

## **Rhode Island Early Childhood Governance: Introduction and Background on Proposed Recommendations**

The Rhode Island Early Childhood Working Group on Early Childhood Governance has produced a [Comprehensive Interim Draft Report](#) that (a) discusses the current landscape of early childhood services in Rhode Island, and (b) examines the national landscape of early childhood governance, with particular reference to the issues Rhode Island faces. This Comprehensive Interim Draft report did not include a recommendations section when published in September 2023, and instead posed questions for consideration.

Since publication of the draft report, the Foresight Law + Policy and Watershed Advisors consulting team has worked to gather input from Working Group members, Early Learning Council members, and members of the general public via a survey form and public input sessions to inform drafting recommendations. This draft set of recommendations is based on those conversations.

### **Rhode Island Early Childhood Governance: Potential Recommendations Framework**

Rhode Island's current governance structure for early childhood is "Coordination," meaning that different services are housed in different agencies – thereby requiring Coordination among those agencies. Stakeholders across the system recognize the efforts of state agencies to work together more effectively in recent years, and the Working Group seeks to continue that progress. Accordingly, the Working Group recommends that the state build upon its strengths by remaining in the Coordination model.

This Systems Analysis has surfaced opportunities to accelerate the state's progress and be more responsive to providers and families. This conclusion itemizes some of the areas in which the state will apply its focus in the years ahead, to ensure that it is meeting the needs of Rhode Island families. The Working Group recommends taking the following actions to strengthen Rhode Island's oversight of its early childhood system:

#### *1. Establishing stronger role clarity and using data to inform action*

- The lead agencies have been working toward establishing improved data infrastructure that breaks down current silos and allows the state to provide more holistic data about the early childhood system. The state's goal is to build a core of useful data that can inform policy and practice on an ongoing basis. The agencies will continue working to build the state's ability to bring together data on the providers, personnel, and children engaged in each of the programs identified in the scope of the Systems Analysis (and Head Start). This effort will leverage the ongoing efforts of the RI Longitudinal Data System (RILDS), the Ecosystem, and the RI Start Early System (RISES). This process will also identify ongoing resources for centralized analytic capacity to ensure that the early childhood data produced is accessible and useful.
- Over the course of the System Analysis the Working Group has heard that there is a need for more role clarity in state government, as well as clarity on when and how the agencies collaborate on decisions that impact the sector as a whole. In addition, the Working Group has heard that partners seek stronger guidance on how to address issues that arise in the course of their work. The agencies will work with each other – and the provider community – to publish process guidance for problem-solving in the system.

- One key next step is for the state’s early childhood agencies to engage directly with providers and families to develop a set of metrics for success. Those metrics will be developed in the first half of 2024, and will serve as an ongoing gauge of the state’s progress toward improvement. A core goal of state early childhood governance is to make it easier for service providers and families to thrive, and a performance dashboard will allow all stakeholders to track progress toward that goal.

## *2. Improving money management*

- The System Analysis has generated a holistic budget analysis of the early childhood system – one that has not previously been a part of the state’s budgeting analysis. The Working Group recommends establishing an annual unified budget submission and request that includes all of the programs identified in the scope of the Systems Analysis, allowing the Governor, General Assembly, and the public to review and consider funding utilization and proposed initiatives across the system as a whole. The agencies will work together to publish an annual report on system spending and performance outcomes that allows stakeholders to understand the funding and impact of the early childhood system as a whole.

## *3. Setting standards for – and supporting improvement in – service quality and 4. Supporting professionals*

- Stakeholders expressed concern that they are subjected to different definitions of quality that are at times in tension. The agencies will work together to review and update the state’s quality standards across programs – and corollary requirements for professionals’ qualifications -- to ensure ongoing alignment with best practices and consistency across the mixed-delivery system.
- The agencies will also engage on an ongoing basis to ensure that supports for professionals are being delivered effectively. The agencies will conduct an annual survey of professionals across all programs in the scope of the Systems Analysis and publish the results, including recommendations for policy or implementation changes that could improve the experience of early childhood professionals.

## *5. Engaging and supporting families and stakeholders*

- Families consistently report that it is a challenge for them to find the services they need. Moreover, each available service is subject to its own enrollment and eligibility procedures. To improve customer service for families, the state will establish and operationalize a “no wrong door” approach to families enrolling in any of the services within the scope of the Systems Analysis, which will ensure that families have access to the services they need and are eligible for.
- To strengthen the state’s continued Coordinated system, there is an opportunity to grow local leadership to facilitate a unified point of entry to state programs, opening a ‘front door’ to the system from the family and provider perspective. Accordingly, the state will conduct a pilot grant program to support community-level collaboration that can improve support for providers and families by coordinating enrollment in services, programs, and technical assistance.
  - The state will establish criteria for successful applicants, including expected deliverables and participants.
  - At the conclusion of the pilot program, the state will review whether the lessons of the pilot justify a proposal for scaled-up implementation of supports for local coordination.

*6. Communications and public relations*

- Stakeholders reported that while each individual agency with oversight of early childhood programs provides some amount of public-facing communication about the importance of early childhood and available services, families may find the outreach confusing when it is not adequately coordinated. To address this issue the state will plan and implement a strategy for cross-agency family engagement and communications that will create a unified voice of state government on early childhood issues.

*7. Successfully Executing Coordination*

- In the last few years the Governor’s Office has been able to provide ongoing capacity to support agency-level coordination. Agency program staff are responsible primarily for successfully executing their funded services; having centralized capacity to support coordination and interagency project management facilitates the process of policy development -- and helps the state to stay on track toward its policy goals. In order to achieve the ambitious goals outlined here, the state will continue to support staff whose primary focus is on the entirety of the early childhood system, and how its many essential pieces fit together.

For each of these areas the state will develop specific timelines for action, with responsibilities clearly delineated.