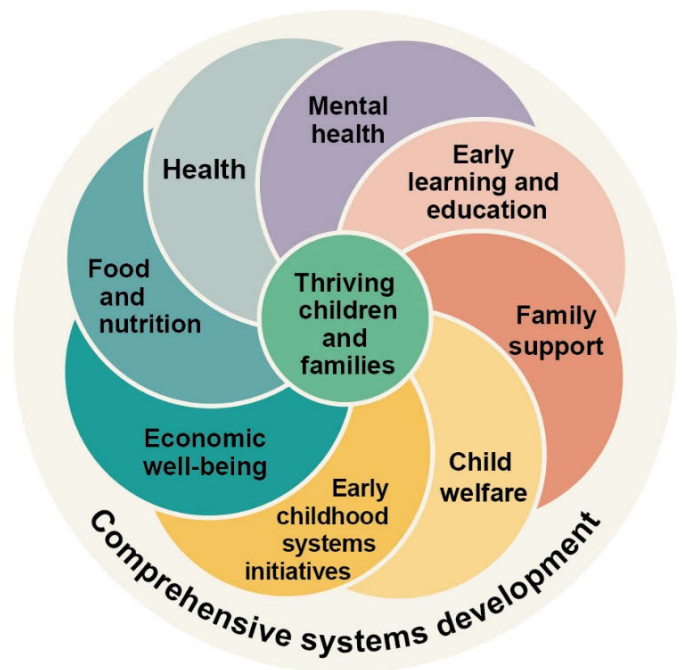


# Early Childhood Systems Collective Impact Project

Supporting child and family well-being: A call for coordinated early childhood systems

Federal, state, local, tribal,  
and parent perspectives  
from key informant  
interviews



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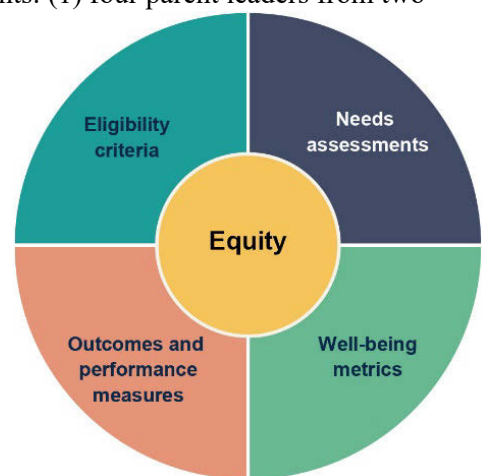
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## Supporting Child and Family Well-Being: A Call for Coordinated Early Childhood Systems

### Federal, State, Local, Tribal, and Parent Perspectives from Key Informant Interviews

This brief presents findings from key informant interviews conducted as part of the [Early Childhood Systems Collective Impact Project](#). The project seeks to improve health and well-being and promote equitable outcomes for expectant parents, young children (birth to age 8), and their families by re-envisioning an aligned and coordinated approach for federal programs and policies that serve them. The purpose of the key informant interviews was to understand barriers at the federal, state, tribal, and local levels that impede the development of coordinated, comprehensive early childhood systems; learn about promising efforts to overcome those barriers; and inform recommendations for future action.

Staff from Mathematica and the Center for the Study of Social Policy conducted 30 interviews from March to June 2022. We interviewed a wide variety of respondents: (1) four parent leaders from two states who have used programs and services for young children and their families and serve as advocates and guides for other parents; (2) state officials from four states representing system building efforts such as Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) and Preschool Development Grant Birth-5 (PDG B-5) that are in the early stages; (3) state officials at the system and program levels in three states, representing programs including Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Part C, Head Start, Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); (3) one tribal official; and (4) group interviews with federal program and policy staff across nine early childhood programs overseen by the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS), Education, and Agriculture.



The interviews explored needs, challenges, and opportunities related to five key elements that can support a coordinated early childhood system: eligibility criteria, needs assessments, outcomes and performance measures, well-being measures, and approaches for promoting equity. In this brief, we summarize interview findings by the key elements, combining outcomes and performance measures with well-being measures. We present four findings with supporting themes about challenges and opportunities. We conclude with one overall finding of a vision for aligning and coordinating these program elements and moving towards a more comprehensive early childhood system focused on equity.

#### 1. Improving access to services and supports by simplifying eligibility processes is a critical step in serving the holistic needs of young children and their families.

**Streamlining eligibility and enrollment processes can increase access to services.** Parents and state officials reported confusion about and duplication of processes for eligibility, access, and enrollment. State leaders noted that they heard a strong need for aligning eligibility criteria across programs and communities. Parents and state leaders described the process to apply for benefits as confusing,

overwhelming, and repetitive. Parents spoke about being asked to supply the same information repeatedly and said that sometimes the benefits were not worth the amount of work needed to qualify. They also described the risk of losing eligibility based on small changes in income and having to reapply if their income decreased.

