

RHODE ISLAND

EARLY CHILDHOOD GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS ANALYSIS: FINAL REPORT



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young children experience lifelong health, academic, and economic benefits when they have strong early education and development experiences. Rhode Island's state government administers many early childhood services that seek to facilitate these experiences and advance equity for families; for years, the state has worked to expand and improve those services for young children. These services -- including core early education and care services such as state pre-k, subsidized child care, and family visiting -- are currently administered by multiple state agencies. As Rhode Island seeks to build a stronger early childhood system, a Working Group on Early Childhood Governance has been charged with making recommendations on how the governance and administration of these programs can be improved to drive better outcomes for children. The state commissioned this System Analysis, which is meant to inform the state's plans for the oversight of its early childhood system.

The Current State of Governance of Early Childhood Programs

The current early childhood system has many strengths to build on. While there are multiple agencies that administer early childhood services, those agencies work together well; the staff responsible for early childhood have built strong relationships, and have collaborative structures that facilitate interagency work. State government works directly with early childhood service providers, and has built good relationships in the early childhood community.

But there is room for growth. The sentiment outside of state government is that the fragmentation among agencies has constrained the state's ability to support children and families. In particular, having pre-k and child care administered by different agencies creates challenges for the providers who deliver early care and education services – and for the families trying to access those services. Providers are struggling with oversight and support that is not adequately aligned, and families too often have a hard time finding and enrolling in high-quality services.

The Opportunity of Governance

The state's approach to governance matters. First, as state government agencies strive to be good stewards of taxpayer funds, it is critical for Rhode Island to have an efficient early education and care system that maximizes the use of each public dollar toward its end goals. The state of Rhode Island appropriates approximately \$140 million in state and federal funds each year for early childhood services, and the state's management of that investment should be focused on leveraging it effectively. Second, developing and implementing policies that support improved services for children and families is essential to achieving equitable outcomes.

Other states seeking policy coherence and political leadership in early childhood have moved to unify the oversight of early education and care services – either within a larger agency, or as a standalone agency focused on early childhood. Since the turn of the century almost half the states have adopted governance structures that put state pre-k and child care in the same agency, with the goal of improving service delivery and advancing outcomes for children and families.

States that have accomplished a unification generally find that it allows them to execute the core functions of the system more effectively. These functions include engaging with stakeholders, managing finances, setting standards for service quality, supporting professionals, and communicating with the public. Over the long term states have found these benefits to be substantial.

Beyond that, states changing governance have sought to create a more elevated leadership in their early childhood system. That can lead to the state having a more coherent vision for its system, and the means to successfully implement that vision. It can add political muscle to the early childhood community, both within the executive branch and in engaging the legislature. And it can better support staff in developing expertise about the entirety of the early childhood system, rather than just individual programs.

The Challenges of Change

All of those potential benefits might occur if the state unifies its early childhood governance – but there are no guarantees. The process of changing governance requires extensive work. First, the state must have hard conversations about the exact parameters of a potential governance change. Based on the experience of other states, if Rhode Island decides to make a change, it would then need to launch a process that would likely take at least a year to produce a new structure – and then launch a new structure that will remain in something of a transitional state for months (or even years) thereafter. That work would demand a lot of capacity and could be disruptive inside and outside state government; based on the experience of other states, such a process is likely to cost roughly \$1 million in state funds, and also require philanthropic investment.

Cross-Cutting Considerations

Whether Rhode Island changes its approach to state-level governance or not, it should consider a new approach to connecting with communities. There are certain functions in an early childhood system that are best performed at the community level, and more capacity is needed to successfully execute those functions. Community-level structures can help to develop local action plans, analyze data, engage stakeholders, and support aligned professional development; they can also develop systems that make it easier for families to learn about and access services. Many of the decisions relating to these issues may benefit from being made at the local level, by leaders who interact every day with providers and families.

In addition to strengthening the relationship between state government and community-level leaders, Rhode Island should also look at opportunities to elevate its interagency collaboration at the state level. The state's Children's Cabinet brings together agency leaders, and could sharpen its focus on collaborative problem-solving. The Early Learning Council brings together leaders from inside and outside government, and could also ramp up its role in helping to shape policy. Regardless of how authority is configured within state government, these collaborative bodies could have a more defined role and focus to increase their impact.

Recommendations

The Working Group acknowledges the challenges surfaced through this process and believes that strengthening the Coordination model is the best way for the state to move forward toward achieving its goals in early childhood. It acknowledges that there are a range of opinions among stakeholders about the best strategy moving forward, with many non-governmental stakeholders recommending creation of a new agency. Ultimately the Working Group concludes that there are significant strengths to build upon in the Coordination model and that there are specific actions the state can take to address its challenges that are more likely to be effective than creating a new agency at this time, particularly given the disruption that can be caused by the process of transition. Those actions include:

- Strengthening the state's ability to use data in the early childhood system, including through integrating data from different services;
- Creating greater role clarity in state government, with guidance for partners to support improved problem-solving;
- Working with providers and families to define metrics of success for the early childhood system;
- Providing a holistic annual report on system spending, and tracking how the state's spending is impacting performance outcomes;
- Unifying definitions of quality across programs, and provide coordinated support to help providers meet those quality standards;
- Creating a “no wrong door” system that supports families in finding – and enrolling in – the services they need;
- Supporting local leadership and coordination through a pilot grant program;

- Utilizing a unified approach to communications and public relations on early childhood issues; and
- Providing ongoing support and staff capacity for interagency collaboration.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Early Childhood Governance in Rhode Island: The Current Moment

For years, Rhode Island has been working to strengthen its early childhood system – and has made significant progress. There is no question that the system of today is far more robust than the system of 10 years ago. Leadership from inside and outside state government has been essential to making that happen.

But with growth comes growing pains. As Rhode Island has sought to expand and improve its many services for young children and families in an equitable manner, it has at times struggled with the challenges of fitting together the pieces of its puzzle. With a range of services administered by different agencies, it has been difficult to forge a coherent whole out of the many parts of the system. This fragmentation has made the system more challenging to navigate for providers and families, and makes it harder to ensure that the system is achieving its goals for equity.

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.¹ In Rhode Island DHS oversees both CCAP and licensing, functions that were previously bifurcated; 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.² Federal law also requires state education agencies to play an oversight role of special education funds for 3- and 4-year-olds and these services and funding are also housed at RIDE.
- 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).³

In recent years the state’s system-building conversations have increasingly included a strand of discussion about the possibility of a governance change. The Senate has passed legislation that would create a new early childhood agency, and the legislature funded this System Analysis process. Other states – including Rhode Island’s neighbors – have sought to unify authority over key early childhood programs. There has been a desire in the Rhode Island early childhood community to find as much consensus as possible about the right path going forward; whether the path forward is to stay the course or make a major change, having clarity about what the state’s approach will be – and why it has chosen that approach – should have value to the field.

B. Methodology

As established in Article 10 of the enacted FY 2023 budget, a Working Group on Early Childhood Governance was convened in Fall 2022 to conduct the 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 is using this information to make recommendations that advance Rhode Island’s vision for

¹ The federal Administration for Children and Families maintains the [full list of agencies administering Child Care and Development funds](#).

² For the full list of state agencies administering state pre-k programs, see Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Barnett, W. S., Garver, K. A., Hodges, K. S., Weisenfeld, G., Gardiner, B. A., Jost, T. M. (2022). *The State of Preschool 2021: State Preschool Yearbook*. National Institute for Early Education Research, p. 185.

³ The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center maintains [a list of state lead agencies for Part C special education](#). The Center is hosted at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina, and funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

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

For purposes of this System Analysis, “early childhood” is being defined as the birth to five years. While some states use a “birth through eight” definition, that has not appeared to be the operating frame in Rhode Island during this process.

The Working Group is conducting a comprehensive review of the current conditions to 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 was charged with developing 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 required 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 included:

- 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 was staffed by Kayla Rosen from the Governor's Office & Children's Cabinet.

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 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 heard 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. The Landscape Analysis 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.
 - A list of the public meetings held as part of the landscape analysis process is included as Appendix B.

- **Soliciting initial feedback:** In late July and early August, the team solicited feedback on a draft summary. The goal was to build consensus within the Rhode Island early childhood community about the current conditions affecting providers and families.
- **Engaging the community on proposed recommendations:** The team held numerous meetings in October and November to hear from stakeholders, and also offered a survey. The Foresight/Watershed team also participated in sessions hosted by the Early Learning Council to discuss recommendations for the Systems Analysis.

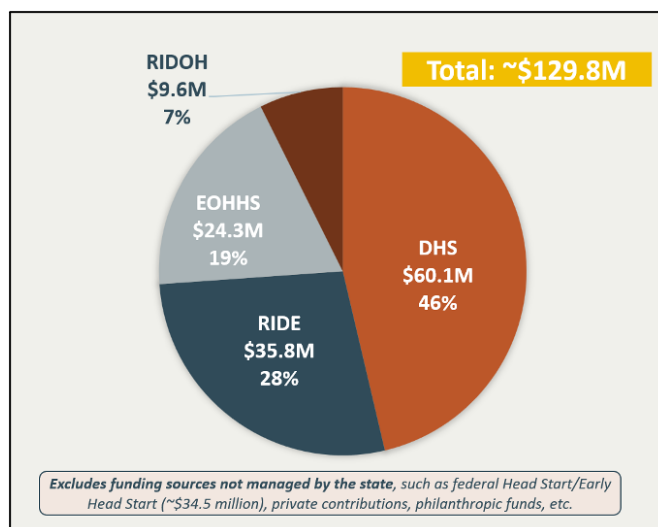
Throughout the process the Foresight/Watershed team emphasized that its goal is to help the state have an informed conversation about -- and potentially to reach consensus on -- an approach to governance that will help it achieve its early childhood goals. Every possible option – including maintaining the current approach – comes with some significant costs; every possible option also has potential benefits, although those benefits may feel speculative. The team tried to maintain a focus on whether or not the state has built adequate capacity to serve its early childhood system, and also to address different possibilities for configuring that capacity.

C. The Scope of Rhode Island’s Early Education and Care System

Based on [U.S. Census estimates](#), in 2022 Rhode Island had approximately 52,500 children under the age of 5. According to the Rhode Island KIDS Count Factbook, the capacity of the early education and care system includes:

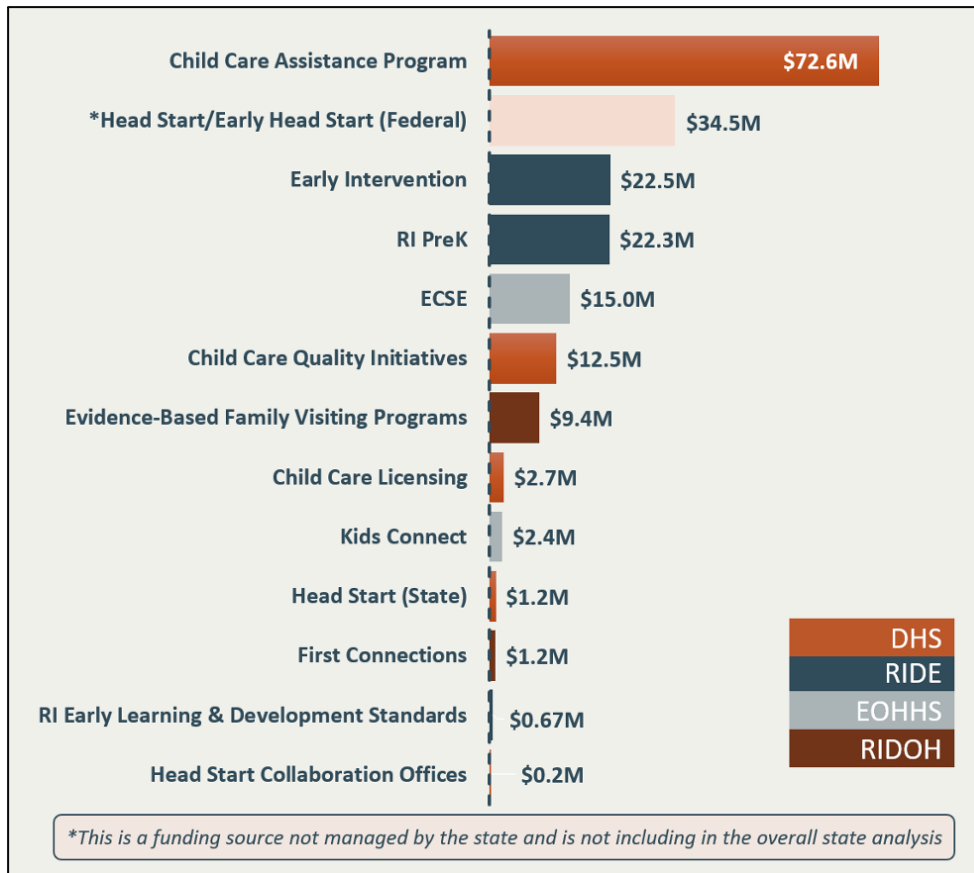
- The Child Care Assistance Program provides subsidies for low-income families with young children who need child care. As of September 2023 there were 6,056 children in Rhode Island receiving child care subsidies.
- Head Start is a federally-funded program that provides comprehensive early education and care services. In 2022 statewide enrollment sat at 1,219. The Early Head Start program provides services to infants, toddlers, and pregnant women; as of October 2022 there were 424 individuals enrolled in Early Head Start.
- In 2023 Rhode Island enrolled 2,364 children in state funded RI Pre-k. The state served 24% of 4-year-old children, and 41% of low income 4-year-old children. The percentages are lower for 3-year-olds: 4% overall, and 9% of low-income children. Rhode Island pre-k is delivered in a mix of settings – including Head Start agencies (40%), child care centers (33%), and public schools (27%).
- The federal Individuals with Disabilities Act governs services to young children with special needs.
 - Programs for children ages 3-5 are managed by RIDE; as of June 2022 there were 2,920 children receiving preschool special education services (8% of all preschool children).
 - Early intervention services for children 0-3 are managed by EOHHS. In Fiscal Year 2022 the state served 3,953 children in Early Intervention.⁴

Excluding one-time federal funding, in Fiscal Year 2023 Rhode Island spent approximately \$130 million in federal and state dollars on its early childhood system (including approximately \$71.4 million in federal money, \$53.5 million in state money, and \$5.8 million in private insurance money). Detailed analyses of Rhode Island’s early childhood spending are included in Appendix C; the analysis conducted to develop these tables was conducted by Afton Partners, using data provided by the Office of Management and Budget and the individual agencies. The total breakdown by agency is as follows:



⁴ All data points in these bullet points are from the [Rhode Island KIDS COUNT 2023 Factbook](#) section on [Education](#). References for the for the first bullet include pages 122-23; for the second bullet, pages 118-19; for the third bullet, pages 128-29; and for the fourth bullet, pages 116-17 and 132-33.

The largest single early childhood expenditure is the child care assistance program:



Appendix C includes additional analyses of Rhode Island’s early childhood spending.

