direct flexible dollars toward a bigger effort.” One notable example was taking advantage of the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) initiative funded by the federal Maternal and Child Health Bureau. Through this grant, shared indicators for school readiness were developed for children, families, schools, and communities. Developing and using shared indicators can be a complicated and difficult undertaking. Individual state agencies may already have their own system for measuring impacts, and much debate and negotiation is required to reach common ground. Leaders recognized an opportunity through ECCS to stimulate conversation and develop a single set of cross-agency school

readiness indicators, despite, as one interviewee put it, “not knowing all the ways it will be used later.” The indicators are already being used to support alignment across programs and as a first step toward shared accountability.

Another way accountability is built into the system is through a commitment to **research** and evaluation. The Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, based at the University of North Carolina, evaluates and studies early care and education services and programs, including Smart Start and More at Four, and the Child Care Services Association has a research department that conducts child care studies. These organizations are a great asset in North Carolina; many states, of course, do not have major early childhood research institutions. Nonetheless, states should work with higher education faculty and other independent evaluators to study the effectiveness of programs and systems for young children.

We make changes by meeting together regularly to discuss and advocate as needed to sustain work, and we continue to cultivate support through local work.

– Karen Ponder, Past President, North Carolina Partnership for Children

product

North Carolina has been successful in establishing, institutionalizing, sustaining, and expanding their early childhood system-building work. The agencies and programs within the system have a long-standing commitment to coordinating and facilitating more integrated services for young children and their families. Interestingly, both Governors Hunt and Easley viewed early childhood as legacy issues, which kept them vigilant throughout their terms and helped to advance and **sustain** the system.

Quality is an essential element that permeates all aspects of the early childhood system. Interviewees heartily agreed, “Quality matters at every level ... you must weave it together and bury it deep in terms of the system.” In fact, as of 2007, the More at Four pre-k program was one of two programs nationwide to meet all 10 benchmarks

for quality as outlined by the National Institute for Early Education Research.¹⁷ The highest standard applies when adding, revising, or combining program elements, and **alignment and integration** are key components of that approach: “We always look through the lens of how something impacts quality,” and “we continuously align as we revamp quality initiatives.” For example, early care and education programs (i.e. public school pre-k, child care, Head Start) that have a four- or five-star rating under the Division of Child Development’s quality rating system can participate as a More at Four program provided they also meet state pre-k standards. The quality rating system was developed to improve the quality of licensed child care centers and family child care homes and is now one of many policies and strategies employed to enhance quality and align programs across agencies and systems.

Additionally, More at Four, Smart Start, Head Start, Title I, Exceptional Children Preschool, Even Start, and child care subsidy funds are often combined at the local level to support programs and professional development. Similarly, the T.E.A.C.H. project, created in 1990 by the Child Care Services Association, addresses issues of qualifications, compensation, and retention within the early childhood workforce by providing scholarships that link continuing education with increased compensation. Though the environment to support blended funds is created at the state level, it is through local planning and collaboration that the real work of combining funds happens. Effective state and local partnerships, buttressed by strong leadership and collective determination, form the basis of North Carolina’s success.



North Carolina

North Carolina Spotlight: Smart Start

In 1993, Governor Jim Hunt and the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation establishing Smart Start, a statewide public-private school readiness initiative. When it launched in 1994, Smart Start included 12 local partnerships, serving 18 counties. Today, the initiative has 79 local partnerships in all 100 counties. Funded jointly by the state and contributions from philanthropies, businesses, and individuals, Smart Start received more than \$260 million for FY06, of which \$203.6 million were public dollars.¹⁸ In response to positive results and national acclaim, the Smart Start National Technical Assistance Center was created with private funding to provide intensive technical assistance to states and communities that adopt the Smart Start model.¹⁹

State and local collaboration forms the foundation of the Smart Start initiative. Local partnerships, with support from the state Partnerships for Children Board, make decisions on how to best meet the needs of children and families in their communities. At least 70 percent of funds are used to improve the quality, accessibility, and affordability of child care for children ages birth to five, and remaining funds are used for a variety of health and family support services and programs.

Durham's Partnership for Children, for example, provides services to approximately 17,000 children in collaboration with over 30 agencies in Durham County. Home visiting and a variety of family support programs help all families meet



the needs of their children and access higher-quality child care. Workforce development programs such as T.E.A.C.H. and WAGE\$ provide scholarships and salary increases for greater educational attainment. Nutrition, health, and mental health services support children in community programs and in their homes, and the More at Four pre-k program, locally funded through blended funds from the

state Department of Education, Head Start, and Smart Start, supports early learning and school readiness.²⁰ Smart Start funds bring communities together to expand and improve the quality of local programs for young children, while ensuring families are able to afford and access needed services.

