

NOVEMBER 2025

Transforming State Early Childhood Governance

A Case Study

OHIO



Executive Summary

Strategies for governing and administering early childhood programs and services at the state level affect parents' awareness of, access to, and experience with vital services for their families. No consensus exists on the optimal governance structures for early childhood, which underscores the need for additional research on best practices for state-level early childhood governance.



To understand the full range of state early childhood governance strategies, the Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center at Vanderbilt University (Policy Impact Center) conducted a national landscape scan to identify each state's strategy for organizing the administration of early childhood programs and services. The Policy Impact Center then selected states with various governance styles for in-depth case studies. This brief presents the case study results for Ohio.

In 2023, Ohio enacted legislation consolidating most of its early childhood services under one new department, the Department of Children and Youth (DCY). In the short time since its creation, DCY has made significant progress for children and families by employing a data-driven, family-centered approach.

Ohio's consolidation of early childhood programs and services offers the following key lessons learned:

- The Governor's commitment to children facilitated governance change.
- Successfully establishing a new department required leaders to engage in thoughtful change management.
- Ohio benefits from a dedicated, cabinet-level position focused on children and families.
- Early childhood programs and services benefit from collectively advocating for resources based on a shared vision.
- Data-driven decision-making at DCY ensures funding is maximized to serve children with the greatest need.
- Consolidating early childhood programs allows DCY to identify and address families' holistic needs.
- DCY uplifts community voice in the decision-making process.

Introduction

Across the United States, state approaches to organizing the administration of programs and services for young children and their families vary widely. Some states consolidate governance of early childhood programs into relatively few agencies and departments. Other states disperse early childhood programs across numerous state government entities. States also make different choices on which services to group together within an office or division, and the types of departments where a given service lives.

Research to date, however, does not identify the optimal governance structure for early childhood programs to maximize effectiveness or efficiency of service provision. Existing resources also do not comprehensively document how state governance choices are similar to or different from one another, either.

The Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center at Vanderbilt University (Policy Impact Center) conducted a study of early childhood governance in the US beginning in the spring of 2024. The study includes a [comprehensive national landscape scan](#) of early childhood governance and case studies of selected states with different early childhood governance strategies. Through the study, we identify patterns in early childhood governance; examine the benefits and challenges of different governance strategies; and identify best practices and lessons learned from states to inform effective and efficient early childhood governance.

This brief provides the case study findings for Ohio. For the case study, we interviewed seven early childhood leaders in Ohio representing state government, non-profits, and advocates. Our findings summarize what we learned through these interviews.

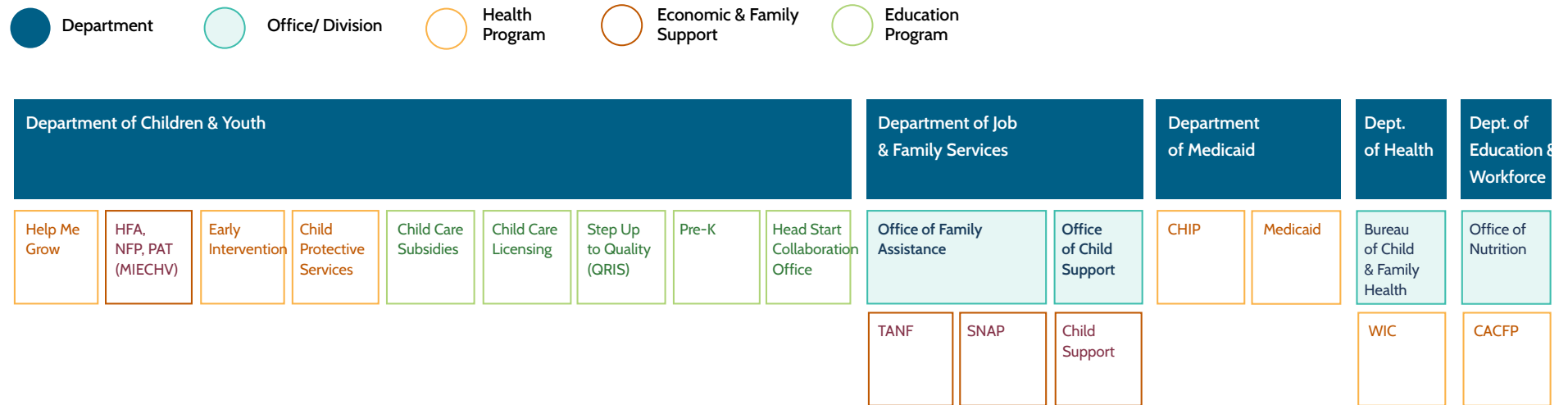
Early Childhood Governance in Ohio

Governance Structure

For our study, we considered all education, health, and economic programs administered by the state that benefit families with children prenatal to age 3. In Ohio, we found early childhood programs are housed across five departments, with the majority of the programs housed in the new Department of Children and Youth (DCY) (see Figure 1). Figure 1 represents the results of the consolidation of early childhood programs in 2024.