D. Overview of This Report

Part II of this report is a landscape analysis that summarizes the current condition of the Rhode Island early childhood system. Overall it finds that there are many promising initiatives underway, but that early childhood providers find it siloed. While state agencies have worked hard to collaborate, the system’s fragmentation continues to impact policy and operations.

Part III of the report then summarizes the three major early childhood governance models: Coordination, Consolidation, and Creation. It discusses how those models address core functions of the early childhood system, and how Consolidation and Creation differ. Rhode Island uses the Coordination model; Part III shares lessons learned from states that have chosen the Consolidation or Creation model. Those insights from other states include potential benefits of unifying governance, potential challenges, and issues to address if the state decides to make a change.

Part IV of the report applies the national models to the Rhode Island context. It starts by discussing the benefits and challenges of Rhode Island’s current approach to early childhood governance. It then considers potential benefits of changing Rhode Island’s system – and potential challenges, including the cost of a transition. It also touches on how a governance change might impact the relationship between K-12 and early childhood.

Regardless of what model the state chooses, there may be opportunities for Rhode Island to improve its engagement with community-level leaders. Part V of the report discusses some of the possibilities for structuring local decision-making while preserving the close relationship between state government and providers. Additionally, whatever model

the state chooses will require some amount of interagency collaboration; the report looks at the existing structures for collaboration, and how that collaboration might be improved in any governance model.

The report concludes with the recommendations of the Working Group. The Working Group recommends that Rhode Island continue to use the Coordinated model, taking specific actions to address the issues raised by stakeholders throughout the course of this process. The conclusion describes actions the state can take to strengthen the system in the years ahead.

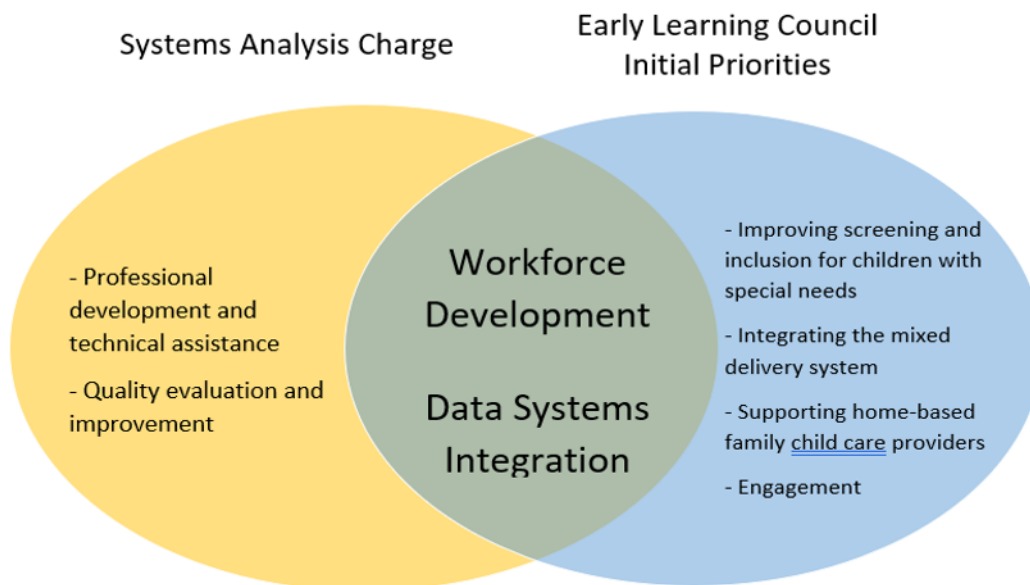
II. LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

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 (birth to five) 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;
- Interagency collaboration is made more difficult by the fact that different hierarchical structures of participating agencies – and different levels of empowerment among participating staff -- can be obstacles to problem solving and taking action;
- The senior leadership of state agencies has broad responsibilities that go well beyond early childhood, limiting leaders’ ability to engage in the work of early childhood; and
- There is substantial concern – particularly within state government -- that any substantial 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:



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.

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:

Current Strengths

- 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.
- 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.

Current Challenges

- While there are existing plans for the early childhood system, individually and collectively they do not appear to represent an 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.
- Having multiple state agencies responsible for individual components of the early childhood system demands a high level of collaboration.
- While the staff responsible for early childhood are given significant latitude to oversee the programs within their agency, they are not always empowered to be decision-makers 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 leaders⁵ who are perceived outside of government as making public advocacy for improved early childhood services a central focus of their work, although that has changed somewhat with DHS' elevation of its primary child care executive. Cabinet members 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.
- The lack of local infrastructure for collaboration means that providers are not insulated from the fragmentation at the state level.

⁵ "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.

Of note, there is concern – particularly among state government officials -- that any substantial change to early childhood governance will represent a lot of effort for very little operational payoff.

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 organizational chart from the agency head. Accordingly, there is no single empowered senior leader within state government who has both (a) administrative responsibility for multiple 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 report (Part III). For now, the important thing is that Rhode Island's early childhood system takes on all the characteristics of a de-centralized system without unified leadership: 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.

i. 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.

ii. Legislative Connections

Multiple sources observed a lack of coherence in the executive branch's work with the legislature on early childhood across the involved agencies. Our conversations suggested that while there is some effort to provide a holistic view of early childhood policy, much of the executive branch's interaction with legislators is focused on particular programs rather than advancing a comprehensive vision. In effect, each agency has its own legislative strategy for the early childhood services it oversees.

The state's independent early childhood 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.

iii. 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.

iv. 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 (an issue discussed further below).

v. 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) – an important effort given the significant challenges faced by children with disabilities. 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.

i. 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 that appears to be driving governmental behavior. Sources did note that workforce needs are explicitly referenced in the state's ECCE strategic plan, and that the Governor's Workforce Board had an Early Childhood Workforce Advisory Committee that includes a number of key stakeholders. 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 to 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.

ii. 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 perceived by stakeholders as 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 Head Start, Part B, Part C, and home visiting; there is some collaboration among some funding streams. 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.

While there are career pathways initiatives taking place in higher education institutions, to date Rhode Island's higher education system leaders have not been actively involved in strengthening professional development systems. One source indicated that there is little motivation for the higher education agencies to get involved, given the state of the field.

iii. Quality Evaluation and Improvement

Like other policy issues, quality evaluation and improvement typically remain 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.

iv. 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.
 - While these efforts have been managed separately so far, there are efforts to better connect them. The EOHHS Secretary will now sit on the Longitudinal Data System's governing board, and that governing board is working to develop recommendations for a more integrated data system.

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 within the early childhood sector.

Early Learning Council Initial Priorities

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 and retention.** 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 to refer children for early childhood IDEA services. 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 family child care providers.** The number of home-based family child care 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.

In the second week of August, the Early Learning Council conducted a survey of its members to identify priorities for the System Analysis. The survey asked members to consider the importance of the topics discussed by the Council (listed above), and also the following eight topics:

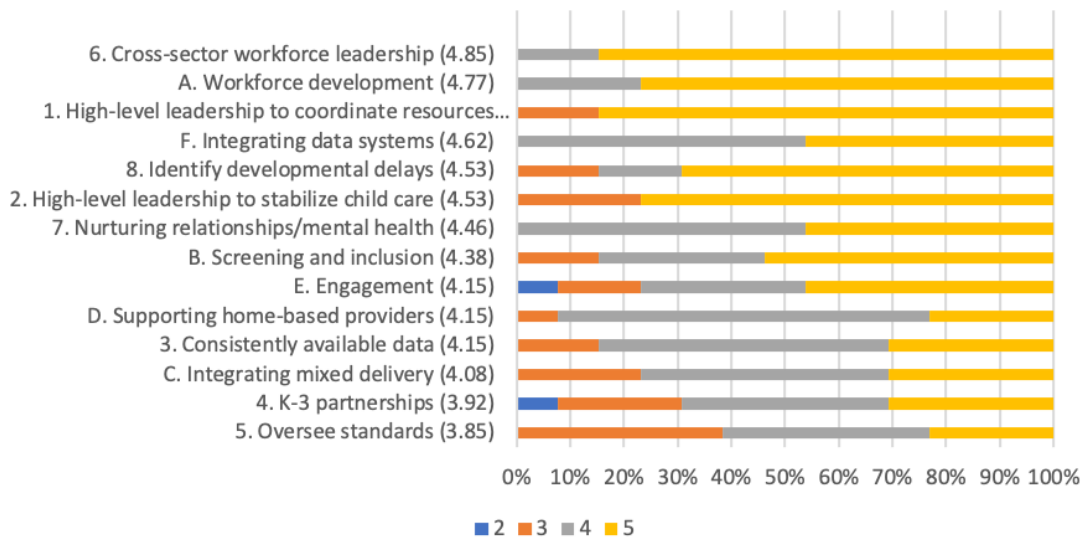
1. High-level government leadership to secure and coordinate early childhood resources, programs, and interventions with the goal of improving young children's development and learning, birth to K entry with particular attention to young children with high needs.
2. High-level government leadership to secure and coordinate resources and programs to ensure the state has a stable, high-quality, and affordable child care system that offers families with children from birth through age 12

choices among diverse child care options (including family child care, center-based care, and school-age care) to meet needs of essential workers, employers, and the state’s economy.

3. Consistently available shared data about children’s participation and development in early learning programs to measure progress and inform policy makers and educators.
4. Supportive partnerships, shared and aligned resources, and strategic connections between the early childhood sector and the K-3 early elementary grades at state and/or local levels.
5. Cross-sector leadership to oversee standards and resources available to support progress toward achieving standards in the early care and education sector, including the Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, Early Care and Education Workforce Knowledge & Competencies, and Early Learning & Development Standards.
6. Cross-sector leadership to develop and sustain a qualified, effective, diverse, and fairly compensated workforce to promote young children’s development and learning, including consistently available shared data about the early learning and development workforce.
7. Cross-sector system of supports for programs, children, and families to promote the development of nurturing relationships and a strong foundation of mental health in young children with resources to respond and meet the needs of young children with social-emotional and behavioral challenges.
8. Effective cross-sector systems to identify children with developmental delays and disabilities (and other eligible children) as early as possible and ensure they consistently receive high-quality early childhood IDEA services through Early Intervention and/or Early Childhood Special Education in natural and inclusive settings that meet the needs of their family.

Thirteen of the Council’s 41 members responded to the survey, rating each priority on a scale of 1-5 (with 5 being the highest priority). The results were as follows, listed in rank order of priority (with average score in parentheses):

Potential Governance Priorities



Additional Observations

- While the systems analysis focuses on state oversight, multiple sources emphasized keeping front and center the needs of families with young children. We heard about challenges families have in accessing affordable child care, the difficulties faced by families who need services under the Individuals with Disabilities Act, the complexities of providing child care to children in the foster care system, and more. Improving outcomes for children and

families is the goal of this work, and the state's approach to early childhood governance should be focused on meeting the needs of children most effectively.

- 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.
 - The transition would also generate administrative burden across a number of agencies, which will be discussed in more detail later in this process.
- The heart of the conversation about governance change almost always centers around state-funded 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.
 - One of the concerns raised is that rearranging governance will simply create a new set of silos that continue to require cross-agency collaboration. It is certainly the case that there is no plausible configuration of governance that does not require interagency collaboration to effectively serve young children, so the need for that collaboration should be taken as a necessity regardless of the outcome of this process. It is also the case that in some states that have made governance changes the new configuration ended up operating in silos that were not meaningfully more effective than the previous silos. So while there are success stories of states that have made changes that had a positive impact on the system, it should not be assumed that changing governance will automatically make things better.
 - 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.

III. GOVERNANCE OPTIONS IN NATIONAL CONTEXT

A. Early Childhood Governance Models

1. The Three Basic Models

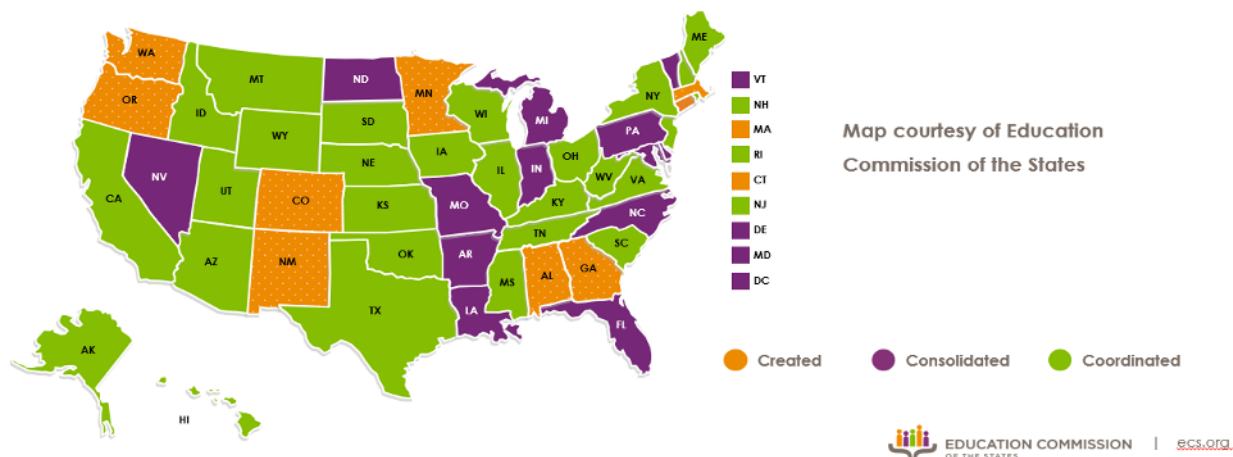
In early childhood governance, there are three basic models for how states organize their early childhood funding streams and functions: Coordinated, Consolidated, or Created.⁶

COORDINATED	CONSOLIDATED	CREATED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early childhood funding streams and functions live in multiple, distinct agencies – requiring coordination across those agencies • Sometimes a centralized office helps to facilitate coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early childhood funding and functions are consolidated into an existing agency that also has other responsibilities (typically the state education agency or a human services agency) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early childhood funding and functions are consolidated into a single agency that is created to focus on early childhood services • Agency has a sole or primary focus on early childhood, without other responsibilities

Rhode Island currently utilizes a coordinated approach, involving EOHHS, DHS, RIDE, and RIDOH. As described in the landscape analysis, each of these agencies has responsibilities for important funding streams serving young children in the state.

Nationally, roughly half of states use a coordinated approach, while the other half have consolidated or created governance structures:

National Landscape, 2023



It is worth noting that states that unify governance over early childhood generally do not go back to the coordinated model. In some states an early childhood agency has had new responsibilities added to its plate over time, but once

⁶ Regenstein, E., and Lipper, K. (May 2013). *A Framework for Choosing a State-Level Early Childhood Governance System*, Build Initiative; see also Regenstein, E. (June 2020), *Early Childhood Governance: Getting There from Here*, pp. 56-58. Note that some of the text in this section describing governance options and cross-state themes is drawn directly from the *Vermont Child Care and Early Childhood Education Systems Analysis Final Report* (July 1, 2022).

pre-k and child care are under the same roof they tend to stay there. While unification is a recent change for some states, in others the combination is now well over a decade old.