Oklahoma

people

The early childhood system-building process in Oklahoma began with a focus on creating discrete quality programs, such as the highly rated pre-k-for-all program and the nation's first child care quality rating system. This strong foundation of quality programs, coupled with a history of sustained leadership, has made it possible for the state to take the next step: bringing quality programs together into a cohesive whole, working toward a common vision.

Leadership played a critical role in Oklahoma's early childhood system-building effort. The state's early childhood leaders are also able to move their agenda – for example, pre-k – because they have a long history of personal **relationships**. Some of the major stakeholders in the system – including leaders in the Department of Education and Smart Start Oklahoma, which is modeled on the original North Carolina program – have worked in the state for years. Over time, these relationships have fostered an ethic of collaboration and communication. For instance, the development of state pre-k guidelines brought together representatives from Head Start, child care, and other early childhood programs. This approach is also an asset when disagreements or conflicts occur. As one interviewee said, “It’s all about relationships. Every success I have had has been about a relationship.”

Governors have also played prominent roles. Former Governor Frank Keating appointed an early childhood task force that eventually evolved into Smart Start. As his term ended, this group made sure that early education was on the agenda during the 2002 election. Their efforts paid off when Governor Brad Henry was elected and became a champion for the state's early childhood services. Philanthropists are a more recent group of leaders. In 2006, with leadership and funding from the George Kaiser Family Foundation and other foundations, the city of Tulsa implemented the Educare

program, which provides comprehensive birth-to-five services, including child care, early education, on-site health care, and family support services. To improve services statewide, the Kaiser Foundation and state government also established a public-private partnership to finance the Oklahoma Early Childhood Pilot Program to provide quality care for children birth through three years from low-income families. Such public-private partnerships can be extremely valuable, but they also have limitations and are not available to every state.

With the recent growth of Smart Start Oklahoma, relationship building within the early childhood system has become more institutionalized. The Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness board, which governs Smart Start, creates formal venues for diverse stakeholders to discuss, debate, and deliberate on key issues. For example, Smart Start convened a group that included service providers, agency staff, advocates, and parents to create plans for four areas of the early childhood system: education, health, mental health, and family support. The Smart Start strategic plan is a culmination of this work. The Smart Start model has also developed local leadership through its community coalitions across the state. These coalitions engage local members to organize legislative breakfasts, community forums, and “child watch tours,” which offer lawmakers the opportunity to observe high-quality early childhood settings.

Oklahoma

perspective

Under Smart Start, Oklahoma has begun to develop a **common vision** and goals for its early childhood system. Smart Start's goals encompass health, early care and education, and family support from the prenatal-to-five perspective. It also spearheaded the effort to create common school readiness indicators that integrate outcomes in health, early care and education, family well being, and social and emotional development. This systemic perspective on programs and services, together with an understanding of the state **context**, allows stakeholders to anticipate unintended consequences to parts of the system that may result from changes in another part. For instance, when the state's pre-k program expanded, state policies allowed child care providers to get full-day reimbursements even if children spend part of their day in pre-k. This alleviated some child care providers' concerns regarding revenue loss. Nevertheless, reaching consensus around a common vision is challenging, even with a structure like Smart Start in place. Interviewees described the understandable tendency for agency directors to focus on their programs' needs and priorities and the difficulty in setting them aside for the broader vision. "The whole silo thing ... It's difficult to knock them down."

process

Oklahoma is one of only a handful of states to provide high-quality, state-funded pre-k for all four year olds and currently serves 70 percent of this age group, the largest proportion in the nation. **Research evidence** has been key to the success and growth of this program. Results were documented through sound research such as the Georgetown University study of Tulsa's program,²¹ and as more families enjoyed the benefits, public opinion turned strongly in favor of early education and care. By **focusing strategically** on high-quality pre-k for all four year olds, expanding it gradually, working cooperatively with stakeholders, and providing reliable evaluations, early childhood leaders cultivated the body of evidence, public and grassroots support, and political will needed to take the next step in advancing their prenatal-to-five vision: including younger age groups. For example, the state has been increasing investment in the Oklahoma Early Childhood Pilot Program, which serves at-risk children from infancy through three years of age in high-quality programs.