Specifically, DCY provides a range of programming for families with children, including Early Intervention, home visiting (MIECHV), child protective services, a screening and connection service (Help Me Grow), child care subsidies, child care licensing, child care quality ratings (Step Up to Quality), pre-Kindergarten (pre-K), and the Head Start State Collaboration Office. The Department of Job and Family Services, the Department of Medicaid, the Department of Health, and the Department of Education and Workforce also provide relevant services for families with young children in Ohio (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Early Childhood Governance in Ohio



History of Ohio's Early Childhood Governance Structure

Early childhood was elevated by Ohio state leaders beginning in the early 1990s with the creation of Ohio Family and Children First (known as the “Children’s Cabinet”). The cabinet, housed within the governor’s office, brought together leaders from 11 state departments to streamline and coordinate services for children and families. Additionally, county-level councils were created to uplift the voiced needs of the community to the state-level cabinet.

Ohio has also made multiple changes to their state governance structure over the last 25 years which impacted programs and services for young children and their families. Specifically, in 2000, the Department of Human Services and Bureau of Employment Services were merged into the new Department of Job and Family Services (JFS). JFS originally managed programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and child care subsidies. In 2014, Ohio Medicaid was spun off from JFS into its own department, the Department of Medicaid.



During the 2018 gubernatorial election, Mike DeWine ran on a platform that centered early childhood issues, reflecting his longtime commitment to children and families. His “Opportunity for Every Ohio Kid” plan included key tenets such as improving the access to and quality of early childhood education services, increasing home visiting services for first-time mothers, reforming the foster care system, and creating a Director of Children’s Initiative to coordinate children’s services.¹

Once elected, Governor DeWine (R) immediately began fulfilling his campaign promises, determined that someone in his administration would wake up every day thinking about kids. On January 14th, 2019, the governor signed an executive order creating the Governor’s Children’s Initiative. The Children’s Initiative was tasked with: improving communication and coordination across state agencies providing services to children; aligning local, federal, and private efforts and investments to maximize impact; and improving policy and practices for home visiting, early intervention, early childhood education, foster care, and physical and mental health.² The Children’s Initiative was housed in the governor’s office, and Governor DeWine appointed LeeAnne Cornyn as the first Director of the Children’s Initiative.

The Children’s Initiative, in partnership with department leadership, successfully fulfilled multiple campaign promises. In the 2019 budget, the provider reimbursement rates for evidence-based home visiting and child care services were both increased to improve staff recruitment and retention. New funding streams for multi-system youth and school-based physical and behavioral health care were also included in the budget.

Data-informed decision making was also prioritized during this time. The Initiative launched a process to track childhood outcomes through a standardized ID (known as Statewide Student Identifier, or SSID); this took multiple years to implement but is now used across the state.

Despite working closely with a variety of department directors and deputy directors that managed programs for children and families, ultimately departments had to balance responsibilities for a multitude of programs and services; with no department solely focused on children, progress on the Governor’s goals for children and families was slow. Furthermore, despite significant overlap in the families served by various departments, there often was a lack of intentionality guiding which departments oversaw which programs.

As such, top leaders in the state increasingly embraced the idea of a new department that would consolidate children's services. Although leaders did consider moving programs into existing departments, such as the Department of Educationⁱ (because it was in the process of becoming a cabinet-level agency) or Department of Medicaid (because it managed the largest pool of funds for children), ultimately leaders felt a standalone, dedicated department was ideal. Specifically, a new department could set unified goals, streamline changes, and above all else, maintain a singular focus on children's needs.

