Taking Stock of Early Childhood Systems Initiatives:
Selecting Priorities, Planning, and Moving Forward

Introduction

Early childhood systems are complex, with many linked elements and moving parts. To help states make smart choices about where and how to focus their attention and resources, Build has been working on developing useful frameworks and tools to support systems initiatives. This packet provides a work-in-progress overview framework, with five areas of focus. While each area has its own complexities to address and tools to support selecting priorities and planning, it is helpful to periodically take stock of the big picture.

The content of this draft material is derived from the work of and lessons learned from the state leaders, funders, evaluators and other experts involved in the Build Initiative who have contributed so much to the experiential learning process.

In particular, the material in this packet draws heavily on:

- *A Framework for Evaluating Systems Initiatives* by Julia Coffman (August 2007).
- *Toward of theory of change for the Build Initiative: A discussion paper* by Charles Bruner, the national evaluator for the Build Initiative.
- *Building Comprehensive Early Childhood Systems: A Continuum of Systemic Change* (August 2007 draft developed jointly by Build, Education Commission of the States, and Colorado early childhood leaders.)
- The dialogue and conclusions of the Early Childhood Systems Working Group

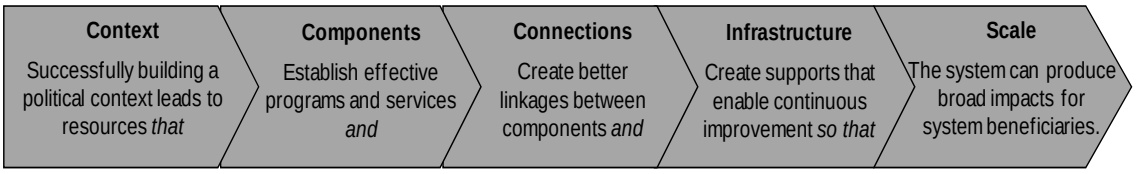
Build states have been creating a culture of continuous learning, information sharing, and experimentation with their systems work. Tools and materials such as the resources in this packet and the material it draws from are helping capture the states' collective learning, along with that of the funders and experts who support them. This pool of resources is benefiting Build and contributing to the broader field of systems building.

Overview

States participating in the Build Initiative tend to be working in one or more of the following five areas to create or improve the early childhood system and its impacts on young children:

- **Context:** Improving the political context that surrounds the early childhood system so it produces the policy and funding changes needed to create and sustain it.
- **Components:** Establishing high performance programs and services within the system that produce results for young children.
- **Connections:** Creating strong and effective linkages across the early childhood system that further improves results for young children.
- I**nfrastructure** – Developing the support systems that need to function effectively and with quality
- **Scale** - Ensuring a comprehensive early childhood system is available to as many people as possible so it produces broad and inclusive results for young children.

These areas are interdependent, working together to produce the impact sought:



Although there is an overarching flow, as illustrated in this figure, systems building is not a linear sequence. Initiatives typically work on multiple areas simultaneously, focusing attention where needs and opportunities are greatest. Though every area will benefit from attention, the highest impact is achieved when areas of focus have been selected intentionally and strategically.

State team reflection

- Which areas (or area) have received the majority of our state focus in the last 12-18 months? What are examples of points of progress we have seen?
- *Which do we want to discuss in the time allotted this afternoon, digging just a bit deeper to identify the success, challenges, and recommendations we see as a group?* Select an area, which may be the same or different from recent areas of focus, that will benefit from attention in the next planning cycle.

CONTEXT
Background & Discussion Guide

Background

Initiatives focused on context attempt to change the political environment that surrounds and affects a system's development and ultimate success. This focus tends to come earlier in a system's development, as it helps pave the way for the system's construction. At the same time, systems also require that context focus be continuous; sustaining support for systems requires vigilance in a regularly shifting political environment.

Most human service systems cannot be built, scaled up or sustained without public funding. Securing these public investments requires political will. Some initiatives therefore focus on building political will and on the elements that influence it, including media attention and public opinion.

Examples of activities to improve context may include:

- Developing a vision
- Educating policymakers
- Educating and engaging the public
- Engaging the media
- Doing electronic outreach
- Organizing – grassroots or grasstops, community mobilization, coalition building

Examples of context outcomes may include:

- Recognition of system need, with supporting evidence
- Shared early learning vision
- Leadership from political and advocacy circles
- Active, supportive public
- Media coverage
- Public will
- Political will
- Policy changes (e.g. increased pre-school funding, increased child subsidy rates)

State Team Discussion

1. Brainstorm examples of Context successes and challenges in your state. Examples may include outcomes, work-in-progress activities, early conversations that are bringing attention to relevant issues – or lack of these data points. *Use the attached worksheet to record a few particularly proud successes and daunting challenges.*

   Tips:
   - ✓ Use the Context Success Indicators to get your conversations started.
   - ✓ Allocate approximately 30-40 minutes to discuss and create your short list.

