



# EDUCATION TRENDS

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## Governance in Early Childhood Education

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By age five — before starting a formal K-12 education — 90 percent of a child's brain has already been developed.<sup>2</sup> Recognizing the opportunity and importance of these pivotal early years, some states are strengthening the early childhood systems and programs they offer students before they reach kindergarten. The problem, however, is that these systems and programs are often fragmented — creating disconnected experiences for children — because of a multiplicity of funding streams, early education settings, services and professional roles.

Multiple state agencies (human services, state education agency, health, etc.) administer early childhood education programs. These agencies may also handle programs relating to mental health, education (Head Start/Early Head Start, child care, early intervention, pre-K, K-3, etc.) and social services (child care, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, foster care, home visits, family resource centers, parent education, etc.). In addition, local school districts often directly administer early childhood and pre-K programs. This complexity of program administration, funding streams and oversight creates challenges that make policy alignment difficult for state and local officials. These challenges include an array of intergovernmental cooperation issues, like gaps in quality and monitoring, that are compounded by ongoing political changes.

The disconnect is especially prevalent between the birth-to-age-five system and K-3. There is rarely a formal governance structure that dictates high-level decision-making ability and influence to address conflicting eligibility, regulations, processes and accountability across the birth-to-third-grade continuum and across state departments. Multiple planning and governing entities are often simultaneously contributing to an early learning vision, goals and objectives for specific programs — with little attention paid to potential duplication or collaboration. Convoluted administrative structures create natural limits to addressing policy issues in an efficient manner and require clear institutional connections to facilitate cooperation.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the recent history of early childhood education, there has been a tacit understanding that governance is an important vehicle to stem the fragmentation that characterizes the field. Not only can governance entities mitigate the negative effects of highly discordant programmatic approaches, but they can also foster more systemic thinking that respects the inherent holistic development and program needs of young children.<sup>1</sup>

Early learning governance varies greatly across states and is often fragmented across different state agencies.

Every state, except for one, has an early childhood advisory council, which often provides policy recommendations and helps to coordinate efforts across the state.

There is a sense of urgency among some state policymakers to reduce the field’s fragmentation by focusing on the execution, coordination and management of early childhood programs. This is where state education governance — the practice of coordinating institutions, processes and norms to guide collective decision-making and action — is crucial. Governance addresses alignment issues by providing structure in the form of authority, accountability and a coherent strategy for achieving a birth-to-age-five system that is aligned with K-3.<sup>4</sup>

Currently, at least five states have what they define as a department of early learning, and every state but one has an early childhood advisory council.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, in every state:

- The education agency houses an early childhood administrator, who likely oversees early learning programs — including school readiness, pre-K, special education and others.
- A child care administrator, most often housed in the department of human services, oversees the federal Child Care and Development Block Grants (grants to states to support child care for low-income families), child care licensing, quality improvements and often programs such as resource and referral or family support.

This report examines these structures and strategies — including the creation of state offices, the consolidation of others, and collaboration and coordination across several state agencies.

### Governance in Early Childhood Compared With K-12

Except for a few states, there is no durable early childhood education infrastructure that compares with the K-12 system:<sup>6</sup>

	ECE	K-12
<b>Governance</b>	Nothing formalized in most states	State boards of education and local school boards
<b>Finance</b>	Multiple, chaotic funding	Guaranteed tax base
<b>Professional Certifications</b>	None universally required	Required to teach
<b>Regulation</b>	The minimum is state required; all else is voluntary	Required accreditation

## Strategies for Streamlining Early Childhood Governance

Understanding the distribution of authority in early childhood education governance may prove insightful to understanding how education issues are prioritized and resolved in each state. Additionally, by developing a coherent strategy and vision for early childhood education, state leaders can help align each agency’s mandates and goals and facilitate effective intergovernmental cooperation. This kind of alignment and communication can ultimately increase and streamline quality, access, capacity and local delivery of early childhood services across all child-serving sectors.