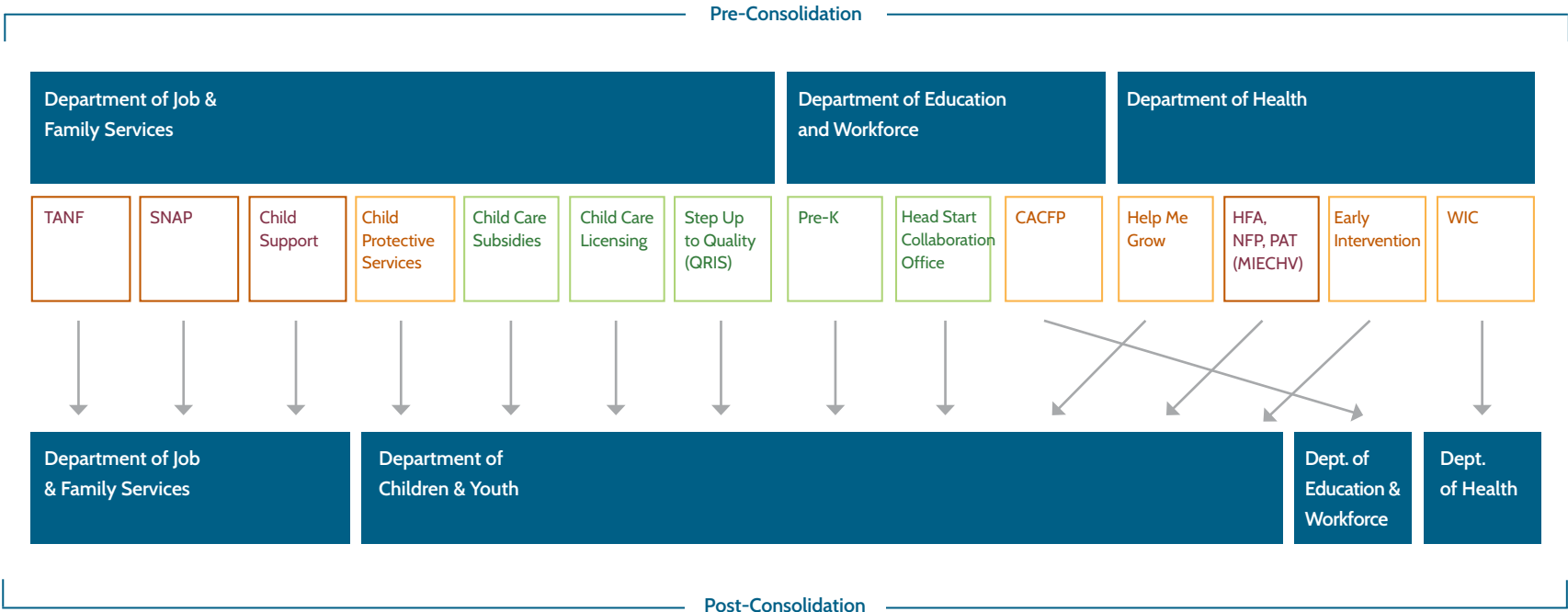
During this time, leaders also sought feedback on the consolidation from state officials, external partners, and families. While some interviewees felt engagement with community leaders was very limited, the listening sessions did provide useful guidance. Particularly, the idea that DCY adopted an asset-based, rather than deficit-based, approach remained central to the design and implementation of the new department.

State leaders proposed the creation of DCY in the new budget with an initial announcement in the 2023 State of the State address. State leaders then prioritized the creation of DCY by including it in the 2023 state budget (House Bill 33).³ Notably, the budget did not include new funding for the creation of DCY; rather, resources already allocated to programs and services being consolidated would be transferred to DCY. The creation of DCY was one of many important policy items within the budget bill, so negotiations concerning DCY were minimal compared to other items in the budget. Generally, legislators supported the consolidation as an opportunity to increase efficiency and accountability for programs and services for children.

State leaders considered a wide scope of programs and services for children in families when determining what to consolidate; leaders wanted to make it clear to the average Ohioan who to call if their child needed support. Ultimately, the state budget tasked DCY with managing several children's programs and services. Many of these programs, including child care subsidies, child care licensing, Step Up to Quality, and child protective services were previously administered by JFS. Additionally, the Head Start State Collaboration Office and pre-K were previously administered by the Department of Education and early intervention and MIECHV were previously administered by the Department of Health (see Figure 2).

ⁱ In October 2023, the Department of Education was renamed to the Department of Education and Workforce

Figure 2. Programmatic Shifts during Governance Consolidation



Notes. The Department of Medicaid is not represented, as it was unaffected by the consolidation.

DCY officially launched on July 4, 2023; Governor DeWine appointed Kara Wentz as the inaugural Director of DCY, a cabinet-level position. Although the legislation required all programs to be moved by January 1, 2025, state leaders were able to transition all programs in just 6 months, by January 1, 2024.

