

Rhode Island Early Childhood Governance: Overview of Current Status

July 2023

Rhode Island's state early childhood system is populated by many professionals who are skilled, dedicated, and passionate about their work, using the resources available to them to improve outcomes for young children in their respective programs. At the same time, there is broad agreement that the state largely does not have a comprehensive understanding of what experiences children ages 0-5 and their families are having – and that if it did, it would find that those experiences could be improved substantially through better state support. The tension between these two truths sits at the heart of this Governance and Systems Analysis, which is designed to review and offer pathways to strengthening Rhode Island's oversight and coordination of its early childhood system.

This interim, draft report was produced pursuant to Rhode Island's Early Childhood Governance and Systems Analysis (website [here](#)). This report provides an overview of the current early childhood governance landscape, and is being circulated to solicit feedback from any and all interested parties. If you believe it contains any inaccuracies or essential omissions, please contact Elliot Regenstein at elliott.regenstein@flpadvisors.com.

This report includes a short overview of the Governance and Systems Analysis process, and an overview of Rhode Island's current early childhood governance landscape. After feedback on the draft has been collected, this report will be used to inform recommendations on next steps for the state's overall approach to governance. Those recommendations will include a discussion of different models of early childhood governance, and identify the pros and cons of each approach; those pros and cons will be grounded in the landscape analysis.

Executive Summary

There is a relatively strong consensus about the current state of early childhood governance, including both strengths and challenges:

- There is no overarching vision for early childhood that all of the agencies are working together to execute;
- The current system leverages the expertise of each participating agency but demands substantial collaboration;
- The staff whose primary focus is early childhood work well together and communicate effectively;
- Those early childhood staff are not consistently empowered to be decision-makers about the key functions of the system, and the different hierarchical structures of participating agencies can make it difficult to problem solve and take action;
- The senior leadership of state agencies is not deeply engaged in the work of early childhood, but instead is focused on other priorities; and
- There is substantial concern – particularly within state government -- that any change to early childhood governance will prove more disruptive than beneficial.

The current system is built on the efforts of a hard-working, dedicated core of state government employees who have not been put in a position to provide the leadership that the system may ultimately need. The executive branch has an opportunity to think more holistically about its overall

capacity, its legislative strategy, how it engages with contractors, and how it partners with community-level leaders. While the current system has leveraged expertise across agencies and collaboration, the state’s current approach to oversight also has led to disconnects and overlaps in state policy.

In discussing those disconnects and overlaps, we are focused particularly on the policy areas identified in the charge of the systems analysis – and the priorities identified by the Early Learning Council. Those policy areas include:

Systems Analysis Charge	Early Learning Council Priorities
	Workforce Development
	Data systems integration
Professional development and technical assistance	Improving screening and inclusion for children with special needs
Quality evaluation and improvement	Integrating the mixed delivery system
	Supporting home-based providers
	Engagement

In addition to lacking coherence at the state level, Rhode Island also does not have significant local infrastructure to support the implementation of early childhood services. The state’s small size means that providers often end up dealing directly with state government, in a manner that might be unusual in larger states. This engagement has significant advantages, but there may be ways to preserve that close relationship while still strengthening local capacity.

The lack of coherence at the state level – and a lack of local infrastructure designed to provide organization and coherence at the community level – represents a challenge for providers and families, who end up having to navigate a fragmented system. The state has a strong culture of active interaction between state government and providers; this process represents an opportunity to think about how to leverage the benefits of those relationships.

Full Report

I. An Overview of the Governance and Systems Analysis Process

A. The Scope of the Governance and Systems Analysis

As established in Article 10 of the [enacted FY 2024 budget](#), a Working Group on Early Childhood Governance was convened in Fall 2022 to conduct an Early Childhood System Governance Analysis (“System Analysis”). The Working Group’s [mission statement](#) explains that its goal is to examine systems, structures, and authorities that govern and administer early childhood programs (as defined in the Scope). The Working Group will use this information to make recommendations that advance Rhode Island’s vision for children to enter kindergarten ready to succeed educationally, social-emotionally, and developmentally -- putting them on a path to read proficiently by third grade and setting them up for successful completion of postsecondary education.

The Working Group will conduct a comprehensive review of the current conditions and identify gaps and opportunities for improvement to best achieve the goals set forth in the Early Childhood Care and Education Strategic Plan and the Governor’s 2030 Plan (discussed further below). The Working Group

will develop a report that includes recommendations regarding the governance of early childhood programs in the state. The recommendations will address, but need not be limited to:

- The coordination and administration of early childhood programs and services;
- The governance and organizational structure of early childhood programs and services, including whether, and under what circumstances, the state should consider unifying early childhood programs under one state agency;
- The fiscal structure of proposed recommendations; and
- The implementation of early childhood data systems, for strategic planning, program implementation and program evaluation.