A state that desires to (re)examine its early childhood governance should not necessarily begin with a model in mind but rather with a focus on its goals and desired outcomes for early childhood. From there, state leaders can choose a strategy.<sup>7</sup> In states that have already done this, leaders have focused on five key goals:<sup>8</sup>

**COORDINATION.** Connecting the different parts and programs of the early childhood education system, reflecting its comprehensive nature.

**ALIGNMENT.** Providing coherence across systemwide tasks — such as data collection, quality standards and outcome measurement — and breaking down silos associated with the administration of funding and the oversight of programs.

**SUSTAINABILITY.** Withstanding political and administrative changes and accounting for the full range of programs and services that are part of the state’s early childhood system.

**EFFICIENCY.** Allocating resources wisely, reducing duplication of efforts and providing a significant return on investment.

**ACCOUNTABILITY.** Holding programs and services responsible for quality, equality and outcomes.

It’s important to note that streamlining governance does not mean all programs and services need to be co-located under the same roof, but rather, that the governance body has the authority needed to make decisions across multiple entities. States may want to consider coordinating bodies to ensure various state agencies and local governance are harmonized in their work. This is especially true in cases where responsibilities are distributed to multiple entities at different levels of government, which is typical in the early learning sector.

## Benefits of Effective Early Learning Governance

- Establishes vision-setting entities that can align state goals.
- Increases efficiency.
- Increases public/private partnerships, federal-state-local coordination and the alignment of early childhood services across government entities.
- Initiates supports and infrastructure that improve outcomes for young children.
- Reduces duplication of efforts.
- Increases responsiveness.
- Maximizes fiscal and human capital resources.

## State Agency Organization

Within early childhood governance, states typically look to their state agency structures and advisory councils as they often serve as two concrete existing entities through which systems can be strengthened to best serve children. Within state governance structures, several agencies can cover different early childhood care and education programs. State agencies that serve the early years typically include the state’s departments of health, human services, education and others. These programs can be administered by the:



**CREATION**  
of a dedicated early childhood agency.



**CONSOLIDATION**  
of existing programs and divisions into one state agency.



**COLLABORATION**  
and **COORDINATION**  
across different agencies.

No strategy is better than the others, and what works in one state may not work in another. To build an early learning system, multiple planning and governance structures are likely to be needed at the state and community level over time. When trying to categorize states into one of the three structures identified above, it is clear that some states fall into more than one. What is known, though, is that high-performing offices of early learning bolster the state's ability to target organizational capacity, improve effectiveness and efficiency, and maximize leadership and staff capabilities.<sup>9</sup>

The following pages provide state examples that closely reflect the creation, consolidation, and collaboration and coordination structures.



## CREATION

A few states have looked to create new entities responsible for managing all early learning and early childhood programs across the state. These offices become executive branch entities or new departments, and they typically hold most of the early childhood programs and responsibilities.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, they often have a board, and their director or commissioner may report directly to the governor. Internally, different divisions or offices may separate the components of the birth-to-third-grade programs the state oversees.



### ALABAMA

[The Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education](#) was created as an executive department of state government, replacing the department of children's affairs, to effectively and efficiently oversee programs to support children in the state. Within the department, four offices guide the state's early childhood priorities: office of school readiness, office of early learning and family support, Head Start collaboration office and office of child development and professional support. [An executive order](#) established the Alabama Children's Policy Council in 2015, the same year the office was renamed. The [council coordinates services across the state](#) through a local entity in each county.



### GEORGIA

[Bright From the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning](#) was created in 2004 by merging the office of school readiness units in the department of human resources, the department of education and the Georgia Child Care Council. Bright From the Start administers the state's pre-K program, in addition to licensing child care, federal nutrition programs and the community-powered child care rating system. It also houses the state's Head Start collaboration office. The department reports to a board, consisting of representatives from each congressional district. Additionally, the Georgia State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care merged with the [Georgia Children's Cabinet](#) to help guide policies and leadership on early childhood initiatives by having several agencies and entities collaborate on coordinated goals.