Originally, the change was met with apprehension by some county- and state-level leaders. At the county level, some local leaders were concerned how the reorganization would impact their funding and operations; this was particularly pressing given that Ohio is a state-supervised, county-administered system. To address these concerns, local leaders were reassured that reorganization was not required at the county level. Furthermore, DCY maintained the same fiscal infrastructure to ensure allocations and audits remained consistent.

At the state level, department leaders aimed to be as transparent and communicative as possible about the staffing choices (both who moved to DCY and who stayed at their current department). Additionally, within DCY program staff were reorganized into two divisions (policy and practice) to encourage collaboration with like programs and across divisions. Although the staffing changes did result in minor disruptions, leaders were able to leverage the change as an opportunity to elevate talent and reduce duplication.

Since consolidation, DCY continues to work closely with other state departments. For example, the Children's Cabinet (now housed within DCY) maintains bimonthly meetings for department directors and monthly meetings for department deputy directors; during these meetings, leaders assess progress using a data-driven approach. Additionally, the departments continue to coordinate to maintain Ohio Benefits, a shared application for several programs and services in the state. Finally, as DCY is still relatively new, many contracts, funding streams, IT services, etc., still pass through the departments that the programs used to be housed in before being transferred to DCY; work is underway to untangle funding and technology, but it will likely take years to fully separate.

The efforts to coordinate state actions are critical given families may still access services housed across multiple departments. There remains some friction at the local level, where services are administered, as local leaders still must coordinate across multiple state-level agencies, including but not limited to JFS, DCY, and the Department of Medicaid.

Ultimately, DCY has been operational for almost 2 years; although it has had many successes in that short time frame, the department continues to evolve. Additional research in the future will shed light on the long-term benefits and challenges of Ohio's new governance structure.

Lessons Learned

The Governor's commitment to children facilitated governance change.

Governor DeWine, reflecting his longstanding commitment to children and families, prioritized children's initiatives from the start of his gubernatorial campaign. The tenets outlined in the Opportunity for Every Ohio Kid plan were acted upon shortly after Governor DeWine came into office, when he signed an executive order creating the Children's Initiative.

The Children's Initiative was the first step in ensuring that someone would wake up every day thinking about kids. Although the Initiative facilitated many positive changes for children, as described above, it was an imperfect tool to execute the Governor's vision. As such, consolidation of governance was pursued, ultimately resulting in the creation of DCY; interviewees stated Governor DeWine's deep commitment to children was the driving force behind the consolidation.

Furthermore, many interviewees indicated that the governance change, enacted via the 2023 budget bill, will maintain Governor's DeWine's vision for children into Ohio's future. Specifically, interviewees pointed to how the new governance structure will continue to elevate children's issues and benefit the state even as leadership changes. Additionally, by creating a department dedicated to children's policy issues, children will remain central in future policy conversations.

In short, the Governor's commitment to children was critical for facilitating governance change. Still, some interviewees acknowledged the challenges as well as the benefits of a top-down approach; namely, inclusion of more diverse perspectives, including local leaders and advocates, may have resulted in design choices that better reflected the needs of children and families.

Ohio benefits from a dedicated, cabinet-level position focused on children and families.

As noted above, having a department dedicated to children's issues ensures the needs of children and families are centered in policy conversations. This is especially true given Ohio's choice to make the Director of DCY a cabinet-level position.

Interviewees recognized multiple benefits of a cabinet-level position. First, the Director has the authority to quickly address problems and update systems in real time. Second, the Director reports directly to the Governor, whose greater authority can be leveraged to address more challenging issues in a timely, efficient manner. Finally, having a single individual responsible for the efficiencies and outcomes of children's programs and services has boosted legislators' confidence in funding such programs.

These benefits are amplified by strong leadership. Interviewees praised the inaugural Director of DCY, Kara Wente, for her outstanding leadership, and particularly for her clear vision for children and families. The entire senior leadership at DCY strives to address concerns by first considering what is right for kids, then addressing any funding or compliance issues.

DCY uplifts community voice in the decision-making process.

DCY is committed to doing what is best for children and families, and these decisions are often informed by intentional community engagement. From the beginning, DCY leadership positioned the department to be one which listens and responds to families.

DCY primarily engages with the community in two distinct ways. First, DCY facilitates a Parent & Youth Ambassadors (PYA) program to coordinate regionalized support to individuals or families requesting assistance. PYAs are trusted members of the community they serve and have lived experience navigating social services.