2. Core Functions

In thinking about how Rhode Island might achieve its goals, it is important to consider the functions of state government. Through its statutory and regulatory power state government can serve a number of critical functions that impact community leaders and providers, including:

- Collaborating with multiple stakeholders to define a vision for the future of the early childhood sector, and ensuring that policymaking reinforces the goals of that vision;
- Money management (fund distribution, budgeting, resource allocation);
- Setting standards for – and supporting improvement in – service quality (maintaining learning standards, defining program quality, monitoring implementation, supporting improvement, maintaining data systems, facilitating research and evaluation);
- Supporting professionals (licensing, pre-service education, professional development);
- Engaging and supporting families and stakeholders (determining eligibility, supporting family and community engagement, building local capacity, supporting enrollment); and
- Communications and public relations (informing about child development, informing about government-funded services).⁷

The state should evaluate which governance model is most likely to help it succeed at these functions.

3. Differences Between Consolidation and Creation

Among those states that have made an effort to unify authority, some have chosen to do so in a standalone agency, and others in an agency with other responsibilities. There are some common values that have animated these changes, and in many instances creation or consolidation serve similar purposes. But there are some important differences between the two models.

In roughly a dozen states, state pre-k and child care are administered by the same agency, but that agency has other responsibilities beyond early childhood. The Education Commission of the States (ECS) defines those states as having a Consolidated governance model.⁸ In most of those states, the education agency is the lead agency; Delaware, Florida, Louisiana, and Michigan⁹ are among the states that have used this approach for years, with Missouri and North Dakota among the states to recently join them. Indiana and North Carolina are among the states to have their human services agency as the lead, and it is worth noting that in both of those states the state superintendent of education is or was a separate Constitutional officer (which may have influenced the decision of where to place early childhood functions). Pennsylvania uses a unique hybrid model in which a standalone early childhood unit reports to the heads of both the education and human services agency.

There are some important ways in which consolidation is different from creation that are worth thinking through in the Rhode Island context:

⁷ Getting There from Here, pp. 26-27.

⁸ The ECS lists Vermont as having Consolidated governance because its human services agency and education agency have joint authority over the state's pre-k program. In practice, though, the pre-k program is primarily overseen by the education agency. So while Vermont technically has a Consolidated governance structure, in practice it operates much more like a Coordinated structure. [Vermont Child Care and Early Childhood Education Systems Analysis Final Report](#).

⁹ Michigan recently passed legislation to create a new lead agency for early childhood. Dellinger, H. and Lohman, I. (July 12, 2023) [Gov. Whitmer creates new Michigan agency for early childhood through post-secondary education](#). Chalkbeat Detroit.

- In consolidation, the first choice that always must be made is which agency should take the lead. The considerations typically look something like this:
 - The advantage of consolidating into the education agency are that it strengthens the connection between early childhood and K-12, which is one important value for the early childhood community. The challenge is that state education agencies (SEAs) typically have not had to understand the complex dynamics of private social service agencies that work at the local level (including but not limited to child care providers), and in some instances SEAs have been very slow to learn – meaning that those local providers can feel like second-class citizens compared to K-12 schools. In Rhode Island the SEA already has substantial experience in working with private providers, as the majority of Rhode Island pre-k classrooms are in settings outside of public schools.¹⁰
 - The advantage of consolidating into the human services agency is that those human services agencies do typically have strong connections with private social service agencies. The downside, predictably, is that school districts are generally focused on the SEA and it is not easy for other state agencies to drive behavior at the school district level (an issue we will It is also important to note the different charges these agencies have. Human services organizations are largely meant to serve families most in need, and are often considered successful when families are no longer in need of their services. In contrast, SEAs are required to oversee publicly available systems for all families, at scale, regardless of need, while also increasing the equity of these systems to ensure positive outcomes across the state. The interplay between means-based services and universality is an ongoing dynamic in early childhood systems. Federal child care grants require the regulation of the entire child care system, but funds access to the system only for the children most in need; SEA-administered preschool leverages the universal school system infrastructure, but may limit access based on funding constraints. Because of limited dollars, early childhood access is most likely to be funded for families most in need – but the state’s goal is to have a system that is more broadly scaled and widely available across the state. If the state chooses consolidation, it should reflect on these dual values and how they might fit within the host agency’s larger mission; if the state chooses creation, it should be clear to the new agency about how these values should be reflected in its work.
 - When early childhood is consolidated in an existing agency, it is typically administered by a top deputy to the agency head. Administratively, it is often easier to reorganize within an existing agency than it would be to create a new one. But it is also the case that a deputy may not have the same gravitas that an agency head would have in connecting with the legislature, providers, families, and other stakeholders.
- Some states have a history of success with smaller agencies; in others, only the behemoth agencies carry any real political heft. We did not probe on this question in our interviews, but in the months ahead it is worth considering where Rhode Island falls on this spectrum.
- In the mechanics of the transition, the creation of a new agency involves multiple units coming together to form a new agency culture; consolidation includes a team (or teams) that must assimilate to an existing agency culture. Both are difficult, and reasonable people can disagree about which is more challenging.

As noted earlier, early childhood agencies have in the past expanded beyond their initial mandate. That can occur regardless of whether the state chooses creation or consolidation, but creation may make that expansion more likely to occur. If an agency’s primary focus is the early childhood years, there may be programs that fit that mandate – even if they would not fit naturally into an education or human services agency.

Finally, in some states a consolidation effort can eventually lead to creation. A recent example of this approach is Michigan, which for years housed both pre-k and child care subsidy in its Department of Education – but in 2023 an Executive Order¹¹ moved responsibility for early childhood to a new Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential.

¹⁰ Rhode Island KIDS Count Factbook, p. 129.

¹¹ State of Michigan, Office of the Governor. Executive Order No. 2023-6. July 11, 2023.

B. National Landscape: Experiences of Other States

Rhode Island's System Analysis draws on insights from other states that have sought to unify their early childhood governance. In some states that unification occurred many years ago; in others it was relatively recent. From conversations with leaders in those states, we have collected some insights worth considering as Rhode Island considers its options. A list of the leaders consulted for this national landscape is included in Appendix A.¹²

1. Potential Benefits of Unification

Some of the potential benefits of unification identified in other states include the following:

- Multiple sources indicated that unification can in fact create a more cohesive relationship between pre-k and child care.
- Multiple sources thought unification had led to more coherent policy in multiple areas, including workforce development, professional development, quality ratings, and integrating data –although all of those areas remain challenging to address.
- Multiple sources saw value in having a politically-appointed agency head, and for advocates to be able to lobby the Governor on who to appoint. Having an early childhood system leader who has authority and the trust of the Governor can be a significant asset both operationally and politically.
- Relatedly, multiple sources cited the ability of high-level agency leaders to define an agenda and ensure that certain issues are addressed when needed.
- Having early childhood functions under one roof in the executive branch can cause the legislature to adjust its practices, and develop focused expertise to complement the executive branch.
- One source indicated that having unified authority in early childhood had led to better communication with stakeholders, and clearer accountability to those stakeholders.
- One person said that unification may make it easier for advocates outside government to track how federal funding is being used.

2. Potential Challenges to Unification

We also heard about some potential challenges that can occur after unification. These include:

- Multiple sources agreed that if the unification of authority occurs outside the education agency, it can be difficult for that agency to work with K-12 schools. One source noted that districts could be positioned to take a leading role in early childhood, but right now they are not accountable and do not think much about it.
 - Kirsten Baesler, the Superintendent of Public Instruction in North Dakota, emphasized that if leaders are concerned about the connection between early childhood and K-12, they can make that a focus of the transition process – even if an education agency is surrendering programmatic oversight. She stated emphatically that having programmatic oversight of early childhood at an education agency is not necessary to building strong relationships with K-12, and that the education agency can continue to show leadership and make connections even if its authority over early childhood is reduced.
- One source noted that a governance change is not insulation against turnover at the leadership level; governance changes can potentially make more good things possible (and more likely), but it cannot necessarily protect against bad things.

¹² For purposes of this System Analysis we were able to interview ten leaders from eight other states. These leaders played different roles within their systems and were able to offer some different perspectives. For those readers interested in more detail about the experiences of other states in changing early childhood governance, the 2020 report [Early Childhood Governance: Getting There from Here](#) provides a national perspective on many of the issues addressed in this System Analysis, including interviews with almost 90 state and national leaders

- While some people we talked to believed it was helpful to have a high-level leader in the executive branch to fight for more resources for early childhood, one person told us that creating a new agency can serve as a form of “box-checking” for a Governor and the legislature, which can actually make it harder to obtain new resources. They raised the concern that in their state creating a unified structure had not led to greater investment.
 - Another source noted that in their state the legislature was reluctant to increase early childhood service funding during the transition, for fear that the new agency would not be able to handle the increased funds. This person – who did not work for the agency in question -- said that while a preschool expansion might have taxed the agency’s capacity, the agency could have handled an increase in child care funds. In fact, after it made administrative changes that helped increase demand for child care, the lack of additional funds led to the creation of wait lists – a new administrative burden for the agency.

3. Process Considerations

We heard many suggestions about the potential process of transition should the state choose to undertake a unification effort. These include the following:

- In most states, the unification of governance occurs because a governor uses political capital to make it happen – typically because that governor believes it is necessary to accomplish certain policy goals.¹³ It is also important to have political leaders who will support the agency as it gets up and running, given that the process will not go perfectly and it will need political champions to ensure that it does not end up in a downward spiral.
 - Champions outside of government are also essential to keeping the process on track.
- Multiple sources emphasized the importance of being thoughtful about the initial charge to an agency during the unification of authority, as it can sometimes be hard to add new responsibilities later. In particular we heard that it is important to make sure that the agency’s accountability structure is well designed at the outset, as the agency may resist new forms of accountability once it is up and running.
- We heard from multiple states about the importance of administrative leadership during a transition, and having leaders involved in any unification who are trusted by the Governor and staff to weave together different units of state government.
- If unification is to occur, a transition window is essential. Multiple sources told us that the process requires at least a year, and benefits from a substantial focus on the technical steps needed to get the internal connections right. Having clear action plans is key to a smooth transition – and serving the field effectively. Administrative errors or missed payments during the unification process can be fatal to an agency’s standing with the field.
 - Another source added that the transition window should not be too long, because the transition will likely rise to fill the available time and there is value to making the change and moving forward.
- Multiple sources talked about the importance of establishing strong interagency collaboration after a unification
 - Multiple sources emphasized that the heads of existing agencies that are sending units to a new agency should lead by example. If the staff and constituencies see the agency heads publicly working together and supporting each other through a transition, that sets a tone for the process.
 - One source emphasized that no matter where operational lines are drawn the system will need an elevated vision and interagency problem-solving; there will always be intersections among agencies, and those need to be managed. There is value in having high-level leaders talking about the problems that arise in and around those intersections, and staff to follow up on their decisions.
 - Multiple sources emphasized that maintaining strong connections to the health community is also very important, and requires careful thought.

¹³ Massachusetts is the most notable exception to this rule. Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy and Strategies for Children (April 2008). [A Case Study of the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care.](#)

- Another source talked about the need to connect with political leaders working on Medicaid, housing, food security, and other issues facing families receiving publicly-funded early childhood services.
- Relatedly, the importance of communication during a transition period cannot be overstated. Clear, consistent, and frequent communication is critical to the success of a transition. In addition to sharing information, state government leaders should also ensure that they are listening to outside partners – and, where possible, acting on what they hear from those partners.
- Multiple people emphasized that local implementation is key, and that even with unification certain functions cannot be performed effectively at the state level. While different communities will have different resources and needs, the state can help ensure that communities have collaborative structures through which they can define what they are trying to achieve and identify their implementation gaps. Indeed, state support is seen as critical to the success of local efforts.
 - One person described local collaboratives as a “lighthouse” close to families.
 - Local collaboratives can be the right venue to establish coordinated intake systems, with state support.
- One source emphasized the importance of being up front about different cultures in pre-k and child care, both in the field and in state agencies.
- One person told us that the transitional period is a unique opportunity to establish new norms for community engagement and communication, and that any transition plan should include a focus on that issue.
- One source emphasized that sometimes giving up control is important to achieving progress. The goal of making progress should be more important than programmatic control.
- Multiple people talked about issues to consider in determining the scope of a unification:
 - One noted that careful thought will be needed about how to place special education – which is a significant and often under-appreciated part of the system.
 - Another pointed out that after-school care can be very important to child care providers and deeply interconnected with schools, so it is critical to consider that as an important part of the landscape.
 - One person emphasized that while child care has an important relationship with pre-k, it also has important relationships with a range of other programs – including but not limited to mental health, child welfare, and early intervention. All of those are important, and any governance approach should account for them. Indeed, this source suggested that Rhode Island evaluate the business model of its child care providers, including how big they are and what ages they serve; this will help inform who they connect with, and how state governance might optimize their web of relationships.

Overall, the leaders we talked to in other states were glad that their states had chosen to unify governance. Some of them did point out limitations in the changes made, and places where the vision of the governance change had not been fully realized. It also must be acknowledged that all of our national sources came from states that had already made the transition to a unified governance structure, which Rhode Island right now has not.

IV. GOVERNANCE IN RHODE ISLAND: CURRENT STATE AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Rhode Island currently uses the coordination model – but of course, its particular approach to coordination is unique. This Part discusses the benefits and challenges of the current model, and then potential benefits and challenges of other models.

A. The Current Model: Coordination

In some states, the term “coordination” is more aspirational than descriptive¹⁴; in Rhode Island, it truly appears to be taken to heart. Thus, for Rhode Island, the pros and cons of continuing in the Coordination model are essentially the pros and cons of the current system.

One key benefit of the Coordination model is that, at its best, it allows the state to leverage different kinds of expertise from different agencies. For example, the early childhood team at RIDE is nested in an environment with deep expertise in K-12 education; the early childhood team at DHS is part of an agency well versed in a wide range of human services. When the respective point people from those agencies – and others, such as EOHHS and RIDOH – are able to take advantage of their agencies’ knowledge and contacts, it serves the system well.

For example, in our conversations with the RIDE team, one consistent theme was the importance RIDE places on having early childhood in an educational setting. The team at RIDE believes that offers benefits to its administration of pre-k, and allows it to influence K-12 policy and build connections with K-12 leaders. The team is concerned that those connections would be lost if pre-k administration were to be moved out of RIDE. This issue was not unique to RIDE, but was a particular point of emphasis in conversations with the RIDE team. Another source raised the possibility that moving pre-k out of RIDE could make it harder to achieve salary parity and maintain quality standards.

One fundamental advantage of the Coordination model is that it does not involve any transition costs. Moving to a new governance model can be disruptive, and the Coordination model avoids that disruption.

As described in III.A, there are certain core functions that should be a central consideration in choosing a governance model. Based on the landscape analysis, the state has shown strengths in some of these areas, but not all:

- **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.