### MASSACHUSETTS

In Massachusetts, three state agencies covering the P-20 continuum fall under the secretary of education, who reports to the governor. Those three entities are the department of early education and care, the department of elementary and secondary education and the department of higher education — all of which have their own commissioners who report to the secretary of education. Created in 2005, [the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care](#) was created by consolidating the office of child care services and the early learning services unit. In doing so, the state

aimed to better align services and supports along the P-20 spectrum. The department is responsible for programs for infants through preschoolers, in addition to after-school programs and other early care needs — such as foster care and home visits. It also licenses child care facilities across the state and houses the Head Start collaboration office and the state’s Quality Rating Improvement System, among other early childhood education responsibilities. It works in conjunction with the department of elementary and secondary education’s early learning team to align early learning services and initiatives across departments.



## CONSOLIDATION

Some states have looked to consolidate offices dedicated to early childhood programs into one. In these instances, states examine which already-existing entity can manage these programs — and in many cases, that is the state’s department of education or department of human services.

### MARYLAND

In 2005, all early childhood programs were moved to the newly created division of early childhood development at the [Maryland State Department of Education](#). The division is composed of the office of child care, the early learning branch, and the collaboration and improvement branch. The division covers licensing, credentialing, subsidies, pre-K and kindergarten programs, and collaboration efforts across early learning programs. Its efforts in recent years have resulted in a new family engagement website for parents, families and educators across the state.



Establishing state-level early childhood education departments or divisions elevates the importance of quality child care and early education, contributing to streamlining funding and programs, avoiding duplication of services and programs that work at cross purposes.

— ROLF GRAFWALLNER

Program director of early childhood initiatives  
at the Council of Chief State School Officers



## COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION

Some states have decided to align program administration across state agencies, instead of creating new entities or consolidating existing offices. In these cases, memorandums of understanding or formal agreements, dictating each office’s responsibilities, can be key to seamless coordination and setting clear administrative responsibilities.

### COLORADO

Colorado has consolidated previous early childhood efforts into multiple departments, and the state now coordinates them among offices and agencies. Under the Colorado Department of Human Services, the office of early childhood was created to support early learning through two divisions. The first, the division of early care and learning, administers

child care licensing and quality initiatives. The second, the division of community and family support, focuses on child maltreatment prevention, Head Start, home visits and mental health. [Colorado H.B. 13-1117](#), passed in 2013, aligned child development programs housed in the department of human services. This included moving the Early Childhood Leadership Commission and Head Start collaboration office out of the governor's office and into the new office of early childhood. Additionally, the state created a memorandum of understanding to align the work of the P-3 division within the Colorado Department of Education.

## PENNSYLVANIA

[The Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning](#) is jointly overseen by the department of human services and the department of education. The office was created in 2006 to administer child care, early intervention, and learning and family support efforts. Within the department, five bureaus — early intervention, early learning, subsidized child care services, children's trust fund and certification services — oversee program administration. These bureaus act as targeted divisions within the department, much like the divisions within Colorado's Office of Early Childhood.

## State Early Childhood Advisory Councils

Early childhood advisory councils also coordinate and implement early childhood programs. The Head Start Reauthorization Act of 2007 required states [to establish early childhood advisory councils](#) to lead development and coordination of high-quality, seamless early learning systems. Additionally, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 provided almost \$100 million toward state early childhood advisory councils.

The Head Start Act mandates that the following entities are [included in states' advisory councils](#): the state education agency, state agency overseeing child care, local education agencies, institutions of higher education, local providers of early childhood education, Head Start agencies, state agency responsible for IDEA part C and the state agency responsible for children's mental health and health care. Since then, many states have expanded or adjusted council membership to include other prominent early childhood providers, advocates and other state entities. The majority of states have kept their councils active through executive orders or legislation.