Second, DCY hosts biyearly listening sessions in five regions across the state. These small listening sessions, usually including 20-30 community members, provide state leaders with insights on program access and implementation. Furthermore, DCY reduces barriers to participation in listening sessions as much as possible, providing meals and child care during the session and paying community members for their time and expertise. Finally, DCY leaders are also committed to returning to these regions, highlighting the changes that occurred because of valued feedback from the communities.

Overall, interviewees praised DCY's unique commitment to family engagement, although some felt community partners could be better leveraged; specifically, local organizations are well-positioned as a trusted community institutions and could uplift the voiced needs of the community to state leaders on a more frequent basis.

Early childhood programs and services benefit from collectively advocating for resources based on a shared vision.

As a single agency dedicated to children, DCY ensures that early childhood programs and services are all working towards the same goals. These goals are laid out in the department's logic model, with the three primary goals of reducing the infant mortality rate, improving kindergarten readiness, and reducing the rate of children entering the foster care system.

As such, children's programs and services are able to work together to advocate for a cohesive agenda. The single, amplified voice via DCY has had a significant impact on budget choices. In the 2025 budget, the legislature approved over \$89 million in new investments for early childhood and family supports; investments included an additional \$15.2 million in Early Intervention, an additional \$21.5 million in Help Me Grow, and an additional \$20 million in short-term treatment and support for children in crisis awaiting foster care placements, among other things.⁴

The cohesive agenda was especially beneficial as Ohio, like many states, returned to a more typical cash flow after the significant influx of pandemic relief funding in previous budget cycles. Unified messaging will remain critical; during the next biennium, Ohio will face a \$600 million shortfall in child care funding as one-time federal funding is exhausted.⁴

Successfully establishing a new department required leaders to engage in thoughtful change management.

In establishing DCY, state department leaders did not engage in a “lift and shift” of programming but rather a transformation in governance to better serve children and families. Consequently, this transition required strong department leadership to guide staff through the changes.

To do this, department leadership emphasized communication to foster staff engagement and buy-in. Interviewees' descriptions of leadership's communication style highlighted transparency with choices, openness to feedback, and willingness to pivot when mistakes were made. While some turnover was expected given the magnitude of the change, interviewees felt the disruptions were altogether minimal; turnover was under 10 percent during the first two years.

In addition to managing staffing changes, some interviewees also highlighted the intentional change management needed for operational processes. Specifically, with multiple funding streams from a variety of sources, leaders had to carefully assess contracts to ensure requirements were met even as many programs and services transitioned to DCY.

Data-driven decision-making at DCY ensures funding is maximized to serve children with the greatest need.

Interviewees all emphasized the data-driven approach within DCY. Leveraging the data available, leaders within DCY can assess programs to ensure funding is maximized, bureaucracy is reduced, and recipients represent the children with the greatest need.

For example, the home visiting program was reworked to focus on the outcomes of children served rather than simply the number served. Ohio now leverages the Family Connects program to provide an initial visit with a nurse, who can then evaluate which families may benefit from a more intensive home visiting program; this ensures the families most in need are receiving home visiting services, which state leaders believe will help them reach their goal of reducing infant mortality rates.

Similarly, contracts have been assessed using a data-informed approach to ensure money is well spent. For example, DCY established a centralized intake system for home visiting and Early Intervention by renegotiating a contract with the online Ages and Stages Questionnaire provider, Sparkler. Usage of the Sparkler app, which is free to families, increased five-fold since the contract was revised, and referrals, although having decreased in total number, are more accurately identifying children that require additional services.

Leaders also use data to better assess children's holistic experiences. The use of the singular identifier (the Statewide Student Identifier, or SSID) that follows children from early childhood through high school provides greater transparency of who is served, what programs are used, and how program engagement may impact outcomes. These data are particularly valuable to assess the effectiveness of preventative services for children and families.

DCY hosts bimonthly, virtual meetings to share its data and assess progress towards three key goals (as described above) over the previous 60 days. Interviewees largely appreciated DCY's transparency with data, noting data sharing was more limited in other state departments. Some interviewees, however, felt that data were selectively shared.

Interviewees agreed the data-driven approach was beneficial for legislators, who can clearly see the impact of investments. Yet, some child care providers do not feel the state's data represent their lived experiences; interviewees recognized the need to supplement data with community perspectives.

Consolidating early childhood programs allows DCY to identify and address families' holistic needs.

DCY leadership is committed to understanding and responding to the holistic needs of children and families. The holistic approach is demonstrated first and foremost in how the department is organized. During the transition, reworking the divisions to be split by policy and practice was intended to encourage coordination both with like programs and across divisions.