Rhode Island has outlined ambitious goals for its early childhood system through its [Early Childhood Care and Education Strategic Plan](#). That plan's core objectives include the following:

- Rhode Island's early childhood programs meet high-quality standards for care and education as defined by our Quality Rating and Improvement System;
- Children and families can equitably access and participate in the early childhood care, services, and supports that will help them reach their potential and enter school healthy and ready to succeed;
- All four-year-olds in Rhode Island have access to high-quality Pre-K, inclusive of parental choice and student needs. (Note: legislation passed in 2022 requires the state to develop a plan to expand Pre-K to 5,000 seats by 2028);
- Secure the quality and delivery of Early Childhood Care and Education ("ECCE") through increased and sustainable funding and operational improvements; and
- Expand the depth and quality of family and child-level data accessible to and used by agencies, programs, and partners to drive decisions.

The state's broader "2030 Plan" ([Rhode Island 2030: Charting a Course for the Future of the Ocean State](#)) identifies two longer-term early childhood goals:

- Work towards ensuring all children, starting in infancy, have access to high-quality affordable childcare in which no family in the state must spend more than 7% of income to access high-quality childcare (the federal standard of child care affordability); and
- Implement universal, high-quality Pre-K for children ages 3 and 4 through a mixed delivery system.

The Working Group overseeing the Systems Analysis includes (as of 7/12/23):

- Ana Novais, Assistant Secretary, Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) – Chairperson
- Leanne Barrett, Senior Policy Analyst for Early Childhood, RI KIDS COUNT
- Kim Brito, Director, Department of Human Services (DHS)
- Kristine Campagna, Associate Director, Division of Community, Health and Equity, RI Department of Health (RIDOH)
- Brian Daniels, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, Department of Administration (DOA)
- Shannon Gilkey, Commissioner, Office of Postsecondary Commissioner (OPC)

- Lisa Odom-Villella, Deputy Commissioner, RI Department of Education (RIDE)

The Working Group is staffed by Kayla Rosen from the Governor’s Office.

As adopted in the mission statement and scope of the Working Group, the Systems Analysis is intended to address the following early childhood programs:

- Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS)
 - Early Intervention (IDEA Part C)
 - KidsConnect
- Department of Human Services (DHS)
 - Child Care Licensing
 - Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)
 - Child Care Quality Initiatives
 - Head Start Collaboration Office
- Department of Education (RIDE)
 - RI Pre-K
 - Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Program Approval Standards
 - Early Childhood Special Education (IDEA Part B 619)
- Department of Health (RIDOH)
 - Family Visiting Programs (long- and short-term family visiting)

The development of the early childhood system in Rhode Island has followed patterns that are very similar to those in other states, and each program is placed in an agency that represents a logical home.

- States typically place the oversight of child care in a human services agency with experience in managing the kind of fund distribution demanded by the federal Child Care and Development Fund. In Rhode Island DHS oversees both CCAP and licensing, functions that have been bifurcated in some other states; Rhode Island consolidated these functions in 2019.
- In Rhode Island as elsewhere, the growth of state pre-k has been motivated by a desire to improve educational outcomes; accordingly, state pre-k has been housed at RIDE. Federal law also requires state education agencies to play an oversight role of special education funds for 3- and 4-year-olds.
- Health outcomes are one critical focus of home visiting programs, which makes RIDOH a natural home for those programs.
- The KidsConnect behavioral health program sits at the EOHHS, along with Part C special education services (which also frequently have a health focus).

B. The Process for the Systems Analysis

Following the Working Group’s adoption of a mission and scope for the work, the state issued a Request for Proposals for a contractor to assist with the Systems Analysis process, and ended up hiring a team led by Foresight Law + Policy and Watershed Advisors (the authors of this report). Their work began in May 2023 with a presentation to the Working Group (available [here](#)), which is charged with overseeing the Systems Analysis process.

The team provided an overview of the timeline for the report, which included the following phases:

- Information gathering: An information-gathering phase in which the team would hear from a wide range of Rhode Islanders engaged in the work of the early childhood system. The team hosted meetings, collected survey data, and conducted interviews; overall, the team talked to more than 70 people. Some of those people were consulted multiple times, and some people were involved in both individual interviews and group conversations. This report summarizes the key points from those conversations, as distilled by the Foresight/Watershed team.
 - This report is not meant to be strictly a summary of those conversations, and so the Foresight/Watershed team used its judgment as to which comments to include and which to omit.
 - The Foresight/Watershed team promised the people it spoke to that their names would not be attached to specific ideas in this report, which is why all comments in this report are anonymous.
 - A list of the stakeholders who participated in the process is included as Appendix A.
- Soliciting initial feedback: In late July and early August, the team will be soliciting feedback on this draft summary. The goal will be to build consensus within the Rhode Island early childhood community about the current conditions affecting providers and families.
- Making recommendations: By late September, the team will share some recommendations for potential next steps. Those recommendations will be based on Rhode Island's current goals and conditions, and national best practices (which the team will study in greater depth).
- Engaging the community on proposed recommendations: The team is hoping to spend October and November engaging with the Rhode Island early childhood community to hear reactions to the proposed recommendations; that feedback would then be incorporated into a final report to be issued in December.