### **The challenge**

**Each federal program has its own eligibility requirements, and most are codified in statutes.** Each program's eligibility rules are established separately, often without consideration for consistency across programs. Federal interviewees pointed out some income eligibility similarities among programs such as Head Start, TANF, and SNAP, but these are the exception. As a result of these disparate federal rules, states typically maintain separate intake systems for each federal program. Federal interviewees cautioned that alignment problems at the national level are often rooted within existing statutory requirements.

### **Opportunities and examples of progress**

**States are working to create integrated eligibility systems featuring a simplified application process.** Several states have developed or are currently working on eligibility portals in which a family can enter information once to apply for multiple programs. One such portal in South Carolina includes 44 publicly funded services across 10 state agencies. State interviewees noted that creating the portal has been complex, and they cautioned that it brings challenges related to program staffing and federally mandated time frames for processing applications for some programs. For example, programs may begin receiving more applications than they are used to processing and may have to adjust accordingly. State officials also emphasized that the flexible funding provided by PDG B-5 and the American Rescue Plan enabled the state to cover expenses to develop these applications.

**States have streamlined eligibility by taking advantage of limited flexibility built into federal rules.** Efforts to streamline eligibility include presumptive eligibility in Minnesota for Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, with self-attestation or minimal documentation required from families with low incomes. Colorado and Washington State have used adjunctive eligibility, in which eligibility for one program (for example, WIC) can be established based on enrollment in another program (for example, TANF or SNAP). For federal programs that allow states to set their own income limits (typically as a percentage of the federal poverty level), states can choose the same initial income eligibility threshold and phase-out rates based on income for multiple programs, making it easier for families eligible for one program to access the others. Currently, the rate at which benefits decline based on a given increase in income varies across programs. Full alignment would require consistency in both initial eligibility rules and coordination around phase-out rates.

**Family navigation services are crucial for reaching people and communities facing barriers to accessing public benefit systems.** Parents credited family support or community health workers from local organizations, who typically live in the community they serve, as helpful for explaining benefits and navigating complicated eligibility processes. Parents noted that when this kind of help is unavailable, they often rely informally on other parents for information. Parents also said the variety of programs and rules is so complex that caseworkers in one program often cannot provide useful information about others.

2. Understanding the holistic needs of young children and their families through coordinated, community-level needs assessments will better match services to needs and help create an efficient system of supports.

**Improving community-level needs assessments will help illustrate the landscape of services and supports available to families, as well as how they can work together.** Under the right circumstances, needs assessments at the community level help state and local leaders learn about community strengths and challenges; help programs engage with local residents and users of services, producing rich qualitative and quantitative data; and support adjustments to make programs and services more equitable. However, needs assessments for various programs can be duplicative and burdensome for states. There are opportunities at the federal level to streamline needs assessments for federal programs.

### **The challenge**

**Current federal rules regarding needs assessments limit their usefulness and create substantial burdens on states.** Many federal programs require separate needs assessments, often covering the same topics, with inconsistent schedules. One state official said, “The last thing we need is another needs assessment.” One state respondent described having to do three needs assessments for similar populations back-to-back over three years to follow the rules of separate funding streams. Multiple assessments take a great deal of effort that could be better spent elsewhere, and they can lead to duplicative, overlapping plans.

### **Opportunities and examples of progress**

**States have used a variety of approaches across programs to maximize findings from needs assessments while reducing burden.** For example, Alabama and Colorado used the same research team for PDG B-5 needs assessments that they used for other needs assessments to make it easier to draw from the same information that had already been gathered. In another case, a Washington state leader described analyzing the state’s multiple needs assessments to better understand assets and gaps in services across a wide variety of programs.

**Some federal programs have aligned their needs assessments.** For example, PDG B-5 supports comprehensive needs assessments that include several programs. In South Carolina, the PDG B-5 work engaged 5,000 people in a comprehensive approach to needs assessment, including more than 1,000 parents whose young children participated in a variety of early care and education programs. In addition, needs assessments for the federal home visiting program (Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting [MIECHV]) must, by statute, be coordinated with needs assessments for several other federal programs, and guidance from the Maternal and Child Health Bureau (in the Health Resources and Services Administration of HHS) has encouraged states to take steps toward even broader coordination.



