

EARLY CHILDHOOD GOVERNANCE DECISION GUIDE

Many states have come to understand the importance of the early childhood years — generally birth to 5 or birth to third grade — and are seeking to provide high-quality services to young children and their families. But states have struggled with the fact that many of the existing programs for young children are administered by different agencies. Some states have chosen to change their governance of early childhood, with the goal of making their system more coherent. This decision guide is meant to help states that are considering an early childhood governance change.

The guide is a complement to the report [Early Childhood Governance: Getting There From Here](#), which provides more detail on each of the issues raised here. The structure of both documents is the same to allow for easy cross-referencing. This guide articulates key questions that states may benefit from asking, and presents considerations for answering those questions. Like the report, this guide is based on the premise that there is no single ideal governance structure, and that states should engage in a thoughtful process of weighing multiple tradeoffs in defining a governance structure that will best meet the state’s needs.



| KEY QUESTIONS | IMPORTANT SUB-QUESTIONS | CONSIDERATIONS FOR STATES |
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| <p>1. Is the state clear on its overall priorities for the early childhood system?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the state identified its priorities for the early childhood system? • What does the state see as the relationship between those priorities and the child outcomes it is trying to achieve? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the state does not have agreement on top priorities and goals for its early childhood system, it should establish that agreement before changing its governance system — and then shape its governance system to support its top priorities and goals. • There are certain priorities that have emerged in conversations about governance in multiple states — including minimizing the burden on families to access services, improving quality, expanding access to services, delivering services efficiently, and elevating leadership on early childhood issues. |

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KEY QUESTIONS**IMPORTANT SUB-QUESTIONS****CONSIDERATIONS FOR STATES**

2. What process should states use to determine whether or not a governance change is needed to meet the state's objectives for its early childhood system?

- Is the process supported by high-level political leaders?
- Does the process engage a wide range of stakeholders from state government, partners and customers of state government, communities, providers, families, and other stakeholders?
- Has the state clearly articulated the process for making a final decision about governance based on stakeholder feedback?
- Is there dedicated staff capacity to support the process?
- Does the state have a plan for following up on the process after a decision about a governance change has been made?

- The process of discussing governance change demands high-level leadership from the governor or key legislators. Without that leadership, the conversation is not likely to lead to actionable results.
- The process should involve broad representation to ensure that multiple voices are heard — across issue areas, geography, and roles.
- Establishing parameters for a discussion of governance is helpful, and can help those in an advisory role understand how their advice is likely to be used.
- If there is not adequate support for the process, it probably will not lead to a useful result. Time and resources are needed to address these complex issues, and to address the challenges that inevitably arise.
- If a decision to change the state's governance structure is made, the process of the change itself will require ongoing engagement and support.

3. What functions will the state need to perform to achieve its priorities?

- Do leaders have a shared understanding of the core functions of an early childhood system?
- Is the state working to minimize the administrative burdens on providers and families?

- Every early childhood system has critical core functions (itemized in Section 3.A of [Getting There from Here](#)) that it should be able to perform. These include functions relating to money management, setting standards for — and maintaining — service quality, supporting professionals, engaging and supporting families and stakeholders, and communications and public relations.

4. How should different levels of government work together to execute the critical functions?

- Which level of government is best positioned to be successful at different roles?
- How can roles be defined to support success at every level?
- What is the state's strategy for building local capacity?
- How is the state supporting inclusive decision making at the local level?
- What supports are states providing for local innovation?
- How can the state sustain a healthy state-to-local dynamic? Is the state equipped to manage the state-local relationship on an ongoing basis?

- Functions that benefit from scale and consistency are likely to be better off at the state level. Functions that benefit from deep and ongoing engagement with providers and families are likely to be better off at the local level.
- States play an indispensable role in ensuring equity.
- Local collaboration can be valuable, but it requires authority and capacity to be successful — and the state has a key role in providing that authority and capacity, along with needed flexibility.
- State governments create incentives for local action, and provide capacity. To be effective states must be strategic about how they leverage those incentives.