By contrast, in a setback that reminds stakeholders of the work ahead, a recent proposal by the governor to extend the pre-k program to three year olds met with less success. The bill lacked legislative support and did not pass.

product

Much of Oklahoma's success in their early childhood system can be attributed to a consistent focus on **quality**. The state was the first to develop a tiered reimbursement system for child care programs based on levels of quality, and its pre-k program for all four year olds includes high standards for teachers, professional development, limited class size, and a low child-staff ratio. Not only has this attention to quality served children well, it has created public support. "Families want to be a part of a high-quality program," said one interviewee. This is an important lesson that stakeholders carry with them as the early childhood system develops. Another interviewee advised: "Take a step back ... and make sure quality components are part of the system."

Oklahoma is also making progress in increasing **alignment** across the early childhood system. For instance, much of the state's early childhood professional development activities are provided through a partnership with the University of Oklahoma's Center for Early Childhood Professional Development. In other areas, however, challenges persist. For example, conflicting teacher-compensation requirements still create barriers for collaboration and coordination.



**Oklahoma Spotlight:
Pre-K for All**

Oklahoma's pre-k program, the *Early Childhood Four-Year-Old Program*, started as a pilot, grant-based program in 1980. In 1990, as part of a school reform bill, the *Early Childhood Four-Year-Old Program* began providing pre-k for all Head Start-eligible four year olds with sustainable funding through the state's school funding formula. In 1998, after years of incremental expansion, Oklahoma became the second state in the country to offer pre-k for all four year olds, and today, the state ranks first in the nation in the proportion of four year olds served: 70 percent. While school districts are not required to implement pre-k, nearly all do. As of fiscal year 2007, pre-k in Oklahoma is a \$240 million enterprise of which \$210 million are state and local funds.

The *Early Childhood Four-Year-Old Program* allows for a diverse group of providers, including Head Start, private child care centers, and faith-based providers. Almost 20 percent of pre-k children in Oklahoma are served outside of public schools. Schools can also use pre-k money to provide extended-day services through collaborations with child care centers and other community-based providers. Pre-k in Oklahoma follows high quality standards, meeting nine of the 10 NIEER benchmarks. The state has comprehensive Pre-Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines, which were written collaboratively with representatives from Head Start, child care, and other early childhood programs. Teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree and certification in early childhood education and are paid on the same scale as K-12 teachers. Recent studies by NIEER and Georgetown University's Center for

Research on Children in the United States have demonstrated significant benefits from Oklahoma pre-k on children's school readiness. Furthermore, the research shows that *all* children benefit regardless of ethnicity or family income.

With a successful pre-k program firmly in place, Oklahoma has recently turned its attention to a more comprehensive early care and education model. Policymakers, philanthropists, advocates, and early childhood professionals are working together to provide comprehensive services to children from birth to five through two new initiatives: Educare and the Oklahoma Early Childhood Pilot Program. In the case of Educare, services are provided seamlessly under one roof. As with the state's pre-k program, these initiatives are starting small with quality built in from the very beginning.

Pennsylvania

people

Pennsylvania's progress in building a comprehensive and coordinated early childhood system can be attributed to strong leadership and creative governance. In 2003, through its involvement with the cross-state Build Initiative, the state created and implemented a plan to build an early childhood system. In 2004, the Office of Child Development (OCD) was created within the Department of Public Welfare. OCD's head also held a joint appointment as the policy director of the Department of Education. OCD has since evolved into the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL), which is part of both departments. This innovation in governance has allowed Pennsylvania's early childhood system to serve young children and their families in a comprehensive manner without creating new bureaucracies.

The success of the early childhood system in Pennsylvania relies on broad-based **leadership**, from the governor to providers. During the 2002 gubernatorial elections, advocates pressed early childhood issues onto the agenda, educating candidates on the policies and politics and encouraging them to make pledges of support. The campaign also raised the public profile of early childhood issues. By the time Governor Rendell took office, he was a strong, well-informed supporter.

Leadership within OCDEL also plays a critical role. Interviewees from OCDEL referred to themselves as “advocrats,” government employees who both carry out executive policies and, when necessary, challenge the administration to help shape its vision for the early childhood system. Further, ongoing efforts to build leadership at the community level enable those responsible for programs to engage in policy work. For instance, through retreats and training sessions at the local level, early childhood leaders help people organize in their own communities. As a result, more people have become involved in advocacy efforts, and they are doing so in more sophisticated ways. As one interviewee put it, “We are trying to create a system where lots of people are influential.”