*“One fruit that was born out of the needs assessment and early learning coordination plan was the early learning navigator.... There was a huge need around children becoming involved in the child welfare system that did not have access to early learning.... We built this organic child welfare early learning navigator model to say, okay how can we better connect?”*

- State interviewee

### **Alignment of needs assessments, including fewer assessments on a coordinated schedule, will lead to a better understanding of system opportunities.**

Interviewees across federal and state levels suggested that a smaller number of needs assessments on a more coordinated timeline would improve their planning. Federal interviewees spoke of the value of having states map funding across programs, to help state program leaders see where funding was going and where funding was lacking. State interviewees mentioned the value of assessments that can identify communities with substantial needs and help those communities build capacity to respond. One state program lead said, “We’d be able to work smart, instead of constantly redoing work.” These improvements would

likely require revisiting authorizing statutes and regulations to replace program-specific needs assessments with coordinated ones.

### **3. Measuring positive, equitable, and common program-level and family well-being outcomes across programs will focus the early childhood system on helping children and families thrive.**

**The early childhood field needs comprehensive, common measures of well-being.** Federal and state participants suggested that a set of common measures would enable multiple programs to contribute to a more complete picture of child and family well-being in states. They shared examples of measures they thought would be helpful, ranging from kindergarten readiness to poverty reduction. They noted that qualitative measures can help supplement quantitative data (for example, with information about how families benefit from programs). Interviewees noted that it is important for measures to have data available at the state, city, county, and community levels.



*“So often we’re in a defensive mode when it comes to data collection and analysis ... it’s reactive, instead of stepping back with a holistic and strategic framework and starting there.”*

- State interviewee

### The challenge

**Existing measures are program specific. To the extent that measures try to address outcomes, they focus almost exclusively on problems and risk factors.** Each federal program has its own data collection and reporting requirements related to the goals of the program, and these requirements often differ from the measures in other programs. In addition, participants at the state and federal levels noted that outcomes often focused more on risks and deficits than on strengths. For example, a state interviewee said, “There’s some programmatic data, but it’s often just about the child or just the parent, but not attachment and how the parent and child are doing together and what’s going well for a family.” Interviewees expressed interest in measures of family and community engagement, and in measures that help contextualize need and program performance, such as those that capture the social determinants of health. One state interviewee said, “The Feds want us to measure the bad things.... There are very few metrics about increasing the good things and how to do that. If you’re really trying to grow well-being, what are those positive metrics?”



*“It’s not so much aligning measures perfectly, it’s about helping programs at local or state levels exchange the information and translate it in a way that’s readable for both sides. We don’t have to collect school readiness in the same way. It’s that when we do collect it, we exchange it in a common format that can be read by everybody.”*

- Federal interviewee



*“We would want to have child well-being indicators in the context of their families. In families with economic or mental health needs, are the needs for services and supports being met? What kind of community factors support the well-being of families and children? We need a holistic picture of the child in the context of their families and communities.”*

- State interviewee



### Opportunities and examples of progress

**States are taking steps to integrate their data systems.** Integrated data systems will help states better understand patterns of service use across programs. State data systems were often developed independently of one another to respond to the separate reporting requirements of each federal program. Establishing a single identifier used across systems for each child and family (with appropriate security protections) is an important step toward alignment. A few states had data-sharing agreements across multiple programs and found them helpful. For example, South Carolina has established a data warehouse in which various agencies store information. State leaders noted that these approaches take a great deal of effort and have some inherent limitations.

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“We launched First 5 South Carolina, which is unique in the nation. It’s a single portal into an eligibility screener and common application across 44 publicly funded services, ...10 state agencies, and five domains”

- State interviewee

**There are promising early examples of efforts to align measures at the federal and state levels, but there are tensions between flexibility and consistency.** As an example of an alignment effort, Minnesota is creating performance indicators to apply across all early childhood programs, serving as a cross-system supplement to the required federal measures for each program. More generally, many state and federal staff noted a tension in determining the data states must collect and report. By aligning measures, they did not want to restrict states in collecting data that were most meaningful to the states themselves. On one hand, federal and state interviewees noted the value of allowing states and communities to choose their measures of interest. On the other hand, they want consistent data that can be aggregated across jurisdictions.

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“Our data systems are all held together with duct tape.... The way we’ve built our data system is based on... federal funding. So, if we get some funding in one area, something’s built there, and then if there’s funding in another area, something’s built there. So, none of it is talking to each other.”