2. Identify one or two recommendations that can contribute to meaningful progress. *Use the attached worksheet to record your recommendations.*

   - ✓ Remember that amplifying or advancing existing successes is a way to achieve impact.
   - ✓ Allocate approximately 10 minutes

CONTEXT – Success Indicators

Use this sample list of success indicators to get your conversations started.

Recognition of system need

- Emerging body of credible data that:
    - provides evidence of the failure of the current system (or lack of system)
    - includes quantitative and anecdotal data
    - documents systems gaps
- Stated recognition that simply expanding programs is not sufficient to address needs
- Public opinion research demonstrates recognition of EC problems and support for publicly-funded solutions

Shared vision

- Cross-stakeholder forums to shape an EC vision create collective ownership of targeted outcomes and strategies
- Multiple stakeholders:
    - articulate the same messages about EC success
    - seek linked solutions and partnerships
    - identify ways to share resources

Leadership

- Governor/gubernatorial candidates demonstrate understanding of systems gap implications
- Political campaigns make statements/policy proposals that will enhance EC systems
- Systems champions emerge:
    - in legislature and/or judicial branch of state government
    - at multiple levels across agencies and existing organizational structures
    - in community and business sectors
    - in philanthropic community

Media Coverage and Communications

- Targeted campaigns reach multiple stakeholders with consistent messages
- Ongoing coverage:
    - highlights consequences of systems gaps
    - promotes cross-stakeholder links
    - educates families
- Multiple channels, including electronic outreach

Public will

- Public generally understands and advocates for public policies concerning system goals and resources to fund them
- Traditional advocates mobilize and work in concert
- New allies (e.g. business, pediatricians, faith-based, law enforcement) take on advocacy roles
- Private sector resources increase

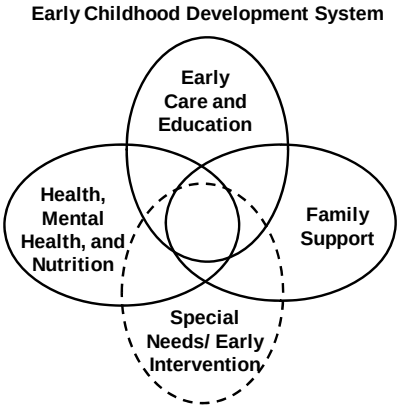
Political will

- Increased political support addresses the array of needs for young children
- Policy proposals are coherent and less fragmented, promoting comprehensive programs, services, and outcomes
- State leaders engage in the continuous process of building trust, establishing priorities and taking strategic action that will support change

COMPONENTS
Background & Discussion Guide

Background

Although a system must contain alignment and have more than independently operating programs, the strength of individual components should not be overlooked as an important part of systems work. The Early Childhood Systems Working Group identified four components of a system:



Optimal developmental outcomes for young children will be achieved when each component is fully developed and when the four components or subsystems connect or align in ways that make programs and services work better for families. The attached summary highlights success indicators for each component.

Examples of activities to strengthen individual components may include:

- Expanding high-quality programs
- Developing new programs or services
- Expanding the effectiveness of programs/services within each component by supporting and expanding dual/multiple language learning
- Expanding eligibility
- Increasing access and availability

Examples of successful outcomes may include:

- New system programs or services
- Expanded program reach or coverage
- Improved program quality
- Increased operational efficiency
- Positive outcomes for children

State Team Discussion

1. Brainstorm examples of component successes and challenges in your state. Examples may include outcomes, work-in-progress activities, early conversations that are bringing attention to relevant issues – or lack of these data points. Use the attached worksheet to record a particularly proud success and daunting challenge for **each** component

   Tips:
   - ✓ Use the Component Success Indicator Highlights to get your conversations started.
   - ✓ Allocate approximately 10 minutes per component.

2. Identify one or two recommendations (within or across components) that can contribute to meaningful progress. Use the attached worksheet to record your recommendations.

   - ✓ Remember that amplifying or advancing existing successes is a way to achieve impact.
   - ✓ Allocate approximately 10 minutes.

COMPONENTS - Success Indicators

Use this sample list of success indicators to get your conversations started.