¹⁴ Getting There from Here, p. 56. The title of the Coordination model refers to the need for coordination, and does not presume even a minimal level of support provided for actual coordination.

- **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.

It may be possible for Rhode Island to address some of these challenges while retaining the Coordination model.

Even if the state retains the Coordination model, it might choose to make a number of changes within that model – including how it engages with local communities, and how agencies work with each other to coordinate. Those opportunities are discussed further in Part IV.

B. The Potential Benefits of Change

Given that Rhode Island's current model is Coordination, either the Consolidation or Creation models would require the state to make a change. This section will consider the potential benefits and challenges of making any change.

1. Potential Impact on Core Functions

As discussed in II.A.2 above, there are certain core functions of an early childhood system that the state should consider in determining what its ideal governance system would be. Having reviewed the state's current performance in IV.A, subsection IV.B.1 now looks at how a governance change might improve the state's ability to perform these functions.

Collaboration

As explained in Part II, the state's current early childhood leaders have been deeply and genuinely committed to interagency collaboration. The fact that these leaders work well together has been valuable for the state. But some outside stakeholders noted the limits of that collaboration. Indeed, their view was that the fact that the state leaders are collaborating well and still can't solve the state's problems with fragmentation is an argument that more structural changes are needed.

A governance change would take certain issues that currently require interagency collaboration to address and turn them into issues that are within a single agency's authority. That is one of the signature benefits of unification, and fundamentally shifts the nature of the collaboration needed for the system to thrive.

As many people have pointed out throughout the process, however, even if there is change there will be some need for connection among agencies. Most of the state agencies focused on early childhood focus on early education and care; those agencies still must collaborate with child welfare agencies, K-12 agencies, health agencies, and others. A reconfiguration may shift the dynamics of interagency collaboration, but it will not eliminate the need for that collaboration.

Importantly, this is one area where gubernatorial leadership can have a very direct impact. Nationally, interagency collaboration tends to go better in states where governors personally focus on ensuring that their agencies work together well. A governance change may incrementally reduce the need for that gubernatorial leadership, but that leadership will remain necessary.

Money management

Unification can have implications for money management at both the state and provider levels. At the state level, unification can make it easier for the state to budget for early childhood holistically, and to think about the interaction among program funding streams.

Setting standards for service quality

The key to the success of Rhode Island's early childhood system is the experiences children have interacting with early childhood professionals. For Rhode Island to be successful in continuing the positive trajectory of its quality evaluation and improvement work, a more comprehensive approach will likely be required – which will be difficult when oversight authority for the affected programs is split across agencies. Unifying governance improves the likelihood that Rhode Island will be able to implement a best-practice quality evaluation and improvement system.

One example of how combining functions can improve policy consistency is Rhode Island's recent consolidation of its child care licensing function into DHS. While this consolidation focused solely on parts of the child care system, we heard from multiple sources that this consolidation had improved the state's overall child care system in meaningful ways.

The administrative burden of having standards for quality that vary across agencies can make it difficult for community leaders and providers to serve families most effectively.¹⁵ We heard from providers in this process that Rhode Island's current system is not minimizing administrative burden, and that a shift in governance would potentially help the state improve its performance in this area.

Supporting professionals

Supporting professionals requires addressing two issues highlighted in the scope of work for the System Analysis: workforce development, and professional development and technical assistance.

The market for early childhood services is a complex one that includes both publicly-operated and privately-operated providers. Accordingly, there is only so much the state can do to guarantee the success of that workforce. That said, there are several kinds of state policies that potentially impact working conditions and workforce success:

- Determining the qualifications for entry into the field, and potentially at additional specific points in a career trajectory;
- Developing competencies for the workforce that build a ladder of professional growth;
- Building pathways for interested candidates into the workforce;
- Reducing burdens that hamper initiatives to increase compensation; and
- Ensuring that policies help, not harm, workforce retention.

Across early childhood programs and funding streams, it is important that states perform all of these functions; in a competitive job market, weakness in any one of these areas can create difficulties in recruitment and retention.

Existing workforce initiatives funded by individual grants or programs are designed to tackle aspects of this problem. But Rhode Island's efforts to comprehensively simplify these functions and find efficiencies where they exist are limited by the fact that authority for the funds that support different segments of the workforce is spread across multiple agencies. That limits the state's ability to use policy to develop a more robust workforce that grows over time, both in its size and its capacity to meet the state's needs. Moreover, fragmentation at the state level makes it more difficult to partner with communities or providers to generate innovative approaches to workforce retention.

Rhode Island also has limited public resources to support professional development for the early childhood workforce. For the state to achieve its vision of high quality requires using each dollar in the system strategically. That requires

¹⁵ Getting There from Here, pp. 27-28 (discussing Herd., P. and Moynihan, D. (2018). Administrative Burden: Policymaking by Other Means. Russell Sage Foundation).

clarity about what kinds of experiences children should be having, based on their developmental abilities and needs – and what capacity the workforce requires to deliver those age and developmentally appropriate experiences.

To date, professional development and technical assistance have been driven by the requirements of individual programs, rather than through a more holistic view of what children need. Within a unified system, this work could be driven by an overarching set of expectations, rather than the regulations governing specific funding streams. Having a clear overall approach to professional development and technical assistance – and then having an agency empowered to drive statewide implementation – would better leverage the state’s existing funding.

Engaging and supporting families and stakeholders

The state plays a dual role in this area: it both engages directly with families and stakeholders, and supports engagement with families and stakeholders at the local level. As discussed in V.A, Rhode Island has devoted less energy to this second function than many other states – in part because its small size has allowed it to take a more ambitious approach to the first function. As noted above, the state has done some good work in this area – but in a siloed manner, rather than a coherent one.

Family engagement and support is also a policy area where administrative burden matters. Administrative burdens can shift costs from the state onto families – including the cost of figuring out what services they are eligible for, the cost of complying with rules, and the psychological cost that can come with receiving public benefits.¹⁶

Communications and public relations

The state does not currently have a unified communications and public relations function that is set up to engage with the public and families on early childhood issues in a holistic way. Creating that function could improve awareness of the early childhood system, both in public discourse and among individual families who seek to take advantage of the system.

2. A More Systemic Approach

Beyond the basic functions of the system, some states have envisioned a role for state government that brings a new level of leadership and coherence to early childhood service delivery. These states see state government as having a responsibility to families that goes beyond managing funding streams. In these states empowered state-level leaders work with early childhood stakeholders to define a collective vision, and put in place frameworks that help communities and programs serve families more effectively – along with ongoing supports to implement those frameworks, and stronger accountability for how public funds are used.

Unification of early childhood governance can have multiple positive impacts:

- Having a lead point of contact within state government can be helpful in the executive branch for a variety of reasons; the ranking official with oversight of early childhood can advocate for the issue both externally and internally, and be a key point of contact with outside partners and the legislature. The challenges identified in Rhode Island relating to external outreach (including legislative outreach) could be addressed through a unification process.
 - One dimension of this leadership is an improved ability to set an agenda. Right now, early childhood is one agenda item among many for each of several large agencies working with the legislature. Unified early childhood governance improves the odds that core priorities of the early childhood community will also be legislative priorities for an executive branch agency.

¹⁶ Getting There from Here, p. 28 (discussing Administrative Burden).

- The ability to work in a cross-cutting manner may also make it possible to highlight critical aspects of the early childhood system that currently are the responsibility of multiple agencies. For example, an early childhood agency might have the ability to focus on the cross-cutting needs of infants and toddlers in a way that no current agency is charged with doing.
- Unified oversight can make it easier to have a single vision – with goals and performance metrics – for the entire early childhood system. It can also support a more focused approach to budgeting that helps support those goals. Stakeholders indicated that right now in Rhode Island there are plans for the early childhood system, but that the impact of those plans is not being felt.
- Having unified oversight allows the staff involved to develop expertise in the functioning of the entire early childhood ecosystem, not just particular funding streams. Through collaboration the current Rhode Island staff have strengthened their knowledge of the elements of the system beyond their direct purview – but while that is a credit to the individuals involved, that is different than having a system set up to ensure that holistic expertise exists.
- Integrating data across funding streams is easier when those funding streams are in the same agency (discussed further below in IV.B.3).

All of these advantages have been realized in at least some of the states that have consolidated programs, but none of them can be guaranteed to occur. As is true in any other area of government, without strong leadership in the early childhood unit none of these potential benefits will come to fruition. But one of the arguments for consolidation or creation is that it potentially allows the state to be more intentional in choosing its leaders. Having a highly-placed politically-appointed official overseeing early childhood gives the Governor’s Office the ability to recruit talent into an early childhood role.

Relatedly, it is important to emphasize that gubernatorial leadership matters in any structure. With strong gubernatorial leadership, a unified model – particularly a standalone agency – may allow the governor to accomplish policy goals in early childhood that simply would not be possible in a fragmented environment. It is also possible that having unified governance will make it more likely that a governor will pay attention to the issue, if only because the governor will always have at least one cabinet member focused on it. But having unified governance is no guarantee that the governor or legislature will pay attention to the issue.

Regardless of how the state configures its governance, it will need to ensure that it has the capacity to execute its functions. As described in the landscape analysis, there are real concerns about the current capacity in the executive branch of Rhode Island’s government. For the system to be successful it will require political leaders and program leaders to be on the same page about the work needed – as well as adequate capacity to get the job done.¹⁷ If building capacity to strengthen performance on the core functions of the system is a key goal, stakeholders should consider whether unifying governance would help to achieve it.

3. Key Policy Areas

The System Analysis asked for analysis of four key policy areas: workforce development; professional development and technical assistance; quality evaluation and improvement; and data systems. The first three are addressed under IV.B.1 above. This subsection will focus on implementing early childhood data systems.

Integrating data across multiple early childhood services requires both a technological infrastructure and an interagency governance structure. With cloud-based technology available in a competitive market, the technological

¹⁷ Getting There from here, pp. 41-46.

infrastructure is comparatively cheap and easy.¹⁸ The much harder part is the human systems needed to ensure that data is used effectively while providing essential protections for privacy and security.

Developing those human systems when all of the source data systems are within the same agency is simply much easier. Unifying governance would reduce the number of interagency agreements or interagency governance structures required; data from any programs included in the unification could be integrated by the new oversight agency (so long as the agency complies with applicable laws and policies in doing so). This simplification unlocks important possibilities for the state in understanding and managing its early childhood system. Accordingly, unifying governance would make it easier to integrate data about the early childhood system. Interagency agreements would still be necessary to integrate data from the lead early childhood agency with other agencies, which would be important for studying long-term educational and health outcomes.

While unification would make data integration incrementally easier, it would not solve one of Rhode Island's biggest challenges in data integration: the existence of multiple separate integration projects with different focuses. Integrating early childhood data would be incrementally beneficial, but would be even more impactful if the state had an overall plan for data integration that incorporated what are now several disparate efforts. Each of those efforts is promising in its own right, but ultimately the state's siloed approach will limit its ability to maximize the impact of those separate integrated data systems. It is likely that gubernatorial and/or legislative leadership will be needed to get the state to a point where it is taking a more holistic approach to data integration.

C. The Challenges of Change

One of the most obvious challenges in any change is the cost of a transition. Those costs are discussed more fully in IV.D.3 below, but it is important to emphasize that the process of transition is not an easy one. Most states leave at least a year between when their legislature authorizes a governance change and when the change actually takes place, giving time to prepare; moreover, a great deal of transitional work will continue to be needed after a new structure becomes official. States that have made a change have done so because they believe that the short-term pain of transition is worth the long-term benefits of a new structure.

Even if the current system is not the one Rhode Island would design if it were starting from scratch, it does matter that the state is not starting from scratch. Indeed, it is building on decades of work in multiple agencies, with stakeholders whose beliefs have been heavily shaped by the existing approach. That is a daunting environment in which to consider potentially transformational change, especially given the weak history of state governments nationally in change management processes.

That said, there are many states that have successfully made a transition in their approach to early childhood governance – and from them, lessons can be drawn about best practices in implementing a new system. Other lessons can be drawn from the states that have had less successful transitions. This section includes a discussion of how the state might think about a transition to a more unified approach to governance. At this time the state has not made any decision as to whether or not a transition in governance would be necessary, but this section is included to help the state evaluate the challenges of embarking on a transition.

1. Deciding What to Include in a Unification

One of the first questions any state changing governance must answer is the scope of the proposed change. As discussed above, pre-k and child care have been at the heart of the conversation in Rhode Island, and are the programs whose unification is most common across states and would likely have the greatest impact. But they are far from the only

18 Regenstein, E. (June 2022) [The Importance of Modernizing Technology in Developing Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems](#).

programs serving young children and their families in the Ocean State, and important decisions need to be made about how to define the scope of any unification effort.

Importantly, some states have undertaken a unification effort and then spent several years assessing its impact – and then making further decisions about the scope of their early childhood agency. Perhaps the most notable example is Washington, which created an early childhood agency in 2006 – and then in 2017 gave it responsibility for child welfare. Other states that have created standalone agencies have added smaller responsibilities over time.

In that vein, one possibility for Rhode Island is to start by considering a relatively narrow unification. The state might do well to focus on a core set of functions it seeks to establish and build an agency well-suited to deliver them, without stretching its mandate to include a broad range of services. That mandate would presumably include pre-k, child care, and Head Start collaboration; over time, the state could consider whether other services should be unified into the agency with responsibility for early education and care, depending on the state's experience.

In particular, stakeholders whose focus is on health and public health were uneasy about the possibility of being part of an agency focused on early education and care. While we heard from providers who specifically identified better alignment between pre-k and child care as a key policy priority, the potential benefits of unified oversight involving health programs is less clear to stakeholders at this time.

To some extent this mindset extends to home visiting, although home visiting is certainly more closely related to pre-k and child care than some other health-grounded services. Indeed, home visiting is often a form of front door into the early childhood system; in many instances home visitors end up helping families navigate the existing landscape to find needed services. That said, home visiting is often integrated with numerous other health services focused on both children and adults, and we heard concerns that moving home visiting out of health agencies would unravel some of those critical ties – and potentially add significant complexity given federal mandates relating to certain health services. If home visiting is not included in a unification effort then the new lead early education and care agency should have the mandate and capacity to engage with home visiting leaders to establish a collaborative relationship.

Special education under the IDEA is also always a complex part of a governance conversation. Responsibility for special education for preschoolers (ages 3-5) is by federal law assigned to RIDE. Federal law gives states flexibility in where to house special education for infants and toddlers, and in Rhode Island those services are currently managed by EOHHS,. Whether or not infant and toddler special education is part of the unification process, once again, a clear mandate of collaboration should be established between any unified early education and care agency and the agency or agencies with oversight of IDEA services. We did not talk to enough stakeholders focused on IDEA to have a clear sense of how this conversation might play out, but raise the issue in the hopes that it can be addressed further before the final report is issued.

