

**Working Group on Early Childhood Governance**  
**September 28, 2023**  
**11:00AM EST**  
**Executive Conference Room, 4<sup>th</sup> Floor**  
**Department of Administration**  
**1 Capitol Hill, Providence, 02908**

*Approved*

*A full recording of the meeting can be found at:*

- <https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/Flls2yKDXnDV4YUi7DDtE2-wP3WQD4dpTUmvj03xK38heZ3cboIwluMbEDeYKSq.Eg4Ws2f34o3VrPeK>
- Passcode: Y!@i4BTy

**Members in Attendance**

- EOHHS: Ana Novais
- RIDOH: Kristine Campagna
- RIDE: Lisa Odom-Villella
- DHS: Kim Brito
- RI KIDS COUNT: Leanne Barrett
- OPC: Greg Ebner

**Welcome & Overview**

- Ana Novais welcomed everyone to the meeting
- Attendees introduced themselves and their organizations around the table
- Kayla overviewed the agenda and overview of the project overall

**Vote on Adoption of Minutes**

- The Working Group on Early Childhood Governance voted on adopting the minutes from the August 22, 2023 meeting
  - First: Leanne Barrett
  - Second: Director Brito
  - All voted in favor and the minutes were accepted.

**Interim Comprehensive Draft Report**

- Elliot and Nasha, vendors for the State conducting the Governance Systems Analysis, presented on the interim comprehensive draft report
- Nasha presented on the process to develop the report, the contents of the report and the foundation that RI is building upon. She encouraged everyone to provide feedback at the meeting and following the meeting.
- Elliot presented on the interim comprehensive draft report. The report highlights the strengths of the existing system – much of the strengths lie in the people and many of the areas for growth lie in the set up of the system.
- The current system includes approximately \$130M in all funds going into Early Childhood Care and Education programs in the scope of the analysis. CCAP is the single largest program.

- There are three approaches to early childhood governance: Coordinated; Consolidated; or Created. Almost half of the states have unified their governance to a consolidated or created model.
- The report summarizes the experience of other states that have done unification of some sort. Key takeaways included:
  - States that have made the change have in general felt that it was worth it and that the change supported their system-level goals, including by creating more coherent policy development and having a system-level leader
  - There are challenges as well, because coordination is still required as not everything would move to the new agency. Interagency connections are still necessary. There is no guarantee that the unified entity will be well run.
- Should the state choose to change, other states suggested that in a transition Rhode Island would need:
  - Political leaders and external champions who will support the agency during transition and keep progress on track
  - A well designed structure to ensure the agency's accountability structure
  - Strong administrative leadership trusted by the Governor and staff to support the transition
  - A transition window with clear action plans and responsibilities
  - Strong interagency collaboration after a unification
  - Clear, consistent, and frequent communication during the transition period
  - Local implementation that can support the state's vision
- State government serves these critical functions. As Rhode Island evaluates which governance model is most likely to help it succeed, it should consider:
  - Collaboration
  - Money management
  - Setting standards for service quality
  - Supporting professionals
  - Engaging and supporting families and stakeholders
  - Communications and public relations
- Current model: Coordination
  - The landscape analysis indicated the following takeaways regarding core functions:
    - **Collaboration:** Stakeholders generally praised the ability of state government to collaborate with stakeholders – and also believe that collaboration within state government has improved in recent years.
    - **Money management:** Stakeholders do not believe that the current system of money management is optimizing quality experiences for children and families in an equitable manner.
    - **Setting standards for service quality:** There is a sense that quality rating in the state has improved over the years, but that there are still challenges and disconnects.
    - **Supporting professionals:** Like many states, Rhode Island is struggling to support its early childhood workforce. While many of the problems on this front go beyond what administrative agencies can control, we did hear that fragmentation in the system has hampered the state's efforts to best support its professionals.
    - **Engaging and supporting families and stakeholders:** We heard some stories of success in engaging and supporting families and stakeholders – but here, as in

- other areas, those efforts were siloed across agencies, not part of a coherent statewide approach.
- **Communications and public relations:** None of the individual state agencies is well set up to communicate broadly about the benefits of the early childhood system as a whole.
  - **Integrating early childhood data:** Having services hosted by different agencies requires interagency data use agreements to provide a holistic view of the system.
- Moving to a unification model:
    - Rhode Island choosing to consolidate or create a new governance model could have the following impact on core functions:
      - **Collaboration:** Certain problems cannot be solved in the current structure. A governance change would take certain issues that currently require interagency collaboration and turn them into issues a single agency can address.
      - **Money management:** Unification can make it easier for the state to budget for early childhood holistically and to think about interaction among program funding streams.
      - **Setting standards for service quality:** Unification improves the likelihood that Rhode Island will be able to implement a more comprehensive approach in quality evaluation and improvement work.
      - **Supporting professionals:** The state can more comprehensively support workforce initiatives through unification. This work could be driven by an overarching set of expectations, rather than the regulations governing specific funding streams.
      - **Engaging and supporting families and stakeholders:** Through a change in governance, the state could build upon its good work in engaging families and stakeholders through a more coherent approach.
      - **Communications and public relations:** The state could have the opportunity to engage with the public and families on early childhood issues in a holistic way. It currently does not have a unified communications and public relations approach.
      - **Integrating early childhood data:** Creating a unified agency would make it incrementally easier to integrate data from core early childhood programs.
  - As Rhode Island considers embarking on a governance transition, the state will need to discuss the following challenges that would be forthcoming:
    - Deciding what to include in a unification
    - The process of transition
    - The costs of transition (including state and philanthropic costs)
    - The relationship between early childhood and K-12
  - Cross-cutting considerations:
    - **State-Community Connections:** Regardless of the state's governance model, the state will need to consider its partnership with community leaders and providers.
    - **Interagency Connections:** There will be a need for interagency connectivity no matter what governance approach the state chooses. One way or another, the state will have to strategize how to address issues that fall at the junction points among multiple agencies.