The Foresight/Watershed team has sought to emphasize that its goal is to help the state have an informed conversation about -- and potentially to reach consensus on -- an approach to governance that will help it achieve its early childhood goals. Every possible option – including maintaining the status quo – comes with some significant costs; every possible option also has potential benefits, although those benefits may feel speculative. The team will maintain a focus on whether or not the state has built adequate capacity to serve its early childhood system, and will also address different possibilities for configuring that capacity. Those two issues are of course interrelated, and those connections will be explored more fully in future analyses to be conducted by the Foresight/Watershed team.

As the statute requires, the System Analysis will include a fiscal analysis that addresses the costs of any potential governance change. That work will be led by Afton Partners as part of the Foresight/Watershed team.

As directed by the Working Group, the Foresight/Watershed team seeks to manage an open and transparent process, with contributions from a broad cross-section of the Rhode Island early childhood system. Any comments or questions can be directed to Elliot Regenstein at elliott.regenstein@flpadvisors.com or Nasha Patel at nasha.patel@watershed-advisors.com.

II. An Overview of the Current Governance Landscape

Conversations with Rhode Island surfaced a relatively strong consensus about the states' current oversight of the early childhood system. While the nuances of these elements may vary from place to place, these views are widely held:

<p>There is no overarching state vision for early childhood services that guides the day-to-day work of all agencies involved in administering early childhood, ensuring alignment across the administration of separate functions in distinct agencies. While the state has articulated some goals for its early childhood system, those goals do not appear to be driving activity in a meaningful way. People described the agencies as collaborating effectively on specific issues and projects, rather than on a broader agenda into which those issues and projects were thoughtfully and strategically nested. There is also no one defining, communicating, or measuring what success would look like if the various state agencies were effectively serving young children and their families.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having various state agencies responsible for individual components of the early childhood system allows for specific agency expertise to be leveraged in administering that component. Early childhood programs are intimately connected with the programming serving other age groups, including the families of young children. The current system draws upon the core competencies of each agency. • Within the agencies overseeing early childhood services, the staff responsible for the day-to-day oversight of early childhood have strong relationships and collaboration, and there is good communication among them in both formal and informal settings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having multiple state agencies responsible for individual components of the early childhood system demands a high level of collaboration. • The staff responsible for early childhood are not empowered to be experts or decision-makers even within these collaborative conversations, and the differing hierarchical structures of the separate agencies present complications for moving forward and problem solving even when there is agreement at this level. This results in little state government accountability to solve challenges that are widely recognized to be facing children, families, and providers. • None of the agencies overseeing early childhood services have senior leaders who have made advocacy for improved early childhood services a central focus of their work.¹ Senior leaders in each agency with some responsibility for early childhood generally recognize and can speak to the importance of early childhood, but early childhood policy is not central to their understanding of their role and responsibilities. Given the breadth of demands on their time and range of programs within their agencies, this is entirely understandable.
<p>Rhode Island's small size allows for a depth of engagement between state government and providers that has built strong relationships and offers numerous advantages for the field.</p>	<p>The lack of local infrastructure for collaboration means that providers are not insulated from the fragmentation at the state level.</p>
<p>There is concern – particularly among state government officials -- that any change to early childhood governance will represent a lot of effort for very little operational payoff.</p>	

¹ "Senior leaders" are defined here as agency heads, and the staff within one or two levels of the agency heads on the organization chart whose responsibilities include early childhood and other policy areas.

Rhode Island's state government faces two distinct but interrelated problems: the delivery of early childhood services is dispersed among multiple agencies, and within each of those agencies the senior-most administrator whose full-time job is early childhood may be several rungs down the org chart from the agency head. Accordingly, there is no single empowered senior leader within state government who has both (a) administrative responsibility for core early childhood programs, including at a minimum pre-k and child care; and (b) is devoted full time to early childhood issues. There are a host of reasons states have chosen to create such roles, which will be explored further later in this Systems Analysis process. For now, the important thing is that Rhode Island's early childhood system takes on all the characteristics of a de-centralized and leaderless system: there are important and valuable pockets of collaboration, but there is very little resembling a systemic and cohesive approach to serving young children and their families.

In saying that, it is important to emphasize that none of this necessarily reflects poorly on any of the people currently in leadership roles within state government. The senior officials at EOHHS, DHS, RIDE, and RIDOH all have a range of responsibilities, with early childhood just one of many competing priorities. They rely on the early childhood officials on their teams to manage the day-to-day functions of early childhood programs and services for which they are responsible, but the early childhood officials in those agencies are not at a management level that would typically be empowered to set policy in the manner that political appointees do – nor would typically be empowered to engage actively with the legislature. No individuals are shirking a responsibility they have been given; as state government is currently set up, there simply is nobody whose job it is to perform certain core functions of the system.

In the course of our conversations we regularly heard praise for the work of numerous state government officials, and examples of them going above and beyond to foster collaboration. Our own impression is that there are many smart, dedicated, and collaborative people in Rhode Island state government, faithfully executing the roles that they have been assigned. It could be natural for those officials to take personally the concerns raised in this report – or, indeed, the very existence of this process. But our purpose here is not to demean in any way the work of individual officials in the early childhood system; instead, it is to give an overview of how that overall system does and does not function, to inform future conversations about what that system might be capable of achieving for Rhode Island children and families.