Finally, like all states. Rhode Island maintains a Head Start collaboration office. Federal law gives states flexibility in where they house the collaboration, and Rhode Island's is currently at the Department of Human Services. If the state unifies its early education and care services, the Head Start collaboration office should be included in that effort. Head Start is a critical part of the early education and care ecosystem, so if the state is seeking to develop an agency with expertise in that area it is important to have the collaboration office as part of that agency.

2. The Process of Transition

Any transition in state oversight will be disruptive in multiple ways. These include:

- Day-to-day operations at the state level. State employees are familiar with the personnel systems of their own agency; any new agency could have different ones, creating work for agency staff as they navigate those

differences. This can include information technology, payroll, accounting practices, budgeting systems, and more. Union work rules are likely to have an important impact on this work.¹⁹

- Agency cultures at the state level. RIDE has a culture that is different than that of DHS; other agencies have different cultures still. Helping staff from one agency transition to the culture of another – or creating a new culture from units of multiple sending agencies – is a body of work in itself, and requires time, managerial skill, and a focused plan.²⁰
- Engagement with the early childhood field. While the state staff involved in a transition will be disrupted, so too will the outside constituencies with which they work. The state will need a plan for managing those relationships during the process of change, and should engage the entire early childhood field in developing that plan.

There are a few elements that have been common to successful transitions:

- The right amount of time. Once the decision has been made to unify oversight, some amount of preparation time is needed to get the structures in place for a successful transition. If the planning period is too long, the state will likely lose momentum toward the change; if the planning period is too short, rushed decisions may adversely impact operations. In New Mexico's largely successful transition, the state adopted legislation in its 2019 session that created the agency as of July 1, 2020; it also provided transitional funding in FY 2020 so that a leadership team could be put in place to manage the process (and then take over the new agency). The success of this approach makes it a potentially valuable model for Rhode Island.²¹
- Constant and clear communication. Stakeholders inside and outside government will want regular updates on how the work is proceeding. While certain information about the operations of state government will appropriately be kept internal, in general the more transparency the better.
- Philanthropic support. There may be kinds of process expertise that state government is not well suited to providing, or even acquiring (given procurement timelines). Philanthropic support has often been helpful to make transition processes move smoothly. And from the perspective of philanthropy, support for the transition is an opportunity to make one-time investments with a potential long-term impact.

While the decision to alter early childhood governance is often made in order to shape and pursue an ambitious systemic vision for early childhood, the initial leadership of any unified agency or unit need not be heavy on early childhood visionaries. Indeed, one skill that is likely to matter a great deal during the transition – and in its immediate aftermath – is strong managerial experience, and the ability to “navigate the complex internal politics that will inevitably surround the change.”²² Establishing a functioning agency is essential to everything the state hopes might come next, and that requires strong leadership and managerial skill.

3. The Costs of Transition

In two recent transitions to a new governance structure – Colorado and New Mexico – the state has made an appropriation for “year zero,” the year prior to the full launch of the agency.²³ In both states the appropriation was relatively small -- \$1.25 million in New Mexico, and \$326,000 in Colorado. These expenses covered the cost of hiring executive FTEs to help manage the transition before the agency's official launch.

In addition to state appropriations, these states have also benefitted from philanthropic investment that supported consultants who assisted with the transition process – and also stakeholder engagement. We do not have data on that philanthropic investment, but note that it was an essential part of the process in both states. Foundations in other states

¹⁹ Getting There from Here 64-66.

²⁰ Getting There from Here 64-66.

²¹ Getting There from Here 66.

²² Getting There from Here 66.

²³ In spring 2023 Minnesota passed legislation creating a new early childhood agency, which also appears to include appropriations for transitional expenses in “year zero.” We are working toward including an analysis of Minnesota's appropriation in the final version of this report.

have seen governance transition processes as a high-leverage one-time investment, but it remains to be seen whether Rhode Island’s philanthropic community would share the same view.

D. The Relationship Between Early Childhood and K-12

At the policy level, there are legitimate differences of opinion as to the potential impact of a new agency focused on early childhood on the relationship between early childhood and K-12. Some leaders in other states believe that the elevated leadership has helped to build integrated policies between early childhood and K-12, while others are more skeptical of the ability of early childhood agencies to influence state education agencies (in this case, RIDE).

To some degree that is contextual and could vary from administration to administration. While on the one hand some RIDE commissioners might be more likely to respond to engagement from a commissioner peer than their own managerial staff, on the other hand some RIDE commissioners might use the existence of a separate agency as an excuse to wash their hands of responsibility for early childhood. It is impossible to say with certainty how a shift in state-level change in governance might impact the long-term development of policy relating to the relationship between K-12 and early learning.

But a consistent theme in our conversations with both Rhode Island stakeholders and national experts is that it can be challenging to get school districts to respond to any agency other than the SEA. So while an agency focused on early childhood at the state level might lead to improved funding and policy development for early childhood, it is not reasonable to expect it to take the lead on getting school districts engaged as leaders on early childhood issues. One way or another that is likely to be RIDE’s responsibility. To date the agency has not had the bandwidth to take on this role as comprehensively as it might like to, but that kind of capacity would be something for the state to consider in the future. And how RIDE goes about that role should be shaped by the larger context of state and local governance that emerges from this process.

E. Cost Analysis

This section describes potential financial implications of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) System governance decisions in Rhode Island. This is a directional estimate based on limited data and information from Rhode Island agencies and includes as an assessment of publicly available financial information related to other states’ governance changes. A summary of the assumptions built into this analysis as well as the limitations is detailed in Appendix D. This analysis includes estimates for all three governance options: Coordination, Consolidation, and Creation.

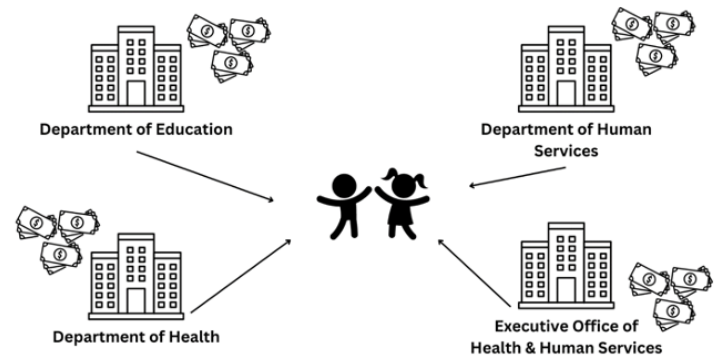
1. Governance Structure Scenarios

The Current System:

The current ECCE system in Rhode Island operates within a coordinated framework, existing within four separate departments, each with its own distinct administration, budget, and operations:

Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS):

- Early Intervention (IDEA Part C)
- Kids Connect



Department of Human Services (DHS):

- Child Care Licensing
- Child Care Assistance Program
- Child Care Quality Initiatives
- Head Start Collaboration Offices

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)

2. Cost Implications of Implementing Governance Structure Scenarios

In determining the right governance model for Rhode Island it is important to consider potential efficiencies and costs for each model. The tables below outline these potential costs and cost reductions. Given the nature of the data, the estimated current system spending may include both ongoing operational expenses and one-time expenditures. The net added costs below represent investments needed in addition to Rhode Island’s current SFY23 budget. Each scenario assumes the participation of all departments and programs listed above; financial figures may differ with partial participation.

Table 1: Estimated Governance Cost Breakdown, by Governance Model Option

	SCENARIO 1: Coordination	SCENARIO 2: Consolidation	SCENARIO 3: Creation
SFY23 State Spending (Carrying Cost)	\$162.9M	\$162.9M	\$162.9M
ECCE Cost Reductions	\$0.0K	(\$572.2K)	(\$572.2K)
Transition Cost (One-Time)	\$0.0K	\$500.0K	\$1.0M
Added Staff (New Carrying Cost)	\$168.5K	\$870.5K	\$1.9M
Office Space (New Carrying Cost)	\$0.0K	\$0.0K	\$325.6K
Year 0: Total System Cost	\$163.0M	\$163.7M	\$165.2M
Year 1: Total System Cost	\$163.0M	\$163.2M	\$164.2M

Table 2: Incremental Spending Needed from SFY23 Spending, by Governance Model Option

	SCENARIO 1: Coordination	SCENARIO 2: Consolidation	SCENARIO 3: Creation
One Time Costs			
Year 0	\$0.0K	\$500.0K	\$1.0M
Year 1	\$0.0K	\$0.0K	\$0.0K
Carrying Costs			
Year 0	\$168.5K	\$298.3K	\$1.6M
Year 1	\$168.5K	\$298.3K	\$1.6M

3. Scenario Methodology & Cost Assumptions

ECCE Cost Reduction Estimates:

	SCENARIO 1: Coordination	SCENARIO 2: Consolidation	SCENARIO 3: Creation
ECCE Cost Reductions	\$0.0K	(\$572.2K)	(\$572.2K)

In both the Consolidation and Creation scenarios, anticipated cost reductions to the Early Childhood Care and Education budget are derived from contract efficiencies and staff reallocations.

Contract Efficiencies: (\$225,000)

Based on a thorough examination of the current contracts held by the four agencies, 11 vendors have contracts with multiple agencies. Given the limited information on these contracts, a more comprehensive review is needed to evaluate the potential for renegotiating contractual fees or identifying duplicative efforts.

Given the need for additional information to determine efficiencies within existing contracts, we calculated a provisional estimate for potential savings and applied a 10% reduction to the smallest contracts among the 11 vendors, resulting in an approximate savings of \$225,000.

Staff Reallocations: (\$347,000)

After consolidation or creation of a new agency, 14 staff members -- including those in executive leadership and business operation roles -- who dedicated only a small portion of their time to early childhood programs, will remain in their respective departments.

This approach is projected to reduce the ECCE budget by \$347,000 annually. However, broader state budget savings may not be immediately evident, as these staff members would likely continue to be funded by their respective departments.

Transition Cost Estimates:

	SCENARIO 1: Coordination	SCENARIO 2: Consolidation	SCENARIO 3: Creation
Transition Cost (One-Time)	\$0.0K	\$500.0K	\$1.0M

In July 2020, the Early Childhood Education and Care Department in New Mexico received a \$1,250,000 appropriation from the state (~1.3 million if adjusted for inflation). This funding was allocated for the development of a finance plan, the implementation of an integrated data visualization system, the establishment of integrated field offices, and the transfer of all programs from other departments to the newly formed ECEC department. While the specific allocation for each element is unclear, it serves as a foundational reference for estimating these one-time costs.

For the Creation scenario, where office space is an ongoing expense, we have adjusted the one-time investment to \$1 million. In the Consolidation scenario, as a new office is not required and not all programs will be transferred, we are estimating a one-time cost of \$500,000.

Added Staff (New Carrying Cost) Estimates:

	SCENARIO 1: Coordination	SCENARIO 2: Consolidation	SCENARIO 3: Creation
Added Staff (New Carrying Cost)	\$168.5K	\$870.5K	\$1.9M

In each scenario, we anticipate increased staffing needs during the transition year and the subsequent years. To identify suitable roles and their associated total compensation (including salaries and benefits) for these scenarios, we leveraged existing data from the newly established Department of Housing in Rhode Island as well as other relevant job specifications in RI state government. The information presented below is total compensation derived from the FY24 budget, assuming benefits for each role is 60% of total salaries:

- \$256,757 – Director, Human Services
- \$245,818 – Chief of Staff (Office of Commerce)
- \$186,110 – Administrator, Financial Management
- \$168, 510 – Assistant Director, Financial and Contract Management
- \$213,750 – Chief of Strategic Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation
- \$138,594 – Chief Progam Development
- \$165,328 – Chief of Legal Services
- \$163,890 – Interdepartmental Project Manager
- \$148,920 – Chief Public Affairs Officer
- \$138,594 – Chief Program Development
- \$129,717 – Housing Commision Coordinator
- \$105,814 – Principal Program Analyst

Scenario 1: Coordination

Under the coordination approach, the current departmental structure remains unchanged, but adding one Assistant Director of Financial and Contract Management is recommended. This position will aim to improve communication and collaboration among existing departments to achieve system-level goals. Responsibilities would align with critical areas including family access, data quality, quality alignment, and budget coordination. The projected cost for this position is estimated at approximately \$169,000:

Existing RI State Government Title	RI ECCE Title	FTE	Total Compensation (Salary + Fringe)
Assistant Director, Financial and Contract Management	Early Childhood System Coordination Director	1.0	\$168,510

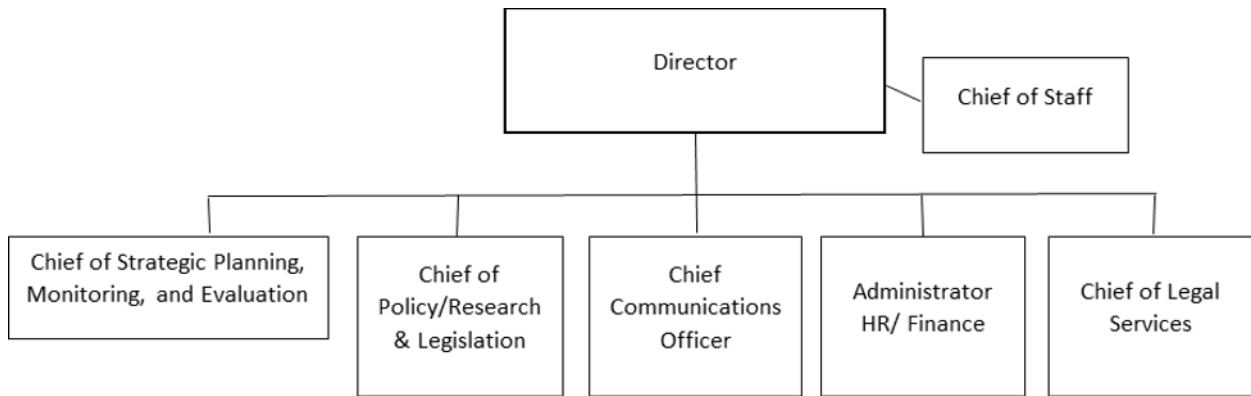
Scenario 2: Consolidation

The consolidation scenario includes one interdepartmental project manager, three program coordinators, and three program analysts. The inclusion of these roles is intended to enhance program efficiencies during this transition. The projected cost for these seven positions is approximately \$870,500, covering the expenses associated with the following roles:

Existing RI State Government Title	RI ECCE Title	FTE	Total Compensation (Salary + Fringe)
Interdepartmental Project Manager	Interdepartmental Project Manager	1.0	\$163,890
Housing Commission Coordinators	ECCE Coordinator	3.0	\$389,150
Principal Program Analyst	ECCE Program Analyst	3.0	\$317,443
		7.0	\$870,484

Scenario 3: Creation

After researching the organizational and governance structures of various states with ECCE agencies (Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, New Mexico, Massachusetts, and Oregon), our analysis showed which key roles were primarily consistent across states. As a result, our cost examples use an estimate for a new executive leadership team based on the following structure:



In addition to the seven positions above, four coordinators for each existing department could be hired to help navigate this transition. The projected cost for these 11 positions is approximately \$1.9 million, encompassing the cost associated with the following roles, using the RI Department of Housing and other state government job specifications as a starting point. Of note, exact job specifications and compensation would need to be determined during implementation to facilitate integration of the different units.