The state's involvement with the Build Initiative has been instrumental in creating an inclusive venue for communicating, coordinating, and building **relationships**. The Early Learning Team coordinates across government agencies and gathers input from a broad range of stakeholders. Strategies for involvement include regional forums, an extensive listserv with an e-newsletter, a parent advisory council, and community engagement groups.

Philanthropists have also helped build a strong foundation for expanding the early childhood system. The Pre-K Counts public-private partnership, created in 2004, was a three-year project funded by a group of foundations, including the Heinz Endowments and the William Penn Foundation, to facilitate pre-k collaboration among school districts, child care providers, and Head Start. This project has helped pre-k programs across different settings align their standards and leverage resources such as professional development opportunities. This project also provided the model for the new Pre-K Counts initiative, which received an inaugural appropriation of \$75 million for FY08.

perspective

When pursuing improved system governance, Pennsylvania's early childhood leaders carefully considered their state **context** – both the political climate and the existing system – to identify the best strategy. Historically, separate agencies tended to compete for funding. Also, the governor was working to streamline government, so creating a new agency or department would have cost political capital. In terms of systemic barriers, transferring programs might have jeopardized existing departmental connections, and unbundling funding streams posed a big challenge. For all of these reasons, the idea of creating an office – OCDEL – and linking it to both the Departments of Education and Public Welfare was very appealing. It reflected their **vision**, fit their experience, and allowed them to blend different approaches and build on previous policy work and existing relationships. As one participant described it, “We think right now there are more pros than cons: developing a shared philosophy, building respect, leveraging relationships and programs.”

process

Pennsylvania's early childhood system building combines good politics with good policy. Pennsylvania leaders work within a broad vision of an early childhood system that crosses programs, such as health, child care, and pre-k, and age groups within the prenatal-to-five spectrum. At the same time, they are aware that they cannot move everything at once but instead must “make a conscious decision about the scope of work and how much you really can do as an agent of change.” This involves creating space and time to identify budgetary priorities, build consensus around a focused agenda, and agree to grow various system elements over time. For example, early care and education was prioritized because stakeholders felt that was the system's weakest area. Now, the state is beginning to **focus** more attention on infant-toddler mental health with a new pilot program. OCDEL staff also revisit their strategic work plan every fiscal year to stay “accountable for what needs to be done.” The most recent effort included a candid assessment of

what has been accomplished and sustained in the past four years and where there are gaps. In formulating his budget recommendations, the governor relied on this analysis.

To both inform this system-building process and make the case for it, stakeholders rely heavily on rigorous **evaluation**. Pennsylvania is developing an Early Learning Network to assess and track outcomes for children birth to five in all types of early learning settings. Evaluation of the Keystone STARS quality rating system indicates that the quality of early childhood settings increases with the number of stars earned and that the rating system has raised the quality of services across settings. Not only do these evaluations guide the efforts of practitioners and programs, they are critical to sustaining the system. In particular, the Keystone STARS evaluation has been instrumental in building public support.

We use an operating principle that says all kids fundamentally need the same thing. So when you begin, you have an opportunity to ask what does that look like? We've spent a lot of time and energy developing a system that is really for all children.

– Joan Benso, President and CEO, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

Pennsylvania

product

Pennsylvania has used different “levers” in order to align parts of the early childhood system. For instance, **alignment** of early learning standards encompasses children from birth to five. A more dramatic step was the creation of OCDEL, which allowed the state to combine the strengths and philosophies of two departments while facilitating coordination, communication, and collaboration among the various programs that reside within them. Early childhood leaders in Pennsylvania, however, did not equate creating OCDEL with delivering **quality** programs to children. They used the office to facilitate a focus on quality across the system. For instance, Keystone STARS is used to integrate the early childhood system in two ways. First, it assigns a number of stars to child care centers and family child care homes by examining a set of quality indicators, including staff qualifications and professional development, curriculum, assessment, environmental ratings, and family and community involvement. Second, by setting a minimum standard that requires child care centers to earn two or more stars in order to participate in the state pre-k program, Keystone STARS serves as a vehicle for raising quality across different early learning settings. It provides one yardstick by which programs across the state can be measured, and as a result, gives a better sense of where quality improvement is needed.