Indeed, if there is to be a change in governance the state should be very clear on the purpose and what it hopes to achieve. Multiple sources emphasized that the most important outcome of this work should be to make it easier for families to access the services they need. Families with young children indicated that the state has a long way to go in this regard, and told stories of how hard it can be to find and afford the services they need.

The remainder of this section looks first at some key elements of the state's administration of the early childhood system, and then at some key policy areas highlighted by the legislation authorizing the Systems Analysis.

Key Elements of the State's Administration

Below are more detailed analyses of five key areas of the state's oversight of early childhood: gubernatorial leadership, legislative connections, agency capacity, interagency collaborations, and local collaborations.

1. Gubernatorial Leadership

Governor McKee has empowered his team to develop and execute a cross-agency agenda in early childhood. This has included convening the Children’s Cabinet and an early childhood governance team. With the support of resources from the Preschool Development Grant, the Governor’s office is currently playing a constructive role in the state’s early childhood system.

For more than 10 years momentum in the Rhode Island early childhood policy community has been fueled by a combination of federal grants, gubernatorial leadership, or both. With the current Preschool Development Grant set to expire in the next year, the people we talked to were hoping that Governor McKee will be the leader the system needs to take it to the next level (whatever that entails).

Many people we talked to noted that the significant changes in personnel between the administrations of Governor Raimondo and Governor McKee created an ongoing transitional period during which it was hard to build a coherent approach. While it was certainly understandable that a change in governors would create a period of flux, the unusual nature of this transition – with Governor Raimondo leaving in the middle of her term – likely exacerbated the issue. In any event, these challenges speak to the need for a system strong enough in its design to weather the inevitable changes in senior personnel.

2. Legislative Connections

One symptom of the lack of engagement from senior agency leaders is a lack of coherence in the executive branch’s work with the legislature on early childhood. Within the current system, interactions between the legislative and executive branch on the subject of early childhood can be somewhat scattershot. Our conversations suggested that while there is some effort to provide a holistic view of early childhood policy and based on a particular program rather than advancing a comprehensive vision. budgeting to the legislature, that there is still inconsistency in how that engagement takes place – with each agency having its own legislative strategy for the services it oversees.

The state’s independent advocacy coalition, [Right from the Start](#), develops a comprehensive agenda that is meant to be shared across its members. In some of our conversations, people indicated that the alignment may be stronger on paper than in reality, and that the coalition has not focused on business leaders or the grass roots families who might be most effective in influencing legislators, although we also heard about emerging efforts on that front. Our engagement with families and providers indicated that there may be more interest and urgency to solve the challenges of the system than the legislature may currently be hearing. We also did hear praise for the advocacy coalition, with some people noting that advocates had been critical to the state’s advancements in early childhood policy.

3. Agency Capacity

One important form of agency capacity is strong executive leadership – but multiple agencies have seen significant turnover in recent years. There has been more consistency at the managerial level, and the early childhood teams within agencies are generally well regarded; that said, those teams are often perceived to be distant from the center of power and focus within their agencies (particularly at RIDE).

Multiple state agencies have had some struggles to hire the people they need, which is not unusual in the current job market. The issues varied from agency to agency, but could include the following:

- A lack of approved full-time positions;

- Work rules that limit the ability to hire based on expertise in early childhood, and may instead prioritize other qualifications for key roles (like seniority in an agency);
- The need for specialized knowledge in a role, with hiring pools not deep enough to meet the need.

Several agency officials noted that their agency would benefit from having more people to fulfill their roles, although officials generally believed their agency's capacity was strong. Several sources indicated a shortage in data and analytic capacity, a topic addressed further below.

The limitations on headcount in state government mean that multiple agencies end up using contracting as a strategy. The state uses vendors to perform multiple system functions, including technical assistance and professional development for providers. There are some advantages to this approach, as some conversations indicated contractors and vendors can act more flexibly than state agencies – allowing them to move faster and save resources. But some agencies also noted struggles to find a sufficient number of qualified contractors to meet their capacity needs.

Using vendors to provide outside capacity still puts pressure on the state to conduct efficient oversight of those vendors, and we heard of some struggles in this area. Contractors overseen by different agencies can end up working in silos, and may need leadership from state employees to work together most effectively. It is also sometimes difficult for providers to figure out which contractor they should be asking for help on a particular issue. Across states, the use of contractors is relatively common for technical assistance and professional development functions – but we heard concerns that the state's current approach to contractor management may not be maximizing effectiveness and efficiency.

4. Interagency Collaboration

The state's most visible formal collaboration structure that addresses early childhood issues is the [Children's Cabinet](#), which includes agency heads and is staffed by the Governor's Office. According to the Cabinet's [website](#):

Pursuant to R.I.G.L. §42-72.5 (1-3), the Children's Cabinet is authorized to engage in interagency agreements and appropriate data-sharing to improve services and outcomes for children and youth, discuss all issues related to children and youth across state agencies, prepare a shared strategic plan, and develop a coordinated children's budget.