Existing RI State Government Title	RI ECCE Title	FTE	Total Compensation (Salary + Fringe)
Director, Human Services	Director	1.0	\$256,757
Chief of Staff (Office of Commerce)	Chief of Staff	1.0	\$245,818
Chief of Strategic Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation	Chief of Strategic Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation	1.0	\$213,750
Chief of Program Development	Chief of Policy/Research & Legislation	1.0	\$138,594
Chief of Public Affairs Officer	Chief Communications Officer	1.0	\$148,920
Administrator, Financial Management	Administrator HR/Finance	1.0	\$186,110
Chief of Legal Services	Chief of Legal Services	1.0	\$165,328
Housing Commission Coordinator	ECCE Coordinator	4.0	\$518,867
		11.0	\$1,874,144

Office Space (New Carrying Cost) Estimates

	SCENARIO 1: Coordination	SCENARIO 2: Consolidation	SCENARIO 3: Creation
Office Space (New Carrying Cost)	\$0.0K	\$0.0K	\$325.6K

Rhode Island’s Department of Housing received a \$240,000 allocation for leasing and office expenses, intended for a workforce of 38.0 FTE, averaging approximately \$6,300 per FTE. In the proposed Creation scenario, the anticipated staffing level for the ECCE department is estimated to be around 52 FTEs. This projection implies a recurring annual lease and office cost of approximately \$326,000 for the ECCE department.

F. Summary

The monetary costs of transition are likely to be relatively small in the context of the size of the overall system; spending \$1 million in a year to permanently reshape a system roughly 100 times that size is potentially a reasonable investment.²⁴ The greater challenge of a transition is the one-time expenditure of effort to engage in the transition process, which can be substantial. So one central question for the working group was whether it believed the potential ongoing long-term payoff in improved efficiency would be worth the cost of a one-time short-term transition process.

²⁴ While the overall early childhood system is spending \$141 million in recurring funds in FY 2023, it is likely that not all of the programs included in that total would be included in any unification effort.

V. CROSS-CUTTING CONSIDERATIONS

A. State-Community Connections

Regardless of the state's governance model, the state will need to be sensitive over time to its dynamic partnership with community leaders and providers. There are certain decisions about the system that properly sit at the local level, because communities are better positioned to make them than the state is.²⁵ All states considering a governance change must address this dynamic.

A distinctive aspect of Rhode Island's governance conversation is the almost complete lack of community-level infrastructure relating to early childhood programs. In many states, community-level collaborative structures are seen as an important way to bring coherence to a fragmented system; local capacity to support collaboration among schools, private providers, Head Start, home visitors, and other services can make the system much easier for families to navigate. Some of the states that have worked to strengthen their local capacity include Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Virginia.

Rhode Island's neighbor, Connecticut, developed a framework for local collaboration in 2016.²⁶ The framework includes a description of the potential benefits of local collaboration; lessons from local collaborations in other states; a discussion of different possible approaches to implementing local collaborations; and guidance on how to measure the success of local collaboration. The report emphasizes that for local collaborations to succeed requires state-level management and technical assistance.²⁷ The report found that stronger local collaboration could lead to improved communication and engagement.²⁸ In implementation, Connecticut has found that local collaborative structures offer greater opportunities to engage productively with families and providers, understand feedback, and address the challenges raised by users of the system.

In Rhode Island there does not seem to be any energy being put into establishing these kinds of local support systems. Rhode Island's small size is clearly a factor in this lack of local infrastructure.²⁹ And, as described in the landscape analysis, there are real benefits to having a close relationship between the state and local providers. The problem Rhode Island faces, though, is that there are a set of functions that might be performed more effectively with a different kind of local infrastructure.

There are numerous functions in an early childhood system that benefit from the ongoing direct input of parents and families – which is much easier to collect at the local or community level than the state level.³⁰ There can still be a valuable state role in providing backbone support for those local functions.³¹ But without local capacity, those functions may not be well performed. Some potentially valuable local functions include:

- Creating a single, public-facing organization for early childhood planning at the local level, who can help to build relationships among existing providers – and ensure that families are able to navigate the system;

25 Getting There from Here, p. 33.

26 Ponder, K. (September 2016). [Framework for Connecticut's Statewide System of Early Childhood State and Local Partnerships, Ponder Early Childhood Consulting.](#)

27 Id. at 7-9.

28 Id. at 9-10.

29 Many of the people involved in the System Analysis emphasized that Rhode Island is unique because of its small size. Some noted that in many other states Rhode Island would really be the equivalent of a county – and indeed, there are more than 40 U.S. counties with a population greater than Rhode Island's, 10 of which are also larger than Rhode Island. Nationally hundreds of counties have a greater land area than Rhode Island, but fewer people. That said, in many larger counties there are sub-systems to support local collaboration, so even if the county analogy holds the state should consider the possibility of new kinds of infrastructure.

30 Getting There from Here, p. 33.

31 Id. at 33, 36.

- Establishing a formal state-local implementation partner to develop local action plans that are consistent with the state's early childhood priorities;
- Engaging stakeholders to develop that local plan, which would also be based on neighborhood-level data. This plan might include strategies for:
 - Improving quality and aligning professional development at the local level;
 - Increasing the number of slots and/or providers in the community;
 - Pursuing revenue generation for improving quality and access to programs; and
 - Supporting the workforce through innovative solutions that can be implemented locally.
- Analyzing and reporting data, such as an unduplicated child count of children birth-to-five being served with public dollars across funding streams;
- Creating a one-stop shop for families with young children to learn about and apply for early childhood programs and services ; and
- Facilitating a coordinated enrollment and/or intake process to ensure a streamlined process for families.

All of these functions would benefit from state support, but all are also functions that are likely to be most effective with focused local capacity.

Local collaborative structures sometimes have real programmatic authority, and other times just provide connectivity among providers and offer advice.³² Ideally these local structures can produce innovations that might not emerge at the state level.³³ For example, almost half of North Carolina Smart Start networks have successfully secured additional funding at the county level to support early childhood programs. Louisiana early childhood community networks create unique, locally-driven strategic plans to address the most pressing challenges in the early childhood space in the context of their community. These have included addressing workforce pipelines, professional development, quality improvement, and collaborations among schools and centers to maximize the use of space in providing mixed delivery opportunities.

Our conversations with the Working Team and individual leaders in the community suggest that Rhode Island has a very limited appetite for robust local structures. If that is the case, there may still be value in creating at least some level of community-level capacity to address functions best addressed locally. These efforts might help bring together actors from different sectors – such as municipal government, school districts, and early childhood providers – and assist with role clarity and coordination. Some states have developed guidance documents or toolkits to support the work of local collaboration.

Along those lines, as the state thinks about its oversight responsibilities at the state level, it should think about how those interact with the opportunities for capacity-building at the local level. There are two different paths that would reflect this potential value:

- Acknowledge the importance of revisiting the state-local dynamic, but focus for the moment on developing a state structure that is well suited to managing that dynamic on an ongoing basis.³⁴
- Focus on building local capacity as a method for mitigating the local impact of fragmented state government, and then use the lessons from that local capacity to shape future changes in state oversight.

Either of these approaches could strengthen the functions of the Rhode Island system.

³² Id. at 34.

³³ Id. at 37-38.

³⁴ Id. at 38-39.

One asset to leverage in establishing local collaborations is the Head Start community. By federal law Head Starts are required to collaborate with local early childhood partners and K-12 schools. Any plan for local collaboration should build on those federal requirements and take advantage of the capacity Head Start brings to local early childhood systems. Rhode Island can also leverage its Health Equity Zones, a community-level public health collaboration implemented statewide and developed to address socioeconomic and environmental conditions that drive disparities and improve health outcomes. These Health Equity Zones previously piloted supports for families with young children through family programming and Family Navigators.

Another important element of the local dynamic is the role of school districts. As described in the landscape analysis, many school districts in Rhode Island are not really actively involved with the early childhood system. That is certainly not a problem unique to Rhode Island.³⁵ But Rhode Island's strategies for engagement with school districts will need to be shaped by its unique context, and potentially its overall approach to governance. In some states school districts are key leaders of local early childhood coalitions, but in other states they are barely involved – or engage in ways that private providers find challenging.³⁶ Local collaboration efforts in other states allow for more productive, collaborative relationships that maximize limited resources to engage families, offer cross-sector professional development, plan for increased demand, and more.

We note that one challenge identified in this process was the difficulty in defining “local.” In many states “local” is tied to a county, or to municipalities; in other states school districts are a defining unit for local collaboration; and other states take a more regional approach. In a state the size of Rhode Island it is not obvious what the right unit of “local” should be. Answering that question definitively is outside the scope of this System Analysis, but could be part of any next phase of governance work.

B. Interagency Connections

Regardless of what governance approach the state chooses, there will be a need for interagency connectivity.³⁷ Even when states have created new agencies focused on early childhood, those agencies have generally dealt primarily with early education and care; child welfare, health, and other key services for young children remain housed elsewhere. One way or another, the state will need to have a strategy for addressing issues that fall at the junction points among multiple agencies.

The Children's Cabinet is currently the body in the best position to address these issues. While to date the Cabinet has not been focused on driving an overall agenda for early childhood – or leading deep problem-solving on the kind of complex issues that can fall at the boundaries of multiple agencies' jurisdiction – it could be turned into a body with those responsibilities. That would require the focused leadership of the Governor and his core team, and potentially additional staff support.³⁸ Many states have struggled to turn Children's Cabinets into true engines of leadership and change; while most efforts to do so have been unsuccessful, there have been some promising successes – including Georgia during the administration of Gov. Sonny Perdue, and South Carolina today.

This kind of high-level leadership is important, but should also be complemented by collaborative efforts at the managerial level. As described above, in recent years that managerial collaboration has been valued by participants from multiple agencies. Preserving that kind of engagement in any new structure should be a priority for the state, and ensuring that there is capacity to support this kind of work will be a key aspect of any transition plan.

³⁵ Regenstein, E. (Feb. 2019). [Why the K-12 World Hasn't Embraced Early Learning](#).

³⁶ Getting There from Here 35.

³⁷ Getting There from Here 59-61.

³⁸ Samantha Aigner-Treworgy – the former Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care – recommended that the state take this approach to build system coherence.

The Children’s Cabinet is populated by leaders from inside government; the Early Learning Council is the state’s table for inside-outside collaboration.³⁹ Whatever model Rhode Island chooses, the state would benefit from having a clear mandate for the Early Learning Council that takes advantage of the unique combination of stakeholders it engages. Indeed, if the state changes governance models its transition plan should leverage the Council as a resource in managing the establishment of a new structure.

³⁹ The federal [Head Start Act](#) requires all states to have State Advisory Council that brings together leaders from inside and outside government. 42 U.S.C. 9837b(b). Federal law specifies certain required members and tasks for the Council, which states can then supplement. The Early Learning Council is Rhode Island’s designated State Advisory Council.

VI. CONCLUSION

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 Working Group recommends that the agencies 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. The Working Group recommends creating a process within the existing budget development cycle in which the early childhood agencies propose their budget requests, which can be coordinated across programs -- allowing the Governor, General Assembly, and the public to review and consider funding utilization and proposed initiatives across the system as a whole. The Working Group recommends that the agencies work together to publish an annual report on system spending and performance outcomes that allows the Governor, General Assembly, stakeholders, and the public to understand the overall funding and impact of the entire early childhood system. This annual report could be a valuable tool in preparation of the state's annual budget. The agencies can alternate as "lead" agency to ensure completion on an annual basis.

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

- Stakeholders expressed concern that they must comply with different definitions of quality that are at times in tension. The Working Group recommends that the agencies 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 Working Group recommends that the agencies engage on an ongoing basis to ensure that supports for professionals are being delivered effectively. Further, the Working Group advises the agencies to 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 Working Group recommends that the state 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, an opportunity exists 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 Working Group recommends that the state 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 Work Group further recommends that the state establish criteria for successful applicants, including expected deliverables and participants.
 - At the conclusion of the pilot program, the Group recommends that the state 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 Work Group recommends that the state coordinate, plan, and implement a strategy for cross-agency family engagement and communications that will create a unified voice of state government on early childhood programs.

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. The Working Group recommends that the state continue to support staff whose primary focus is on the entirety of the early childhood system to assist the state in achieving the goals outlined in this report.

The Working Group recommends that the state develop specific timelines for action in each of these areas, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The Working Group also believes that all of this work would benefit from an updated statutory framework that better defines the structure of the early childhood system. That framework should include a defined role for the Children’s Cabinet and the Early Learning Council. For the state to succeed will require creating strong feedback loops within state government, and between state government and the larger stakeholder community.

The Working Group acknowledges that in the Systems Analysis process there was advocacy for the creation of a new agency. Indeed, the majority of input from stakeholders outside of state government expressed support for that approach. The Working Group does not take lightly the decision to recommend remaining in the Coordination Model; it does so because in evaluating the options, it has come to the conclusion that the effort to strengthen existing systems will have a more favorable cost/benefit ratio than creating a new agency at this time.

The Working Group is grateful to all of the many stakeholders who participated in the Systems Analysis process. It believes that if the state takes the actions described in this conclusion it will strengthen the early childhood system, and thereby improve the experience of children and families in Rhode Island. To succeed will require substantial work on an ongoing basis – including the support of the General Assembly, the commitment of professionals throughout state government, and the active engagement of Rhode Island’s provider community. The Working Group believes that is possible, and hopes that this Systems Analysis will open a new chapter of success for young children in Rhode Island.