- State interviewee

**The federal government can promote equity by requiring data to be disaggregated and analyzed by race, ethnicity, and other factors.** Disaggregated data will enable programs to analyze and use existing data with particular attention to equity. For example, disaggregating data on the composition of the early childhood workforce will help the field better understand the extent to which workforce demographics align with participating families. Some federal data could potentially be used to promote equity, but states noted that these data were not easily accessible. For example, one state said that the Office for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education collects information about suspension and expulsion from early childhood programs run by local school districts, broken down by race and ethnicity, but interviewees noted that the information was not easily accessible or usable by staff. If the information was easier to access and presented more clearly, the information would better inform state and local efforts.



### 4. Focusing on equity in service delivery, building the workforce, and achieving equitable outcomes for families and children must be central to a coordinated early childhood system.

**Building early childhood systems must include equity as a core goal.** State and federal interviewees emphasized that better alignment and coordination promotes equity, and they pointed to efforts to develop comprehensive strategic plans to achieve more equitable results. These efforts are sometimes tied to specific goals. For example, one state identified a 20 percent gap in kindergarten readiness for Black and Latinx children compared with White children, and the state seeks to close that gap through better alignment and coordination.

#### The challenge

**Existing state rules can perpetuate and deepen inequities related to race and culture.** For example, procurement rules and review criteria may give significant advantages to state or local organizations that already have grant experience and more resources which can, for example, put smaller organizations (many of whom may be rooted in communities of color) at a disadvantage. As a different example at the program level, sanctions such as temporary suspension of income supports or child care eligibility can lead to inequities, particularly if those penalties land disproportionately on families of color. Another issue is inflexible requirements about the composition of food packages authorized by WIC, which make it difficult to create culturally responsive services. Similarly, home-based child care provider background checks on whole families may disproportionately exclude people of color from child care employment.

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*“Are we going to change the hearts and minds and internal biases of 3,000 eligibility technicians, or are we going to essentially almost eliminate our sanctions?”*

- State interviewee

**Low pay and inadequate support for the early childhood workforce drive inequity.** States said building and sustaining a high-quality workforce is a priority, especially in places where a significant number of people left the early childhood workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic. Entry-level positions with low pay are filled overwhelmingly by women and disproportionately by women of color. Professional development opportunities are more available to licensed child care staff than to family-based providers, home visitors, and family advocates.

**Tribal nations are too often ignored or treated as a racial or ethnic group, rather than recognized as sovereign nations with which to negotiate on a government-to-government basis.** One interviewee said, “We’re both a race and a political entity ... don’t lump us in a racial category. We’re a government and a sovereign nation.” In addition, they noted that services are not adapted to the culture of tribal communities. Another state interviewee said “folks were like, yeah, that doesn’t speak to me, that’s not how I do it. The program is not relevant to some folks because it doesn’t respond to their traditions, and there’s no reason why it couldn’t.” States noted that services were not adapted to the culture of tribal communities to the extent that they should be. In addition, tribal community members did not feel that programs met their needs. Over-involvement of child welfare systems in tribal communities was a particular concern: Native American children are over-represented in protective services and in the foster care population.

**Parents reported encountering prejudice, facing difficulties in accessing services because of language barriers, or being stigmatized when they applied for benefits or advocated for their children in need of services.**

Some immigrant families avoid accessing benefits and services for fear of deportation; the problem can be particularly acute in agricultural communities, which include large numbers of migrant workers who may be undocumented. Interactions with frontline staff can reinforce families’ sense of being looked down on. In addition, parents of children with complex needs struggled to have all those needs met and felt that they were being judged for advocating for additional services for their children.

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*“People don’t want to hear what you have to say.... Sometimes there’s a language barrier, and they just shut you out.... I hate to use words like racism ... but I have felt it. I have seen it.”*

- Parent interviewee

**Opportunities and examples of progress**

**Family voice councils and similar efforts to engage parents who receive services in planning and decision making can be a powerful force for greater equity.**

Staff considered family voice councils at the state and local levels as especially effective when they were not limited to a single program and instead had a broad mandate to support early childhood as a whole. Federal participants we interviewed suggested that Head Start has strong family engagement and could serve as a model for other federal programs. However, parents viewed some other family engagement efforts as providing only modest benefits, and they reported mixed experiences in whether their participation was supported (for example, whether they were paid for their time) and how seriously they believed their input was taken. In addition, states are supporting greater tribal participation in advisory bodies and advocating for categorical eligibility for tribal families for some benefits.

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*“Once you have a family voice council, you realize, we want people to shake up our beliefs.... We want people to tell us we’re missing the mark and help us change it.”*

- State interviewee

**Paid staff who are rooted in the communities they serve help promote equity.** Parents thought that staff from the community—such as local family support staff—who helped families navigate complex systems or acted as peer counselors were a tremendous support. Interviewees viewed outreach efforts as most likely to be successful when they came from a peer. One state interviewee noted, “I think a lot of [work] has more power when it’s parent to parent.” Washington State has built on successful experiences helping parents navigate early childhood programs by developing a navigator staff position for child welfare services. Furthermore, some states are developing mentorship, scholarship, and professional development opportunities to help staff members of color reach higher-paid leadership positions.