In interviews people generally described the Children's Cabinet as a place where agency heads keep each other informed about their work, but not a group that has developed a shared vision and agenda for the early childhood system – or attempted to drive an agenda. Indeed, some people noted that it does not seem to be a venue for interagency problem-solving. The group's charge does not actually require it to develop a shared vision and agenda, drive that agenda, or serve as a venue for problem-solving, but some of the people we talked to hoped that in time it might serve that role. For the moment, though, its primary utility is as a place where agency heads maintain connections and keep each other abreast of important developments.

The Governor's Office also facilitates an early childhood governance team that meets regularly, with participants from multiple agencies. The participants in this group described themselves as working well together, and found this process to be focused and practical. External stakeholders generally agreed

that the relationships among agencies are as strong now as they have ever been. Still, people described the agencies as collaborating effectively on specific issues and projects, rather than on a broader agenda into which those issues and projects were thoughtfully and strategically nested.

In some interviews, people emphasized that within this group there are positive relationships and that their colleagues are committed to working in partnership. Multiple sources said that they believed the success of the collaboration was in meaningful part driven by the personalities involved, and raised concerns that personnel changes could adversely impact the work.

Outside partners generally experience state government as operating in silos, with each agency staying in its lane. In some cases, the siloing can extend to programs within the same agency. This sometimes leaves partners experiencing gaps in services where their needs fall outside any single agency's lane; other times it leaves partners wrestling with what feel like conflicting or uncoordinated mandates. One specific example that was raised multiple times was the issue of child care provider reimbursement for children in the foster care system, as providers reported that there have been ongoing challenges in interagency coordination that have led to late or missed payments.

One ongoing struggle is ensuring that challenges are addressed at the proper managerial level. There is no real process for determining at what level a particular issue should be addressed – and the lack of focus from agency executives means that any issues that would have been addressed at that level may simply go unaddressed. Several people pointed out specific examples of problems that they would have liked to have seen dealt with head-on, but that appear to have festered for some time. They described multiple incidents where the early childhood staff in an agency could not act on an issue without approval from above; outside partners reported times when the agency staff brought an issue back to run up the flagpole, but then never were able to follow up.

In many conversations, sources noted that because the early childhood system does include elements of education, human services, and health, there will be a need for interagency collaboration regardless of the governance structure.

5. Local Collaboration

Many sources discussed the fact that, as a small state, the relationship between state government and community leaders is more interactive in Rhode Island than in other states. Indeed, Rhode Island historically has not placed much emphasis on developing local or regional infrastructure, although there are exceptions (with [Health Equity Zones](#) being one that came up multiple times; the recent RFP for Governor McKee's [Learn365 initiative](#) is another). State government ends up engaging directly with providers – and even individual professionals – in a way that would be incomprehensible in larger states. We heard positive stories about these interactions, which is a credit to the front-line state staff maintaining those relationships.

Interviews indicated a lack of structured local or regional coordination can result in challenges for both providers and for families. Some providers indicated that even though the state is small, there are still significant differences among localities. Some sources indicated the state could benefit from a more regional or local approach for delivering supports. Several families indicated that navigating the statewide early childhood system – and understanding what services were available for their children –

was a distinct challenge. With no local captain or lead agency, they felt they had to go directly to the state for support.

Rhode Island's culture of deep engagement between the state and local leaders is worth preserving, but multiple sources believed that some greater investment in local capacity might well be worthwhile. Multiple sources noted potential inequities among communities in the state, and thought there might be opportunities to engage municipal leaders as partners. They believe that there are many leaders who are actively engaged at the local level, and that some better system for supporting that energy would benefit children and families.

School districts are one key local partner, and one source indicated that certain districts have partnered effectively with child care and Head Start providers to identify children with special needs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). But other people also indicated that the level of understanding or engagement in early childhood services by school districts is limited (a problem [not unique to Rhode Island](#)). Sources indicated that most school districts do not appear to have dedicated early childhood staff, and that often special education personnel are responsible for overseeing early childhood services – even though those personnel may not have expertise in early childhood, and may be largely focused on numerous other pressing responsibilities. There are some senior school officials – like superintendents and principals – who have engaged on early learning issues, but there are also many communities where the school district leadership is largely disconnected from early learning.

Specific Policy Issues

The charge of the systems analysis requires an analysis of four policy areas that underly the various early childhood programs across agencies: workforce development; professional development and technical assistance; quality evaluation and improvement; and data systems. A summary of the current policy landscape for each of those issues is included below.

1. Workforce Development

Rhode Island is struggling to attract and retain early childhood professionals – which is a problem around the country. Low salaries make it an unattractive proposition to join the field, and the higher education pipeline for qualified personnel is producing only a trickle.

State employees across the spectrum of agencies all indicated that the early childhood workforce was something they thought about and were concerned about; however, no one spoke to a state vision and strategy for addressing these concerns. There are a number of initiatives in various capacities committed to tackling concerns around recruitment, retention, training, and credentials – from the T.E.A.C.H. RI program offering scholarships for child care workers, to RIDOH creating a minimum wage for home visitors to reduce turnover, to Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) considering workforce retention when planning for facilities improvements in child care. But with no common vision for workforce development and no alignment among these existing programs, we also heard that there is still minimal impact on the field. Some state employees indicated their concern for a potential duplication of efforts across the system due these siloed programs. People told us that workforce data collected lacks cohesion, with many organizations saying that their data is not being looked at as part of a larger system.