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KEY QUESTIONS**IMPORTANT SUB-QUESTIONS****CONSIDERATIONS FOR STATES****5. What personnel capacities does the state need to succeed at its priority functions?**

- Does the state have the personnel it needs to be successful at multiple levels — agency leadership, agency management, and front-line staff? If not, does it have a path to building those capacities?
- Is the state considering using external supports, including public-private partnerships?
- Is the state considering building the analytic capacity needed to take full advantage of the information it has available?

- Leadership and capacity is needed in multiple roles for states to be successful — including political, managerial, and staff. The skills needed at each level are different.
- There are multiple challenges to developing and retaining skilled personnel in state government, which the state may need to address.
- Collectively those personnel will need to confront some deep challenges in the early childhood system, which can be difficult without a supportive management culture.
- Public-private partnerships have in some instances been an effective strategy for expanding the capacity of state government.

6. Given the capacities needed at the state level to achieve the state's goals, what is the ideal configuration of that capacity?

- Is the state focused on birth to 5 or birth to 8?
- Is the state focused on early care and education (preschool, child care, and Head Start), or on a broader set of services?
- Is it important to the state to create elevated leadership?
- Is the state looking to decentralize services through a regional model?
- Does the state see benefits to consolidating early childhood programs into a single agency — either a standalone new agency or a larger existing agency?
- What interagency connective tissue has the state created, and how might it adapt to a new configuration of programs across agencies?

- The choice of a state-level structure will be influenced by how strongly the state wants to connect early childhood to the K-12 education system, and by which specific programs and services the state wants to include in a governance change.
- Some states have strongly prioritized creating higher-level leadership as part of a governance change.
- Some states deliver services through decentralized or regional services, which can impact how state government is organized.
- States should consider whether there is a particular size of agency that is likely to be most successful in the state's political landscape, and should also take account of how independently agencies operate in the state's political culture.
- States should consider the potential benefits and drawbacks of consolidating programs into a single agency.
- Any agency having new programs added to its responsibilities must be prepared to deal with new constituencies, which requires preparation for both practical and cultural changes.
- Regardless of where a state chooses to place early childhood services, there will be a need for connections across agencies — and those connections require dedicated capacity to manage.
- In thinking about connections across the early childhood system states should recognize that intra-governmental connections and inside-outside connections are both important, and may require different support structures.

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KEY QUESTIONS

IMPORTANT SUB-QUESTIONS

CONSIDERATIONS FOR STATES

7. If a decision is made to change governance, how should the state manage the process of governance change — and what capacities are needed for that process to be successful?

- Is the state designing a process that engages the field?
- Has the state costed out the process of changing governance?
- Has the state thought through all of the adaptive and technical challenges of moving state staff from one agency to another?
- How realistic is the state's timeline for transition?
- Does the state have in place an effective process for managing change on an ongoing basis, for both state employees and for impacted stakeholders?

- Most state governments do not have a strong record of successful change management. States should think about what capacity they will need to manage change effectively.
- The issues that arise in a governance change include both practical and cultural issues, both of which must be addressed on an ongoing basis for the process to succeed.
- The timeline for the transition must balance the sense of urgency needed to justify the change in the first place with the practical reality that transitions take time to execute properly.
- Governance changes have a major impact on state government employees and on key partners. The transition process must address the needs of both to be successful.

8. In the final cost-benefit analysis, is a change in governance worthwhile?

- Is a change in governance structure really likely to help the state achieve its priorities?
- Has the state clearly articulated how the governance change will directly impact the achievement of the state's priorities?
- Has the state anticipated the costs of the transition, and is it prepared to do the necessary change management?
- Is the state building the needed capacity to support success in the new governance alignment, and to properly leverage the change?

- If states are moving programs to new agencies that is an opportunity to map out what capacities are needed for the programs to succeed in their new environment, and how to best leverage the new governance configuration.
- All of the decisions in a governance plan represent tradeoffs. The costs and benefits inherent in those tradeoffs may change over time, so the state should think about its ongoing process for managing the evolution of its governance system.
- Change is difficult even when it is important and worthwhile. The state should not minimize the impact of a change on its staff or its partners — but also should not accept the status quo just because doing so seems easier.

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