APPENDIX A

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

- The team also met with the Family Home Visiting? 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
Kavla Arruda	Program Assistant	Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)
Eileen Asselin	Assistant Director, Financial Management	Department of Human Services
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	Genesis Center
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	East Bay Community Action
Rhonda Farrell	Head Start Association	Tri-County Community Action
Sharon Fitzgerald	CCAP Administrator	Department of Human Services
Alexandra Flores	Early Learning Provider meeting	Family Child Care Provider
Lisa Foehr	Chief of Teaching & Learning	Rhode Island Department of Education
Marisa Gallagher	Early Learning Provider meeting	Connecting for Children and Families
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	
Mee Hassan	Preschool Development Grant Manager	Governor's office
Jennifer Haywood	Head Start Association	Children's Friend
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	

Name	Role	Organization
Lea Kabbas	Family Visiting Provider	
Jennifer Kaufman	Part C Coordinator	Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Linda Laliberte	Head Start Association	East Bay Community Action
Rebecca LeBeau	Director of Data and Analytics	Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Hailey L'Heureux		TEACH Scholar
Alexandra Lloyd	Family Visiting Provider	
Beth Lobdell	Early Learning Provider meeting	Connecting for Children and Families
Stephanie Lutrario	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Phyllis Lynch	Director, Office of Instruction, Assessment, & Curriculum	Rhode Island Department of 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	
Ana Novais	Assistant Secretary	Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Lisa Nugent	RIDE Early Learning Coordinator	Rhode Island Department of Education
Lisa Odom-Villella	Deputy Commissioner for Instructional Programs	Rhode Island Department of Education
Morgan Orr	Project Manager & Data Analyst	Executive Office of 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	East Bay Community Action
Kara Rocha	Interdepartmental Project Manager	Department of Human Services
Kayla Rosen	Director of Early Childhood Strategy & Children's Cabinet Policy Director	Governor's office
Marti Rosenberg	Director of Policy, Planning, and Research	Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Laura Serafin	Family Visiting Provider	
Mary Beth Slinko	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Jennifer Soucar	Family Visiting Provider	
Theresa Spengler	Early Learning Provider meeting	

Name	Role	Organization
Dulari Tahbaldar	Director, RI Child Care Training Program	SEIU Education and Support Fund
Joseph Tomchak	Business Owners in Child Care Association	Boys and Girls Club of Newport
Lourdes Urena	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Mary Varr	Head Start Association	Woonsocket Head Start Child Development Association
Emma Villa	Early Learning Provider meeting	Family Child Care Provider
Amy Voegel	Early Learning Provider meeting	Dr. Day Care/Kids Klub
Kristy Whitcomb	Director for the Center for Early Learning Professionals	Education Development Center
Elizabeth Winangun	Deputy Chief of Staff	Governor's office
Deborah Zakowski	Early Learning Provider meeting	
Denise Zanzarov	Family Visiting Provider	
Lifen Zhong	Early Learning Provider meeting	East Bay Community Action

The team also spoke to early childhood leaders in other states about their governance choices. Those sources are listed here.

Name	Role	Organization
Susan Steele	Co-chair	Colorado Early Childhood Leadership Commission
Beth Bye	Commissioner	Connecticut Office of Early Childhood
Samantha Aigner-Treworgy	Former Commissioner	Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care
Kirsten Baesler	Superintendent of Public Instruction	North Dakota Department of Public Instruction
Dana Hepper	Director of Policy & Advocacy	Children's Institute (Oregon)
Safiyah Jackson	Chief Strategy Officer	North Carolina Partnership for Children
Christopher Jones	Executive Director	North Dakota Department of Human Services
Amy O'Leary	Executive Director	Strategies for Children (Massachusetts)
Elena Trueworthy	Deputy Commissioner	Connecticut Office of Early Childhood
Michael Weinberg	Education Policy Officer	Thornburg Foundation (New Mexico)

APPENDIX B

Schedule of Open Meetings & Forums for the Governance Systems Analysis Process:

Meeting	Date
Working Group on Early Childhood Governance – Meeting 1	October 25, 2022
Working Group on Early Childhood Governance – Meeting 2	November 30, 2022
Early Learning Council Meeting	December 7, 2022
Working Group on Early Childhood Governance – Meeting 3	February 9, 2023
Early Learning Council Meeting	March 29, 2023
Working Group on Early Childhood Governance – Meeting 4	May 4, 2023
Early Learning Council -- Special Input Session for State Working Group on Early Childhood Governance (Zoom)	June 15, 2023
Open Forum: Early Learning Provider Roundtable (Zoom)	June 20, 2023
Open Forum: Family Visiting Provider Roundtable (Zoom)	June 21, 2023
Open Forum: Early Childhood Governance Roundtable (Zoom)	June 22, 2023
Early Learning Council Meeting	June 28, 2023
Early Childhood Professionals Roundtable (Zoom)	June 28, 2023
Working Group on Early Childhood Governance – Meeting 5	July 27, 2023
Working Group on Early Childhood Governance – Meeting 6	August 22, 2023
Open Forum: Discussion on Emerging Recommendations (Zoom)	August 24, 2023
Early Learning Council – Special Session on Early Childhood Governance (Zoom)	August 30, 2023
Early Learning Council Meeting	September 27, 2023
Working Group on Early Childhood Governance – Meeting 7	September 28, 2023
Open Forum: Input on Developing Recommendations (Zoom)	October 11, 2023
Open Forum: Input on Developing Recommendations (Zoom)	October 19, 2023
Early Learning Council – Special Session on Early Childhood Governance (Zoom)	October 31, 2023
Working Group on Early Childhood Governance – Meeting 8	November 16, 2023
Early Learning Council – Special Session on Early Childhood Governance (Zoom)	November 17, 2023
Early Learning Council Meeting	December 13, 2023
Working Group on Early Childhood Governance – Meeting 9	December 13, 2023

APPENDIX C

Assumptions and Data Notes for Financial Analysis

The SFY2023 financial analysis for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programs in Rhode Island is founded on specific assumptions and data sources. It should be noted that this analysis depends on information and assumptions provided by the respective departments and agencies.:

- **Estimations for FY23:** This analysis is built upon estimations for FY23, combining budgets for FY22, FY23, and in some instances, actual figures for FY23. These values are indicative and subject to potential revision as departments provide updated information for FY23.
- **Exclusion of Funding Sources Not Managed by the State:** This analysis specifically focuses on state-managed resources within the Rhode Island early childhood system, excluding federal Head Start and Early Head Start funding that directly goes to grantees. Notably, the \$34.3 million federal funding for Rhode Island programs in FY22 falls outside this analysis as it is managed independently of the state. Other examples of excluded funding sources include private contributions, philanthropic funds, etc.
- **Included Head Start Funding:** Although the majority of Head Start funding goes directly to grantees and is not part of the state budget or this analysis, certain federal and state funding is integrated into this analysis. For instance, federal funds allocated for the Head Start Collaboration Office within DHS and state-appropriated dollars for additional expenses in six community-based organizations, already receiving federal funds, are considered. These dollars are overseen and distributed by the Head Start Collaboration Office under DHS.
- **Allocation Assumptions for Individual Program Costs:** Each department provided data on their ECCE-related expenses, but the breakdown of program-specific costs was not clearly defined. Program costs were estimated using percentage allocation assumptions guided by the respective departments.
- **Staff Allocation and FTE Counts:** Staff contributions to ECCE programs were determined by estimating the percentage of each staff member’s time. This allocation accounts for the multifaceted roles of staff, with some staff members recorded at FTE counts as low as 0.1, reflecting the many duties a single FTE includes.

Figure 1: Total estimated Rhode Island ECCE spending in SFY2023

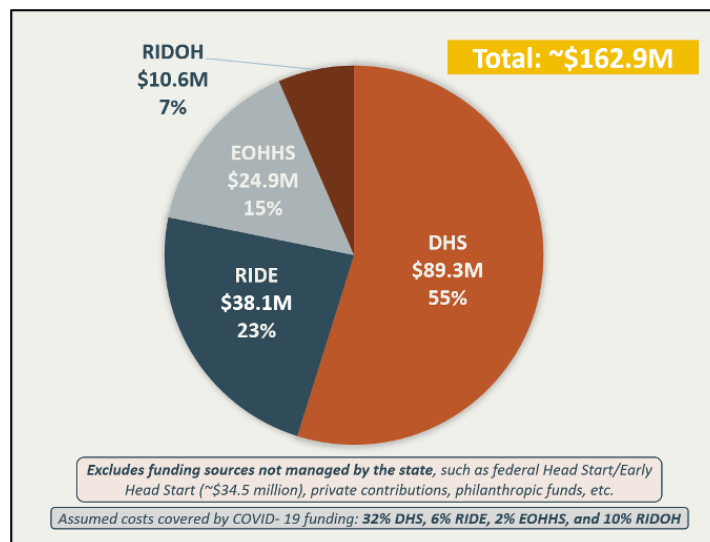


Figure 2: Total estimated Rhode Island ECCE spending in SFY2023, excluding one-time COVID-19 federal funding

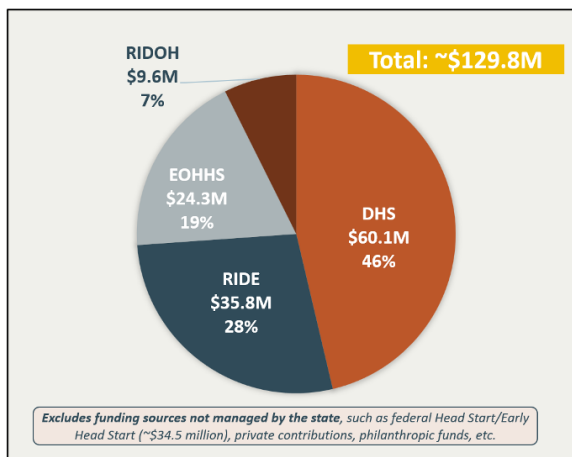


Figure 3: Total estimated Rhode Island ECCE spending in SFY2023 by funding source

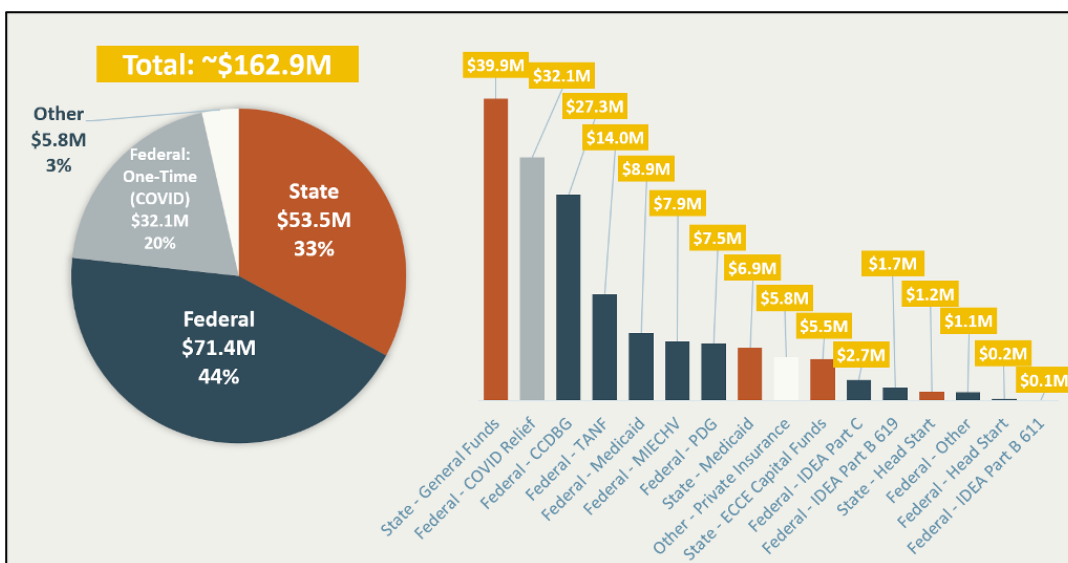


Figure 4: Total estimated ECCE spending by Rhode Island’s Department of Human Services in SFY2023 by funding source

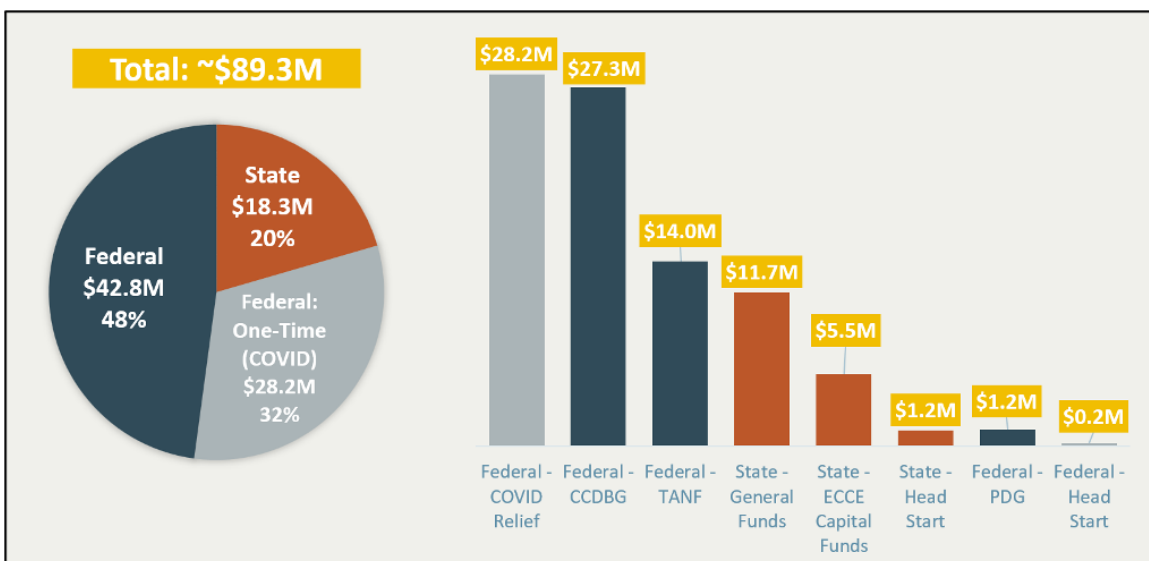


Figure 5: Total estimated ECCE spending by Rhode Island’s Department of Education in SFY2023 by funding source

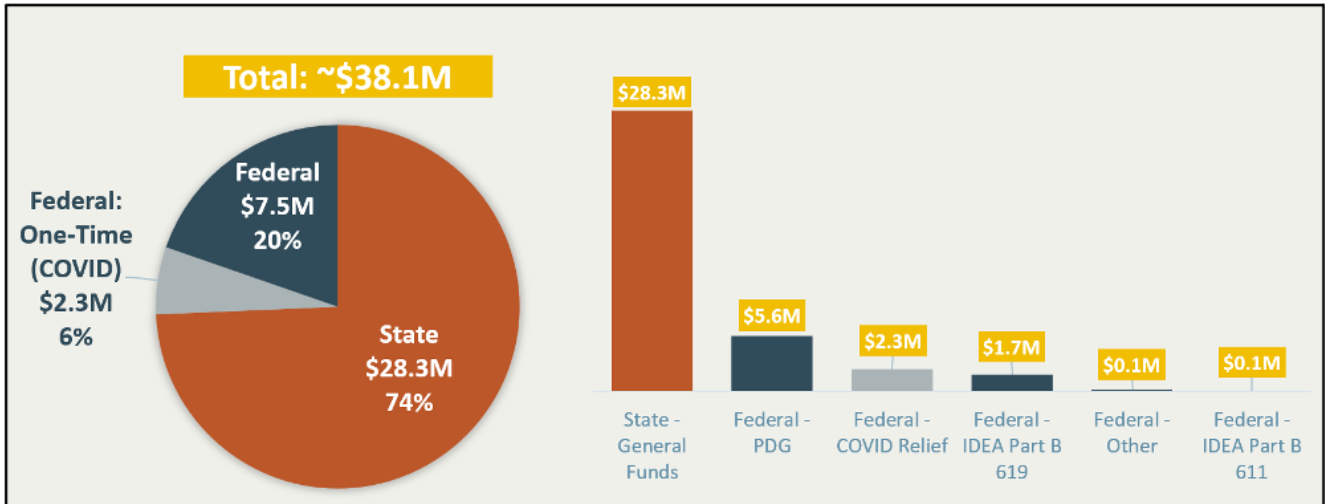


Figure 6: Total estimated ECCE spending by Rhode Island’s Executive Office of Health and Human Services in SFY2023 by funding source