Multiple state government employees indicated that stronger partnerships with the postsecondary and labor worlds are needed.

One source noted that young professionals are often looking for hybrid work that allows them to work from home at least some portion of the week. That is not a possibility in early childhood, where in-person interaction is the core of the work. Thus, the working conditions of early childhood are considered unfavorable to much of the candidate pool; combining that with low pay makes it extremely difficult to recruit.

Multiple people noted that when personnel in child care centers achieve higher levels of credentialing, they are likely to leave for other jobs – and if they are qualified to get jobs in the public schools, the higher pay and stability often draw staff in that direction. Multiple people also talked about the salary discrepancies between public school teachers and community-based child care teachers who both worked in the RIDE Pre-K program. One person indicated concern that Rhode Island had not invested enough in its educational workforce through tuition reimbursements or bonuses.

In a survey conducted through the Systems Analysis website, the single most common issue raised by respondents was the challenge of hiring and retaining staff.

2. Professional Development and Technical Assistance

In Rhode Island professional development in child care and RI Pre-K is provided by the [Center for Early Learning Professionals](#), which has separate contracts with RIDE and DHS. Sources indicated that while the agencies chose to contract with the same agency to support consistency, the fact that they have separate contracts has led to some differences in implementation. These two distinct contracts are not necessarily aligned, which can lead to both duplication and disconnects in implementation. In some instances, for example, a child care site could have a TA specialist for a RIDE RI Pre-K classroom that is completely separate from their TA specialist for all other classrooms. One source indicated professional development offerings that could be beneficial for both pre-K and child care teachers might often be held for just one of those groups, calling for more collaboration and alignment between the two contracts.

Other early childhood programs provide their own distinct PD and TA for their providers, including Part B, Part C, and home visiting. Individual programs have focused goals around professional development and technical assistance that aligns with their funding and processes. There is not a unified or aligned effort across all of these programs tied to a vision of what should be true for professionals working with children in all settings.

One source noted that there do not appear to be comprehensive systems for distributing information about professional development offerings, leaving providers and professionals on their own to find the right opportunities.

To date Rhode Island's higher education system has not been actively involved in professional development. One source indicated that there is little motivation for the higher education agencies to get involved, given the state of the field.

3. Quality Evaluation and Improvement

Like other policy issues, quality evaluation and improvement typically remains siloed by program and funding stream, with focused efforts to evaluate quality and make improvements based on the specific charge, funding, and requirements of the program. One exception is Rhode Island's quality rating system [BrightStars](#) which works across pre-K and child care and received praise from some sources. Multiple sources indicated that it had evolved substantially from its initial design, which many providers found punitive. Sources outside state government credited the DHS staff with turning it into a much more supportive process. That said, multiple sources raised concerns that it is not as well organized or structured as it could be, and that QRIS and RI Pre-K requirements are not adequately aligned. Several sources indicated that the financial incentives through tiered reimbursement for CCAP are not sufficient to help providers reach and maintain the highest levels of quality.

4. Data Systems

Like many states, Rhode Island has been trapped in something of a vicious cycle when it comes to data about its early childhood system, particularly with regard to early education and care. There is a lack of curiosity in the system; top political officials are not regularly asking important questions about how the system is functioning. Accordingly, the state has not built out the infrastructure needed to answer those questions. And when the infrastructure for producing answers is weak, it discourages people from asking questions. In addition, many early childhood services are delivered by private providers being paid directly by families with no state support; children served under those circumstances are generally not included in state data collections.

There is some appetite for data among policymakers, with the [Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook](#) a critical source. But the problems with Rhode Island's data infrastructure are substantial:

- The early education and care system does not have a consistent culture of performance management and data-informed decision-making; there are promising practices emerging, but they have not yet taken hold system-wide. In early childhood the state has not articulated the key outcomes it is trying to achieve, nor developed a dashboard tracking progress toward those outcomes. This limits the state's ability to understand or report on key information, such as the extent to which there is equitable access for children to programs across the early childhood system.
- The state has not invested in significant analytic capacity in early childhood. There are pockets of capacity, but in general what data is produced is not used to solve problems or even tell a story.
 - Each individual agency has its own data initiatives and capacity, and have in different ways been successful. For example, people connected to RIDOH discussed a strong culture of data use in the health fields, RIDE has analytic capacity that it is able to use, and DHS is pushing hard to upgrade its data systems. Each of these efforts is promising on its own, but none of them are part of an intentional overall strategy on data use.
 - Each service has its own data system for collecting data from providers, and many of those data systems are limited in utility – outdated, not user-friendly, and incapable of producing useful reports. Some of those are in the process of being updated.