Pennsylvania Spotlight: Keystone Stars Quality Rating System

The Keystone STARS program is a four-level quality improvement system that recognizes and supports child care providers, both centers and home based, that strive to put the necessary quality components in place to meet children's early developmental and learning needs. The program focuses on four quality criteria: staff qualifications and professional development, the learning program (i.e. curriculum, assessment, learning environment), family and community partnerships, and leadership and management. Providers are awarded one to four stars depending on how they are rated on these criteria. For providers that have achieved two or more stars, increases in enrollment of children receiving child care subsidies and attainment of higher standards are tied to increases in the reimbursement rate.

At the same time, the program offers substantial financial supports, professional development, and technical assistance to help providers at all quality levels achieve higher standards. For instance, not only do providers receive a higher reimbursement rate by attaining more stars, they also become eligible for grants that help

them sustain their quality efforts and continue to improve and achieve higher standards. Additional financial incentives are available for ongoing professional development and retention of directors and teachers. Keystone STARS includes an Early Childhood Career Lattice and provides professional development opportunities to help staff advance along the lattice. T.E.A.C.H. scholarships and vouchers to complete Child Development Associate coursework are also available for those needing financial assistance.

Much of the work in assessing and supporting providers in the Keystone STARS program is done through the Pennsylvania Early Learning Keys to Quality system, which includes six regional “Keys” or offices that work with local providers. This network of Keys has ensured consistent implementation of STARS across the state. Currently, Keystone STARS is the largest quality rating system in the country, with 60 percent of all certified early childhood centers participating. In 2007, the program received state funding of \$56 million.



Recommendations

Based upon the cornerstones, the authors developed the following seven recommendations that combine the best practices from the five states selected for this report. These states approached early childhood system building very differently and are at varying stages of the process. Because they are drawn from this diverse pool of expertise and experience, these recommendations represent practical steps stakeholders must take to advance a prenatal-to-five vision in any state.

Most of these recommendations, like the cornerstones from which they are derived, are not entirely new or groundbreaking. Rather, they are the difficult steps all states must take in order to be successful in tackling the complexities of prenatal-to-five systems. Some of the recommendations are more likely to be undertaken by advocates; others more clearly fit the role of state policymakers, and many are joint efforts of a public-private state team. These recommendations may sound simple, but implementing them is very hard work that involves honest self-assessment, communication, compromise, and openness. That so few states have made significant progress is a testament to how truly demanding this work is. Yet, it is past time for more states and for our nation as a whole to make the commitment to building early childhood systems.

These recommendations can help stakeholders begin. Together, they can serve as a barometer by which states can evaluate both their current status and their readiness to move toward a cohesive prenatal-to-five system. Once a state has made such an assessment, the recommendations provide a roadmap for moving forward.

1. Take stock of your state's context.

- Understand how your state is governed and the implications for early childhood.
 - Know where the leadership/power/authority is strongest in your state, i.e. at the grassroots, in the governor's mansion, in the legislature. Tap existing leaders and cultivate leadership where it is lacking.
 - Be aware of political constraints such as term limits for elected leaders, which may hinder continuity of leadership.
 - Understand to what extent key decisions are made at the state level versus the local level in order to inform early childhood system design.
- Know the demographic trends.
 - Recognize both existing and future needs and create opportunities for collaboration and leadership that reflect the diversity of the child population in growing or changing communities.
- Be cognizant of the political climate.
 - Identify the level of and reasons for public and lawmaker support for children's programs.
 - Know the behind-the-scenes power players, i.e. business, faith-based organizations, unions. Cultivate allies and defuse conflicts.
- Be informed about your state's fiscal circumstances and develop strategies accordingly.

2. Build and nurture leadership at all levels.

- Invest resources in leadership development both inside and outside government. Build strength all along the continuum: governor, legislature, state agencies, advocacy organizations, local programs, and the public.
 - Cultivate government officials as champions beginning before they get elected, and continue working with them throughout their tenure.
 - Tap the best expertise and build organizational capacity within the advocacy arena.
 - Promote early childhood leadership within state agencies, where administrators have considerable decision-making authority over programs.
 - Build grassroots leadership. These leaders can represent the program perspective, and they have relationships with local leaders and policymakers who can sustain the work.
- Reach out to diverse champions such as law enforcement, labor, and business leaders, especially those who are influential among policymakers and elected officials.
- Promote continuity of leadership within government. Build leadership at the agency level that can be sustainable across political administrations. Support electoral policies that promote long-term leadership.