## Discussion of Interim Draft:

- Maryann Finnamore shared that she sees significant benefits to unification. There was great feedback from the Early Learning Council meeting that should be considered, including cautionary tales and what to include or not include. It takes time to make change and while we can be resistant to change, something should happen.
- Leanne said that there are bright spots and then things may move backwards, such as the Starting Right 1998 bill. Having a top leader who can work systemwide would help us tackle this problem and help us address issues across the sector.
- Maryann noted that having a person who really gets the work we do would be very helpful, so we are not pitting providers against each other.
- Ana shared that, based on what we have discussed, we were very broad in what programs are in this process but then we see many states have a more narrow list. Would we think about a more narrow start, or a more inclusive list?
- Lisa Odom-Villella noted that we have not discussed specifically what programs would be part of any change. What do we want to include, if that was the case? There are many people doing hard work around the table but they may not be the same folks who would be in a potential office.
- Elliot noted that there is a complex relationship between system change and existing personnel. Some states focus on ensuring retention of existing staff, and some do not. Many states have tried to provide continuity. Operational knowledge is a premium in these efforts.
- Lisa asked about what problems we are trying to solve and perhaps an existing Coordination model can be improved to address those.
- Ana noted that the Committee should consider what would be included in a potential unification.
- Leanne noted that child care, pre-k, and the Head Start programs are typically where people start and what RI could consider. Leanne discussed the history of developing pre-k and putting it into RIDE.
- Nasha noted that a question that may be helpful is identifying what programs coming closer together would be best for families. Colorado started with child care and pre-k, as they wanted to start with those core programs before bringing more into the new agency.
- Ana noted that one of her fears in the process is developing a clear recommendation that can be implemented and truly address the problems.
- Nicole noted that we need to identify the problem that we are addressing. What is the problem we are trying to solve by moving child care and pre-k together, since we already coordinate so closely together. If there are things we can work together on now to address those problems, we want to hear and want to do that.
- Lisa N noted that a problem could be that there is too much governance over the program leaders and that more could be accomplished with program level leaders making decisions collaboratively without the layers of governance. Decisions that are agency-specific only do not need to come to collaborative tables.
- Elliot noted that that relies heavily on the personalities involved. There is a world in which the way to sustain that is to have those program level leaders report to the same person.
- Nicole noted that when she thinks of all that has been accomplished over the last few years through coordination, it is hard to think about changing course. We are moving in the right direction right now, let's not reverse course.
- Elliot noted that it may not be considered a reversal of course but rather a continuation of moving in a concerted direction.
- Leanne noted that there is fear of losing people like Nicole and Lisa who the field has been supported by. However, over the longer term, we cannot know who will be in these positions.

The people are amazing right now but that could change. A new department that is fresh would be able to build a new culture.

- Elliot noted that there is agreement on the current state. This exchange has clarified that the advocacy for continuing the current state emerges from a place of believing that we can solve the problems within the current model. The states that have gone in a unification have made the decision that the system is a barrier to making even further progress.
- Ana noted that we need to take the people out of it. If it is working because of the two of you, then it's based on you and not the system.
- Ron noted that a new structure may not guarantee the same level of collaboration that is currently happening, especially across governor transitions.
- Lori Wagner noted that we are in the best place we have ever been in and the people we have now are committed. We have relied on them and we do not want to see that interrupted.
- Ana noted that many of these comments have discussed the last four years which speaks to the people who have been there, but not the system.
- Kim noted that the consolidation of child care licensing also moved four years ago and we should give time for things to continue to grow that we have been working on. The structural change happened then and have been reaping benefits.

#### **Vote on Interim Comprehensive Draft**

- Ana asked for a motion to vote on submitting the interim comprehensive draft to the General Assembly and Governor
  - First: Leanne Barrett
  - Second: Lisa Odom-Villella
  - All voted in favor and none were opposed
- The Interim Comprehensive Draft was adopted. The adopted version can be found here: <http://kids.ri.gov/cabinet/documents/wg-meeting-materials/Early%20Childhood%20Governance%20Systems%20Analysis%20Comprehensive%20Interim%20Draft%20Report%20September%202023.pdf>

#### **Next Steps**

- Public engagement and feedback on the interim draft to develop the recommendations
- Next meeting to focus on discussing draft recommendations

#### **Public Comment**

- No public comment

#### **Adjournment**

- Motion to adjourn
  - First: Lisa Odom-Villella
  - Second: Kristine Campagna
  - All voted in favor
- The meeting adjourned at 12:31PM EST