Governing early care and education systems is complex, with multiple agencies overseeing several programs and services that are funded at the local, state, and federal levels. These programs and services all contribute to early development, yet are often siloed — making alignment, coordination and funding distribution difficult. This fragmentation impacts states’ abilities to provide equitable, cohesive and high-quality supports for young children and their families to ensure strong foundations are developed for school readiness.

To address fragmentation, states are required by the Head Start Act to have early childhood advisory councils. Several states also have children’s cabinets or other oversight entities.

The early care and education components of the ECE system include Early Head Start/Head Start, state preschool, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Parts B (ages 3 and up) and C (infants and toddlers), and the Child Care Development Fund. High-quality child care is generally supported through a quality rating and improvement system. Additional comprehensive services include home visiting and early childhood mental health consultation.

Key Questions for Policymakers Considering Governance Changes

Once priorities for the early care and education system are established, the following questions may be considered:

- What process will the state use to determine whether change is needed?
- What are the state’s critical functions?
- How should states work with communities?
- What capacities do states need, and how should they be configured?
- If the state decides change is worthwhile, how will the change be managed?

These questions are adapted from Getting There from Here (full report and decision guide).

Since 2017, at least 139 early care and education governance bills have been introduced in 36 states.