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Effective Early Childhood Governance

Lessons Learned
from Governance
Change



Across the United States, state approaches to organizing the administration of programs and services for young children and their families vary widely. To better understand state choices in governance, the Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center at Vanderbilt University (Policy Impact Center) conducted a study of early childhood governance beginning in the spring of 2024.

The study included a comprehensive national landscape scan of early childhood governance and case studies of five states (Kansas, New Mexico, Ohio, South Carolina, and Virginia) with different early childhood governance strategies. Through the study, we identified 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 a summary of the lessons learned across the five case studies, with a particular focus on the lessons learned from consolidating early childhood governance structures.



Lessons Learned

- 1. Governance change is the result of years of work.** Interviewees in Kansas, New Mexico, and Virginia recognized that advocates laid the groundwork for change for 10-20 years before change occurred. Specifically, time allowed leaders to build awareness of the issues and trusting relationships amongst stakeholders. In all three states, legislation for governance change did not pass on their first attempt; yet advocates continued to build support for change from a variety of key leaders to ensure future success. Notably, interviewees felt the ability to codify governance change in statute, rather than pass by executive order, was worth the additional time invested.
- 2. The governor is a key champion of change.** In Kansas, New Mexico, Ohio, and Virginia, interviewees repeatedly pointed to the governor as critical for pushing early childhood governance change through. Specifically, the governor's prioritization of early childhood built political will to enact governance change. After consolidation, governors continued to elevate early childhood as a core issue, most notably by installing the early childhood department leaders as cabinet-level positions.
- 3. A clear vision is critical to gaining support for change.** In New Mexico, the vision for early childhood funding and governance was laid out in the New Mexico Early Childhood Funders Group "business plan;" this plan fueled public confidence and allowed various stakeholders, particularly those in the business community, to support the change. Similarly, in Virginia, the consolidation of out-of-school care and education programs was pursued in support of the longstanding, shared goal of school readiness. In both Kansas and Ohio, intentional collaboration led to a shared understanding of the challenges of the governance structure and a desire to strengthen the early childhood system through governance change. In all five states, messaging on early childhood (whether for additional funding, changing governance, etc.) was carefully crafted to resonate with the legislature.
- 4. The new early childhood department/division benefits from a strong leader.** For each of the five states, interviewees repeatedly lauded their early childhood system leaders: Jenna Conway in Virginia, Elizabeth Groginsky in New Mexico, Christi Smith in Kansas, Ann Vandervliet in South Carolina, and Kara Wente in Ohio. Across the board, these leaders were described as using a collaborative, data-driven approach to fulfill a vision for the system. Additionally, many interviewees felt these women were effective advocates that sought out community feedback (and made changes accordingly).

5. **Consolidated structures increase the accountability and effectiveness of early childhood systems.** In New Mexico, Ohio, and Virginia, state leaders have access to data from a variety of early education programs which they use to drive decision-making and track progress. (Kansas is in the process of building a holistic data system.) Additionally, interviewees in all four states expressed that having a single individual that legislators or other interested parties can hold responsible increases confidence in early childhood programming and spending. The impact of these changes will be fully measurable in the coming years as additional data over time are available.
6. **Governance change was often followed by increased investments.** Both New Mexico and Virginia experienced historic funding increases to early childhood following the consolidation of programming; in both states, the increased efficiency and effectiveness of the governance structure generated support for additional funding. Additionally, although Ohio hasn't experienced an increase in investments, funds have been used more effectively to serve additional children and families because of the increased data available. Kansas also does not expect increased investments but, like Ohio, may be able to maximize existing funding going forward.
7. **Change was and continues to reflect the voiced needs of communities.** In all five states, interviewees continually identified ways in which change was driven by input from the community. Specifically, interviewees mentioned focus groups, advisory councils, workgroups, surveys, etc., that facilitated community engagement; interviewees in most states also felt their feedback was valued and resulted in change. For South Carolina and Virginia, whose interviewees placed particular emphasis on local control, the regional structures were seen as facilitating feedback loops.



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