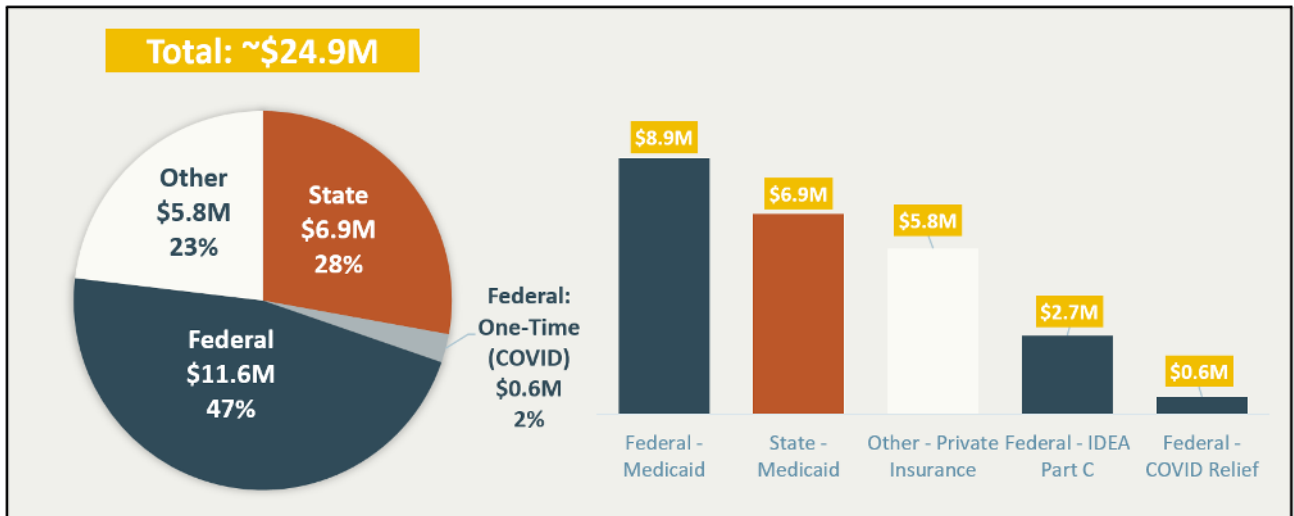


Figure 7: Total estimated ECCE spending by Rhode Island’s Department of Health in SFY2023 by funding source

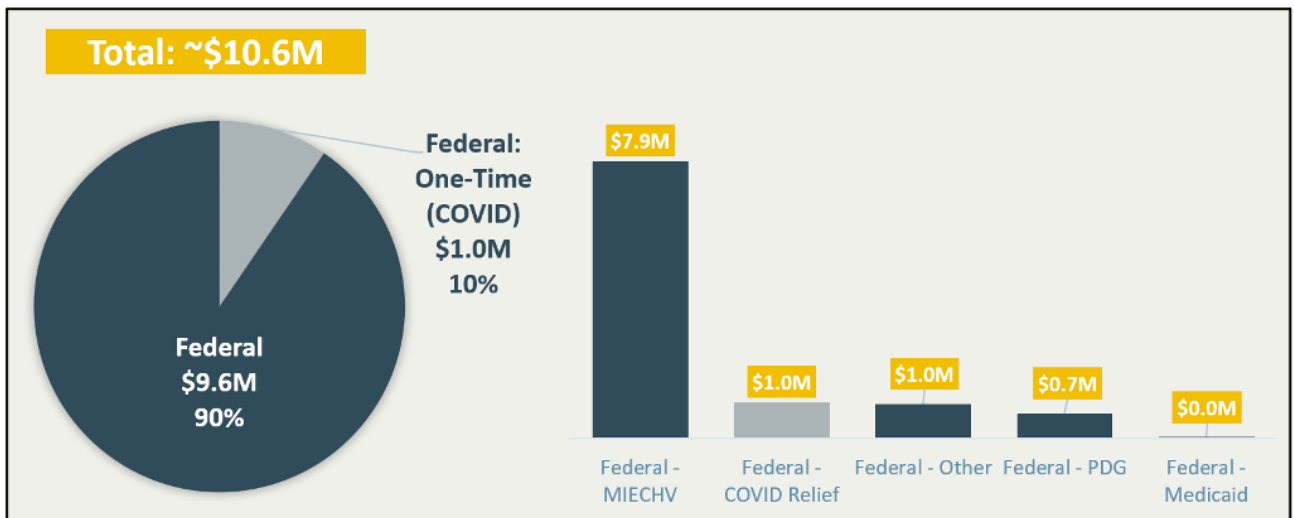


Figure 8: Total estimated Rhode Island ECCE spending by individual program

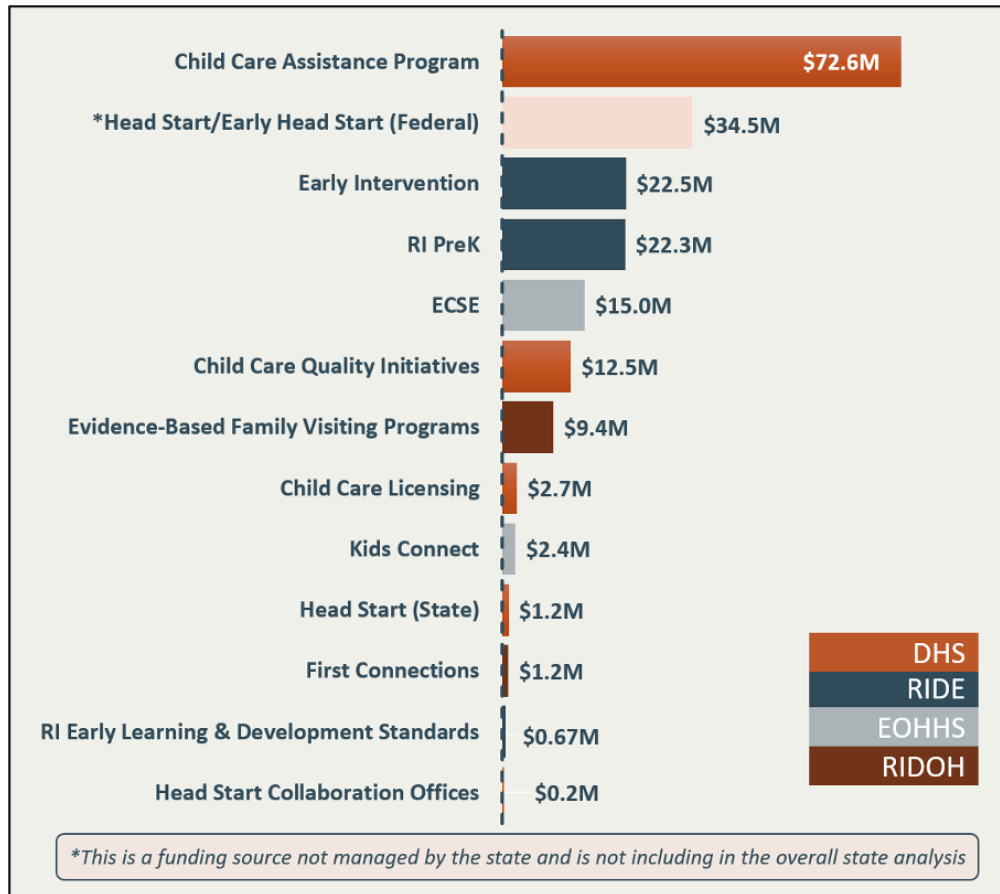


Table 1: Total estimated Rhode Island ECCE spending in SFY2023 by department

	DHS	RIDE	EOHHS	RIDOH	Total
Total Cost	\$89.3M	\$38.1M	\$24.9M	\$10.6M	\$162.9M
	(55%)	(23%)	(15%)	(6%)	
% of COVID Dollars	32%	6%	2%	10%	20%
State FTE*	28	5.94	2.95	5.63	42.52
State Personnel Costs*	\$4.8M	\$0.9M	\$0.4M	\$0.8M	\$6.9M
State Admin Supports (Contracts)	\$1.9M	\$0.7M	\$0.0M	\$0.0M	\$2.6M
System Supports (Contracts)**	\$18.6M	\$1.6M	\$2.1M	\$0.8M	\$23.0M
Direct Services	\$62.8M	\$34.9M	\$22.4M	\$8.5M	\$128.5M
Central Services	\$1.3M	\$0.0M	\$0.0M	\$0.5M	\$1.8M

*These counts and costs were estimated based on each person’s time associated with each program – this does not reflect each person’s total time and total compensation

**These are contracts related to professional development of the workforce, quality improvement initiatives, technical assistance, etc.

Table 2: Cost of ECCE governance transition in other states

	Colorado	New Mexico
Appropriation for establishment of a new department*	\$326k (FY21-22)	\$1.25M (FY 20)
Executive leadership FTE**	1.8 (FY21-22)	8 (FY 21)
Budget justification language	<p>In addition to the programs transferred from CDHS, the amounts listed for the Department of Early Childhood represent the funding to support the administration of the new Department.</p> <p>From CDEC FY 2023-24 Long Range Financial Plan (Page 4)</p>	<p>The following amounts are appropriated from the general fund to the Early Childhood Education and Care Department:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. \$250,000 for expenditure in FY 2020 to develop the early childhood education and care finance plan and an integrated data visualization system b. \$1 million for expenditure in FY 2020 to establish integrated field offices and transfer programs from other departments to the early childhood education and care department <p>From ECECD legislation (page 54)</p>

*Additional funds for the department were appropriated in FY22 in Colorado and philanthropy supported costs associated with governance change in both New Mexico and Colorado

**FTE for ECCE department leadership increased in FY22, after the governance transition in both Colorado and New Mexico

APPENDIX D

This Appendix provides background research that informed the assumptions and findings in Section IV.E, as well as details on transition costs in states like Colorado and Minnesota for creating new early childhood departments.

Notes on Limitations & Assumptions

Afton recommends creating a more refined estimate specific to the State of Rhode Island in further study. To create a more refined estimate, the following additional information would be needed:

- **Contextual information on staff roles and specific functions.** Publicly available job descriptions do not reliably match the roles and functions of staff. To reconcile these differences, we would need to determine the function of roles through consulting with department leadership, which was not possible within the scope of this project. Without information on the purpose of FTE, we are unable to determine what, if any, FTE or partial FTE may be redundant and what, if any, additional FTE are needed to fully support programmatic and administrative functions.
- **Contextual information on contracts.** While agencies provided a list of contracts with names and optional basic information about the purpose of each contract, we do not have enough information to identify specific contracts ripe for efficiencies. We identified 11 vendors that have contracts with multiple agencies, but a more in-depth review of contracts is needed to determine the extent to which contractual fees may be renegotiated.
- **More clarity on strategic direction and operational decisions undergirding each model** (coordination, consolidation, creation), especially as it pertains to the state's desire to improve quality of ECCE administrative and programmatic leadership. Without an understanding of the extent to which the state seeks to improve current ECE infrastructure, a cost assessment can only be based on continuity of level of service. Other decisions needed to inform this study would include but are not limited to preferences for staffed roles vs outsourcing, desire to enhance local early childhood systems, and state approaches to administrative supports. Without this additional information, we are unable to fully determine parameters for a cost study.
- **Cost of transition is highly predicated on several factors that remain unknown.** Most notably, as mentioned above, these include the extent to which the state seeks to improve quality of administrative and programmatic supports, but also the desire to increase statewide engagement, the degree to which the state seeks to invest in workforce and development infrastructure to improve overall system quality, and the degree to which the state seeks to improve administrative systems (such as data and accounting systems) within the agency or agencies of the future. Transition costs to create a new agency also range widely, so additional conversation about the state's budget and desired approach to governance change would help to inform this model.

For these reasons, assumptions have been used and are noted throughout. Once the state has more clarity on its desired direction, a cross-agency group of representatives should guide a more refined cost study.

State Transition Examples

New Mexico: New Mexico launched the Early Childhood Education and Care Department (ECECD) in July 2020, receiving programs from the Children, Youth and Families Department as well as the Public Education Department. The new agency includes Child Care Services, PreK and Early PreK, Family Nutrition, Home Visiting, Families FIRST, Family Infant and Toddler (FIT) Program and the Head Start Collaboration Office. New Mexico appropriated a total of \$1.25 million for the establishment of the new department, with \$250,000 for the development of a finance plan and an integrated data visualization system and \$1 million to establish integrated field offices and transfer programs.

Colorado: Colorado established the new Department of Early Childhood (DEC) in July 2022, bringing together programs from the Department of Human Services, Department of Public Health and Environment, and Department of Education. Prior to the creation of the new department, most early childhood programs were housed at the Office of Early Childhood within the Department of Human Services. DEC's primary programs and operations include

Universal Preschool Program, Colorado Childcare Assistance Program, Early Intervention services, and regulating early childhood service providers. In FY2021-22, Colorado appropriated \$326,423 to support the administration of the new department, which included 1.8 FTEs. The following year, the state appropriated \$538,682,159, which accounted for the transfer of programs previously administered by other departments. It also included 208 FTEs. During this time, Colorado appointed a temporary “Early Childhood Transition Director” to oversee the transition of the new agency.

Minnesota: In Minnesota, the newly formed Department of Children, Youth, and Families will launch on July 1, 2024. A combined 37 programs will transfer from the Department of Human Services, Department of Education, and Department of Public Safety. The governor’s recommended budget for the transition is \$20,341,000 from the general fund in FY24-25 which includes:

- \$10,000,000 for dedicated capacity to successfully transition and support the new agency in transfer of programs and costs associated with one-time set-up of systems, analysis, engagement, and implementation processes.
- \$4,344,000 for the executive team of the Department of Children, Youth, and Families.
- \$3,997,000 for a two-year planning and implementation team.
- \$2,000,000 to upgrade the cost allocation plan, systems account management, compliance, and core functions necessary for oversight in the new agency. These expenditures are expected to generate federal matching funds of \$941,000, for a total of \$2,941,000.

Additionally, Minnesota’s governor recommended \$1 million of annual funding dedicated to the Children’s Cabinet, which will align the state’s funding model with best practices from other states. While the Children’s Cabinet has been in statute (M.S. 4.045) since 1993, it does not receive dedicated state funding. This change would lead to updated staffing structures and help sustain the following positions: seven executive team FTEs including: Executive Director, Policy Director, Program Director, Program Manager (1-2), and Coordinators (including tribal liaison and communication supports). Funding will also support equipment, training, and administrative support.

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FORESIGHT LAW + POLICY



DECEMBER 2023



**RHODE ISLAND EARLY CHILDHOOD GOVERNANCE
SYSTEMS ANALYSIS: FINAL REPORT**