Teams within DCY were also intentionally designed to include staff with diverse backgrounds. For example, leaders staffed teams with a mix of employees previously engaged in child welfare, child care subsidies, home visiting, etc., to further facilitate a holistic approach to children's needs.

Overall, interviewees felt that staff collaboration has increased but still has opportunities to further strengthen. Nonetheless, DCY continues to strive toward seamless interactions between like programs, ensuring families are served efficiently and effectively.

The use of a single application, Ohio Benefits, also provides the opportunity to address families' holistic needs by assessing eligibility for a multitude of programs at once; established in 2013, the application includes programs such as TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, and child care subsidies.

Finally, consolidating programs under DCY strengthened data-driven decision making, as discussed above. DCY leadership, using the SSID, can evaluate the full set of services any child receives, allowing them to identify duplication or gaps in service. Yet not all programs touching children and families are housed in DCY; some interviewees expressed that consolidating Medicaid, WIC, or SNAP into DCY could further strengthen the holistic approach.

Conclusion

States approach early childhood governance in a variety of ways, and these choices can impact parents' awareness of, access to, and experience with early childhood programs and services. Yet research to date provides little guidance on best practices of early childhood governance.

This work begins to address the gap in knowledge about optimal early childhood governance by considering the benefits and challenges of the new consolidated governance structure in Ohio. Interviews with key leaders highlighted the critical leadership of Governor DeWine to drive governance change and department leadership's intentional change management to successfully stand up DCY.

Since its creation, DCY has adopted a data-driven approach to decision making with tangible results. Informed both by data and community engagement, DCY is well-positioned to support the whole child (meaning the academic, physical, social, and emotional needs of the child). Ultimately, the consolidation of early childhood programs into a dedicated department with a cabinet-level director and clear, cohesive goals ensures that children's services will remain central to policy conversations going forward.

Although each state has a unique context, these best practices and lessons learned in Ohio can benefit leaders in other states working to craft more effective and efficient early childhood governance systems.



References

1. *Opportunity for Every Ohio Kid*. (2018). DeWine Husted for Ohio. <https://files.constantcontact.com/c99b3fea601/9e3a5a92-ae9b-40c5-8ee6-ca8e8e8771ea.pdf>
2. *Executive Order 2019-02D Creating the Governor's Children's Initiative*. (2019, January 14). https://governor.ohio.gov/wps/wcm/connect/gov/04d8f20d-2f52-42ff-a1c8-f99a7a3906cc/Final+signed+EO+2019-02D.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CONVERT_TO=url&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE.Z18_M1HGGIKONQJO00QO9DDDDM3000-04d8f20d-2f52-42ff-a1c8-f99a7a3906cc-mxS.1sd
3. House Bill 33 | Establishes Operating Appropriations for Fiscal Years 2024-2025, H.B. 33, The Ohio Legislature 136th General Assembly (2023). <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/135/hb33>
4. *Budget Summary: What This Means for Ohio's Youngest Children*. (2025, July 1). Groundwork Ohio. <https://www.groundworkohio.org/post/budget-summary-what-this-means-for-ohio-s-youngest-children>

Authors

Brief Prepared by: Becca Hanlin Lustick, MA; Cynthia Osborne, PhD; and Abby Lane, PhD

Acknowledgements: We extend a warm thank you to members of the Ohio early childhood community for their willingness to participate in the interviews that enabled this research. A special thank you to:

LeeAnne Cornyn, Director, Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services

Matt Damschroder, Director, Department of Jobs and Family Services

Lynanne Gutierrez, President and CEO, Groundwork Ohio

Scott Partika, Policy Director, Office of the Governor Mike DeWine

Angela Sausser, Executive Director, Public Children Services Association of Ohio

Kara Wente, Director, Department of Children and Youth

Recommended Citation

Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center (2025). *Transforming State Early Childhood Governance: A Case Study of Ohio*. Peabody College of Education and Human Development. Vanderbilt University. <https://pn3policy.org/early-childhood-governance>.



© November 2025, Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, All Rights Reserved.

The Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center aims to accelerate states' equitable implementation of evidence-based policies that help all children thrive from the start. Based in Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of Education and Human Development and led by Dr. Cynthia Osborne, Professor of Early Childhood Education and Policy, the Center's team of researchers and nonpartisan policy experts works with policymakers, practitioners, and advocates to navigate the evidence on solutions for effective child development in the earliest years.