3. Promote inclusiveness, and create venues for groups and individuals to communicate and collaborate.

- Convene public-private collaborative groups where stakeholders can address big picture issues, integrate agendas and strategies, create mechanisms for organizational accountability, resolve disagreements, and develop unified messages for the public.
- Assure that all major decision-making tables include stakeholders covering the prenatal-to-five spectrum of issues, programs, and policies.
- Take the time to articulate and formalize a shared vision, goals, and core principles of the prenatal-to-five system. Work together to develop an integrated, comprehensive early childhood plan and policy agenda.
- Create state-level, formal governance structures with the authority to coordinate disparate early childhood programs, policies, and philosophical approaches.
- Take a long-term perspective, and commit to working together over the long haul.
- Be responsive to local communities, and build state and local partnerships. These state-community connections build infrastructure and capacity, maximize and leverage resources, and promote policies that support a shared vision.

4. Adopt a focused strategy within the broad vision.

- Develop action plans that are crisply focused. States may opt to begin with areas where improvement is most needed, or they may choose to lead with programs that can demonstrate the most substantial impact in the shortest time.
- For every new proposal, work with a broad group of stakeholders to identify and address potential consequences, both intended and unintended.
- Weave new opportunities and elements into the existing system so that alignment and comprehensiveness are in place from the beginning of any new initiative.
- Be intentional and strategic about spending limited resources. Direct dollars to programs and initiatives with proven effectiveness.
- Develop a deliberate strategy that ensures balanced investments across the system and avoids compromising existing programs.

5. Prioritize quality.

- Develop early childhood programs and initiatives that are founded on sound research and best practices.
- Do not compromise on program quality. If necessary, start with a small-scale program of high quality that can win public and political confidence and be expanded and supported over the long term. Build in infrastructure supports that ensure programs can meet higher standards and maintain quality.
- Evaluate programs to inform improvement and promote accountability.
- Do not equate creating and reorganizing system structures with investing in quality programs for children and families.

6. Cultivate public and political support.

- Create public information and advocacy campaigns that tap the best research on children and programs and that are focused and present attainable goals.
- Link early childhood system-building efforts to the hot topics in your state (i.e. education, health care, jobs), and tap the opportunities for collaboration, strategic campaigns, and political leadership that these issues present.
- Evaluate programs in a transparent way to demonstrate effectiveness and build public confidence. Evaluation dollars are funds well spent.

7. Recognize, evaluate, and capitalize on opportunities.

- Be alert for opportunities in a variety of areas, e.g. unexpected leaders, recent research, a budget surplus, a new administration.
- Analyze opportunities for their fit with your long-term vision, and be flexible enough to adapt if a valuable opportunity is not exactly what you originally had in mind.
- Consider local-level innovations as models to bring to scale at the state level.
- Be flexible and adaptive with funding streams. Know what is available from all sources and look for creative ways to address constraints. Understand what's required, what's recommended, and what's allowed.
- Seek out models in other states and participate in cross-state networks to tap expertise and experience across the nation.

Conclusion

The development of a comprehensive prenatal-to-five system that is sustainable and well funded is a vision that is shared by advocates and policymakers in states across the nation. As a country, we have not yet committed to such a vision, but this report hopes to spark the conversation while also providing practical strategies to help states more effectively meet the needs of young children.

The most successful states share more than just a vision. Though their systems vary in age, structure, scope, and developmental path, a common set of themes and strategies underlie them. For California, Illinois, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania an unwavering focus on the best interest of children and a willingness to pursue the vision over many years is leading toward innovative, carefully aligned, high-quality systems.

Yet, the work is far from finished. These states also share challenges such as conflicting agendas and differing philosophies about early childhood development among stakeholders and the tendency to work within silos. Each of

these states has a long way to go before their systems are complete. Sustaining and improving prenatal-to-five systems requires an ongoing commitment to what works for young children and a firm adherence to the cornerstones and strategies outlined in this report. For states seeking to build such a system, the recommendations offered here can help assess the existing landscape, overcome barriers, create the environment for success, and guide the development of programs. Through a long-term commitment to hard work, creativity, and compromise, individual states and our nation as a whole can realize the vision of a system that improves the lives of all young children and their families.

Disclaimer

These materials are intended for education and training to help promote a high standard of care by professionals. The findings and recommendations included here are the result of an extended process of review and analysis on the part of the author organizations and the Advisory Committee. The views expressed in these materials represent the opinions of the respective authors. The interview process did not include an exhaustive list of possible participants, and therefore the findings and opinions do not necessarily reflect the opinions of all stakeholders in the selected states or the project funders.

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