- In early education and care data systems, the actual information itself may not be all that accurate. This is a relatively common problem nationally in situations where underpaid providers are asked to collect information that is neither useful to them nor being actively used by their oversight agency.
- There are two separate efforts to connect data across different services: an educationally-focused State Longitudinal Data System, and a health-focused Ecosystem. These two systems do not connect with each other.
 - Numerous sources noted some amount of territoriality when it comes to data integration.
 - Rhode Island, like many states, made an effort to integrate early childhood data over a decade ago as part of the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge. As in other states that effort was not ultimately successful, in part because the technology of the time was not adequate to meet the needs of the early childhood system.
 - The State Longitudinal Data System will now be hosted by the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner, which multiple sources saw as an opportunity for a fresh start. The state has discussed modeling its approach on the [Kentucky Center for Statistics](#). The Longitudinal Data System has analytic capacity that likely could be leveraged more aggressively by policy leaders.
 - The Ecosystem has come a long way in establishing a culture of data use, and has adopted many thoughtful practices that could potentially be applied more broadly. One lesson of the Ecosystem is that it can take years to build a successful culture of data use – and the infrastructure to support it – but the existence of the Ecosystem is proof that Rhode Island’s state government is capable of building that culture.

In early education and care there are potential policy benefits to integrated data; integrated data [could allow the state to answer some of the cross-cutting questions it is currently unable to answer](#), which could in turn drive policy change and improved coherence. But in the current environment it is not clear who would be asking those questions, what mechanisms could be established to answer them, or how the answers would be used to improve the experiences of children and families holistically across early childhood programs.. A lot of work remains to be done in socializing the community to the benefits of data integration, and the work that will be needed to successfully change the state’s culture of data use.

Early Learning Council Recommendations

The Early Learning Council -- which is the official advisory committee for this effort, as defined in the legislation -- discussed some priority areas to include in the Systems Analysis. Some of the priorities it talked about overlap with the issues identified in the Systems Analysis scope, and others did not. The Council’s discussions to date have included the following topics:

- **Workforce development.** Multiple council members expressed their concern that providers across the state are struggling to hire and retain the skilled personnel needed to work in a labor-intensive field like early childhood. Early childhood work can be stressful, and the working conditions can be difficult; that, combined with the low pay, creates ongoing challenges for recruitment and retention. Council members noted that early childhood professionals and their employers need more support – including creating a more coherent system in which it is easier for them to operate. The current pipeline of talent is seen as inadequate and in need of strengthening due to an array of factors;

policy and regulatory choices, a lack of funding, and the need for greater collaboration are among the most significant. While wages and benefits will always be a critical factor in this policy area, there are numerous other issues that the state needs to address.

- **Improving screening – and inclusion – for children with special needs.** Screening should better integrate pediatricians and child care providers, who each have unique perspectives that would benefit the process. Screening should include a focus on birth-to-five mental health. The state should also focus on building the capacity for inclusion throughout the mixed delivery system.
- **Integrating the mixed delivery system.** The state could do more to integrate child care with pre-k and Head Start, which should include a focus on infants and toddlers who are not currently in the system.
- **Supporting home-based providers.** The number of home-based providers has been shrinking, and the early childhood ecosystem is making it hard for them to thrive. Families rely on services only made available from home-based providers, yet these providers face unique struggles to meet the various hurdles required of them to operate. Providers want and need intentional and coherent support to succeed, and their success is vital for the success of their communities.
- **Engagement.** It is important for policymakers to routinely engage with outside partners – families, providers, advocates, and more – to shape policy that meets the needs of the field. The Early Learning Council is one venue where that can occur, but need not be the only one. Any governance structure should account for the importance of regular inside-outside connections.
- **Integrating data systems.** The state is working to understand supply and demand in a comprehensive manner, but does not currently have adequate data to do so. The state is unable to answer a number of other important questions because of its lack of data infrastructure, including which children are receiving which services. The State also would benefit from a workforce registry, and has secured funding and tentatively awarded a contract to create one.

These issues were the subject of Council conversation, but have not been officially adopted as priorities of the Council.

Additional Observations

- The hesitancy of state agencies to embrace the possibility of a governance change is to be expected. Elected officials often use governance changes as a method of demonstrating their commitment to early childhood without having to spend significantly more money. And these changes – if executed correctly – have the potential to shift burdens off of providers and families, and on to state government. But the weight of any shift is typically borne by the officials already working in state agencies, who are often faced with the most significant transition and role shift of their careers. Sometimes that transition goes well, but it does not always. The concerns raised by state agency staff are real, and must be considered in the process of deciding on the state’s future path; they should not be an insurmountable hurdle, but they cannot be simply waved away.
 - Changing administrative structures in the Rhode Island context would need to include discussions with all relevant unions, who have an important stake in the structures of state government.
- While the universe of states who have seriously considered a governance change in early childhood is limited, the heart of the conversation almost always centers around pre-k and child care. These programs are intertwined in the mixed delivery ecosystem, and many states have found that having them administered separately is a substantial obstacle to strengthening and aligning each.