Councils now serve various functions, are composed of a variety of stakeholders and hold differing levels of responsibility across states. In several states, local councils contribute to the state council's activities and coordinate efforts at the local level. Such is the case in **Oregon**, in addition to other states, where local councils coordinate with the state early childhood advisory council to create a unified plan and disseminate it throughout the state. They may be tasked with similar requirements as state agencies — including data collection, technical assistance, facilitating professional development and other tasks — to strengthen local early childhood programs.<sup>11</sup>

## MISSISSIPPI

Mississippi formed its State Early Childhood Advisory Council in 2008 to provide counsel to the governor on issues impacting young children. Within the council, there are three committees focused on early learning and care; health and mental health; and nutrition and family support. The Mississippi Legislature passed S.B. 2395, [the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013](#), detailing the council's duties. The council also coordinates various agencies and programs serving pre-K students and upholds strong standards for pre-K. The governor appoints the council, which meets monthly; and its current 29 members represent a variety of state and local agencies, early education providers and other stakeholders. The council's work aims to develop a family-based, unified and integrated early childhood system for the state.

 **OREGON**

Oregon's Early Learning Hubs prioritize aligned, coordinated early learning systems; kindergarten readiness; and stable, healthy families. There are [currently 16 hubs](#) working across county and district lines, and they are responsible for several tasks — including coordinating efforts across health, K-12 education, human services and the local business community. Through support from [the Oregon Department of Education's Early Learning Division](#), the hubs help guide the state's youngest learners to be ready to learn, able to focus in the classroom, able to transition from one activity to the next, recognize numbers and letters and reach third-grade proficiency benchmarks. To do so, the state has prioritized the intersection of human services, health, early learning, K-12 education and the private sector to support aligned, coordinated and family-centered services.

## Policy Considerations

Early childhood governance is influenced by the political, fiscal and public engagement context of each state. While much has been written about different models and approaches of governance systems, little research demonstrates which is most effective and provides the best outcomes for children. The work remains extremely complex and difficult to achieve without top-level leadership and buy-in.

Challenges for education policymakers may include:

- Bridging the differences between child care, early education, work supports and parent engagement. Is it a whole child/comprehensive approach to governance or one focused on early education?
- Linking quality improvement efforts with professional development systems and support across programs and disciplines, (i.e., Head Start, state-funded pre-K programs, nurse consultants, mental health providers, child care providers, etc.).
- Aligning services and programs to increase family participation and improve child outcomes.

Governance systems evolve over time through evaluation, operational objectives, performance measures, changes in the target population and the impact the governance system has on child outcomes.

Questions policymakers and stakeholders may want to ask include:

- Will the governance initiative survive through political change?
- What will it take to get the new structure into state statute so it is sustainable?
- Will the working relationships among policy leaders at the state and local levels function in a way that reinforces student success and policy cohesion?
- Will the governance entity have the fiscal and policy/rule-making authority and administrative oversight to achieve the goals?
- Will the structure be positioned to achieve interim goals, (i.e., increased program coordination, cost savings, engagement with new stakeholders, etc.)?
- Will agency mandates and authority be aligned to provide an environment for effective intergovernmental cooperation?
- Will the structures that are put in place have the supports and tools necessary to monitor program quality and share data across relevant agencies?



## Final Thoughts

There are a multitude of approaches to governance and oversight of early childhood education. One of the primary purposes in creating a governance strategy is to improve how a state meets key values, such as coordination, coherence, sustainability, efficiency and accountability for funding and results. State leaders developing an early childhood governance entity may want to empower that entity beyond advisory authority and include decision-making and enforcing authority, visibility inside and outside of government, durability across political administrations with the capacity to change and adapt and interdependence within and across departments where the hierarchical decision-making lands. Creating such an early childhood governance strategy should not become a reshuffling of chairs, but rather a way to improve outcomes for children and their families through a high-quality, comprehensive educational continuum of programs and services.

### ENDNOTES

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors thank Heidi Macdonald and Zeke Perez Jr., of Education Commission of the States, for their contributions to this paper.

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