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*“We can’t go from looking at data on a spreadsheet or a table to a solution. It’s that engagement of community and figuring out what they need and where they have strengths they want to build on.”*

- State interviewee

**Additional flexibility provided in response to the COVID-19 pandemic promoted equity.** Parents and state officials noted the value of being able to access services remotely, rather than having to miss work or arrange child care to attend an in-person appointment. This service was especially important for families living in rural areas where transportation is challenging.

### 5. Federal programs must work toward a comprehensive and equitable early childhood system focused on child and family well-being

#### The challenge

As noted in interviews across federal, state, tribal, and parent contributors, substantial improvements to child and family well-being for whole communities require better alignment and coordination across programs serving families with young children. Federal staff expressed a desire to better support collaboration, but program structures at the federal level make collaboration an add-on to their jobs, rather than a core responsibility. Federal and state interviewees noted that there are few positions dedicated to collaboration with other programs and agencies, and there is no high-level interagency entity charged with promoting collaboration. Federal participants highlighted the importance of leadership. One federal interviewee said, “If you don’t have a directive from the Secretary or above, it’s extremely difficult to get things done.”

#### Opportunities and examples of progress

Interviewees shared numerous encouraging examples of state and local efforts to build comprehensive early childhood systems. They have engaged a variety of constituents and partners, including parents, to develop overarching early childhood plans. These plans include (1) outcomes toward which all supports and services for young children and their families should contribute; (2) priority actions to achieve those goals; and (3) a standing, multisector state entity responsible for guiding implementation of the plan. In addition, federal initiatives have begun to support these state and local activities. For example, several interviewees said that PDG B-5 had been critical to their systems-building work. A PDG B-5 lead in one state said, “I could rattle off 10 enormous, transformative things we’ve been able to do as a result.” For example, they created a birth-through-5 plan for the state that was backed by the governor, with buy-in from state agencies and entities such as child care providers, medical providers, early care and education professionals, and parents of young children.

Some federal interdepartmental structures help support coordination. For example, the Administration for Children and Families’ Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary and Inter-Department Liaison for Early Childhood Development coordinates among the Office of Head Start, the Office of Child Care, the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, as well as other U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Operating Divisions. The office also serves as the liaison to a variety of other federal agencies, particularly with the U.S. Department of Education.

Interviewees emphasized the need for multiyear, flexible funding, which enables programs to create stability and sustain their efforts. They mentioned that flexible funding provided by PDG B-5 and the American Rescue Plan enabled some states to cover expenses to develop new collaborative structures. Federal interviewees also mentioned the importance of innovating to keep forward momentum whenever possible.

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“We need to allow space not just for nuance but also innovation and not getting stuck. For example, if we dealt with one depression screening tool and realized it was inadequate over time, [but the] government doesn’t move fast enough. It’s probably a three-year process to collect the data and change the measures with [the] OMB. We need to allow space for innovation in all of this work.”

- Federal interviewee

Finally, there are smaller-scale opportunities to promote collaboration through joint work on Notices of Funding Opportunities and through letters of agreement and memoranda of understanding between federal agencies. These structures enable federal staff to work together on a common goal, and then to direct state and local partners to collaborate in service of that goal. Interviewees also pointed to the potential for federally funded technical assistance to support states in building systems.

### Conclusion

Findings from key informant interviews with federal program and policy staff, state and tribal leaders, and parents highlight an urgent need for a more coordinated early childhood system that better serves families with young children. This brief includes examples of how states have moved toward a more coordinated system of early childhood services and supports. Although there are clear challenges, the examples demonstrate opportunities where greater federal support and commitment could better support states and communities in creating a comprehensive, coordinated approach to ensure the well-being of families with young children. States have begun work to conduct comprehensive, community-level needs assessments; align eligibility and enrollment procedures; develop measures that comprehensively assess child and family well-being; and promote equitable outcomes for all children. Increased federal leadership and commitment could build on these initiatives and help bring them to scale across more states.

Findings from the key informant interviews have also contributed to the development of a set of 10 recommendations from the Early Childhood Systems Collective Impact Project. Additional publicly available documents developed by the project include a catalog of program requirements from statutes, regulations, and guidance; a crosswalk that provides an overview of the requirements across programs; and a synthesis document, which explains whether and how programs are aligned in their requirements regarding eligibility, needs assessments, performance and well-being measures, and equity.

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