- While the specific challenges of Rhode Island’s early childhood system are unique to the state, many of the themes echo those confronted by other states. Historically most states have had a child care program administered by a human services agency and a pre-k program administered by an education agency – a setup that comes with real advantages, but also some limitations.
- Each agency working in early childhood takes seriously its own role in the early childhood system, and has expressed respect for the role played by other agencies within the system. This may be one of the reasons that Rhode Island has not seen a phenomenon common in other states considering a governance change: agencies making an active effort to become the lead agency on early childhood. In roughly 10 states, either the education or human services agency serves as the leader early childhood agency, with oversight of both pre-k and child care (in addition to their many other responsibilities). But to our knowledge neither of those agencies in Rhode Island are currently expending political capital on attempting to be designated the lead early childhood agency, taking over funding and capacity currently held by other agencies.

Appendix A

The table below lists the people with whom the Foresight/Watershed team met in the course of developing this landscape analysis. If there are any errors in the table or any names missing, please let the team know (elliott.regenstein@flpadvisors.com). Some notes on the table:

- The team also met with the Parent/Caregiver Advisory Council, and on June 22 held an open public session. Attendance was not taken at those meetings, so those participants are not listed.
- Some people are listed as “Early Learning Provider meeting.” The team held an open meeting for early learning providers. At that meeting, participants provided their name, but were not asked to specify their role or organization. If participants in that meeting would like their listing changed the team would be happy to include updated information.

Name	Role	Organization
Kayla Arruda	Program Assistant	Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)
Eileen Asselin	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Charlene Baird	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Leanne Barrett	Senior Policy Analyst	RI KIDS COUNT
Blythe Berger	Chief, Perinatal and Early Childhood Health Community Health and Equity	Rhode Island Department of Health
Jody Bernard	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Julie Boutwell	Project Director	Education Development Center
Dana Brandt	Director · Longitudinal Data System	University of Rhode Island
Elizabeth Burke Bryant	Former Executive Director	RI KIDS COUNT
Lauren Bush	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Kristine Campagna	Associate Director, Division of Community, Health and Equity	Department of Health
Rebecca Celio	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Nicole Chiello	Assistant Director – Office of Child Care	Department of Human Services
Countryside Children's Center	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Jeanne Cola	Executive Director	Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)
Erin Cox	Senior Program Officer	Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)
Brian Daniels	Director	Office of Management and Budget
Marlena DeLuca	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Jessy Donaldson	Early Learning Provider meeting	

Name	Role	Organization
Rhonda Farrell	Head Start Association	
Sharon Fitzgerald	CCAP Administrator	Department of Human Services
Alexandra Flores	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Lisa Foehr	Chief of Teaching & Learning at RIDE	RIDE
Marisa Gallagher	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Shannon Gilkey	Commissioner	Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner
Catherine Green	Head Start Collaboration Director	Department of Human Services
Amanda Hall	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Meg Hassan	Preschool Development Grant Manager	Governor's office
Jennifer Haywood	Head Start Association	
Amy Henderson	Programming Services Officer	Department of Human Services
Lisa Hildebrand	Executive Director	Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children
Jessica Johnson	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Lea Kabbas	Family Visiting Provider	
Jennifer Kaufman	Part C Coordinator · Executive Office of Health and Human Services	Health and Human Services
Linda Laliberte	Head Start Association	
Rebecca LeBeau	Director of Data and Analytics - RI EOHHS	OHHS
Hailey L'Heureux		TEACH Scholar
Alexandra Lloyd	Family Visiting Provider	
Beth Lobdell	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Stephanie Lutrario	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Phyllis Lynch	Director, Office of Instruction, Assessment, & Curriculum	Department of Elementary & Secondary Education
Zelma Malave	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Zoe McGrath	Early Learning Education Specialist	Department of Education
Kimberly Merolla-Brito	Director	Department of Human Services
Sarah Nardolillo	Licensing Administrator	Department of Human Services
Diane Nault	Early Learning Provider meeting	

Name	Role	Organization
Acting Secretary Novais	Assistant Secretary	OHHS
Lisa Nugent	RIDE Early Learning Coordinator	RIDE
Lisa Odom-Villella	Deputy Commissioner for Instructional Programs	RIDE - Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Morgan Orr	Project Manager & Data Analyst	Health and Human Services
Stephanie Poole	Programming Services Officer	Department of Human Services
Debra Quinton	Family Visiting Provider	
Deborah Raposa	Early Learning Provider meeting	Sakonnet Early Learning Center
Jen Rathbun	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Donna Razza	Family Visiting Provider	
Kara Rocha	Interdepartmental Project Manager	Department of Human Services
Marti Rosenberg	Director of Policy, Planning, and Research	OHHS
Laura Serafin	Family Visiting Provider	
Mary Beth Slinko	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Jennifer Soucar	Family Visiting Provider	
Theresa Spengler	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Dulari Tahbildar	Director, RI Child Care Training Program	SEIU Education and Support Fund
Joseph Tomchak	BOCA	
Lourdes Urena	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Mary Varr	Head Start Association	
Emma Villa	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Amy Vogel	Early Learning Provider meeting	Dr. Day Care/Kids Klub
Kristy Whitcomb	Director for the Center for Early Learning Professionals	Education Development Center
Elizabeth Winangun	Director of Policy	Governor's office
Deborah Zakowski	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Denise Zanzarov	Family Visiting Provider	
Lifen Zhong	Early Learning Provider meeting	