Health, nutrition, and mental health

- Services for all young children:
  - Primary health care
  - Primary oral health care services for all children
  - A "medical home" with consistent, regular well-child care by the same practitioner
- Primary pediatric health care services that:
  - Provide developmental and behavioral health screening and address broad healthy development needs that go beyond medical conditions
  - Link to other professional service providers for developmental and behavioral services and other community services for family support

Special needs

- Early intervention system (Part C of IDEA) that identifies and serves children experiencing or at risk of developmental delays
- Child welfare system that identifies and addresses behavioral and health care needs of any child who comes into the system
- Child mental health system that can respond to mental health needs of young children
- Ability to identify and address parental mental health, substance abuse, and other parental issues that impact on the healthy development of children
- Early intervention, child welfare, and child mental health systems linked to the pediatric health care system and to early care and education and family support programs

Early care and education

- Affordable early care and education system that is staffed and supported to provide developmentally appropriate, high quality early learning environments for young children
- Preschool for three- and four-year olds that can:
  - Provide an educational and social environment to prepare all children for kindergarten entry
  - Meet the needs of children requiring more intensive, comprehensive services
- Family, friend, and neighbor caregivers are supported to provide developmentally appropriate experiences for the children in their care
- Adequate funding levels assure family choices from a full range of high quality programs (including for babies and toddlers)
- Early care and education programs with:
  - Access to professionals from other fields (e.g. nurse consultants, nutritionists, developmental specialists) to address children's needs while in care
  - Sources for referral and follow-up when providers identify potential issues and needs of the young child or the young child's family
  - Funding streams linked to quality standards

Family Support

- Ensuring that working families have economic stability that enables them to provide safe and supportive environments for their children
- Addressing the needs of non-working families with young children to ensure those young children have their basic needs addressed
- Defining state roles in providing supports to help strengthen families who otherwise will struggle in providing nurturing, developmentally appropriate homes for their young children
- Developing programs and policies that reach and serve those families
- Ensuring that those programs and policies are aligned and coordinate with health, special needs, and early learning programs

CONNECTIONS
Background & Discussion Guide

Background

Systems initiatives that concentrate on connections focus on what makes a system *a system*—the integration, linkages, and alignment between its parts. Connections ensure that, when necessary, the needs of young children identified in one subsystem can be referred to and managed by another. Examples include:

- *On the frontlines* - programs across or within subsystems that share professional development, staffing, facilities, technology and communication, data collection, or funding.
- *At the administrative leve*l - aligned eligibility requirements and enrollment processes, streamlined reporting procedures, coordinated case management, and established protocols and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) for referrals across subsystems.

Examples of activities to enhance connections include:

- Creating forums for cross-sector planning
- Smoothing developmental transitions
- Connecting data systems
- Promoting collaboration and referrals

Examples of outcomes that increase and operationalize system coordination, alignment, integration, or linkages include:

- Shared goals that are clearly articulated
- Memoranda of understanding across systems
- Shared standards that are clearly articulated and monitored
- Cross-system training
- Shared data systems
- Reduced duplication of service (e.g. fewer families supported by multiple case workers working independently)
- Referrals/follow-ups
- Seamless services

State Team Discussion

1. Brainstorm examples of connection successes and challenges in your state. Examples may include outcomes, work-in-progress activities, early conversations that are bringing attention to relevant issues – or lack of these data points. *Use the attached worksheet to record a few particularly proud successes and daunting challenges.*

   Tips:
   - ✓ Use the Connections Success Indicators to get your conversation started.
   - ✓ Allocate approximately 30-40 minutes to discuss and create your short list.

2. Identify one or two recommendations that can contribute to meaningful progress. *Use the attached worksheet to record your recommendations.*

   - ✓ Remember that amplifying or advancing existing successes is a way to achieve impact.
   - ✓ Allocate approximately 10 minutes

CONNECTIONS - Success Indicators

Use this sample list of success indicators to get your conversations started.

Shared goals & Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) across systems

- Broad agreement across the system that::
  - all children and families will have access to high quality services across ECE, Health, Mental Health, and Family Support
  - children with special needs will have access to the programs and services they need
- A system vision that:
  - is continuously refined, with expanded stakeholder involvement and support
  - includes structural, programmatic, and policy proposals
- Commitment to seek new money for cross-system reforms
- Leadership and decision-making that reflects a "whole child" mindset

Shared standards

- Standards that benefit from:
  - Pilots and refinements based on best practices
  - Expansion across the system
  - Formalized mechanisms in place for continuous improvement
  - Ensure high quality standards programs, practitioners and children
  - Alignment within and across domains
- Shared competencies or skill standards for providers and practitioners
- Funding available to support the achievement of shared standards
- Parent satisfaction measures regarding the way service providers "in their world" work together

Shared data systems

- Cross-agency/sector data requirements and protocols pilots
- Collaborative data collection and analysis methods that:
- are refined based on stakeholder input
- Agreement about:
  - data to be collected
  - how to use data for planning, continuous improvement and accountability
- Collection of data that supports achievement of desired outcomes

Cross-system service delivery that benefits young children

- Shared responsibility for procedures and practices that result in:
  - Seamless services across the system
  - Collaboration of case workers serving families
  - Cross-system referrals and follow-up
- Cross-sector partnerships that work jointly towards:
  - Reducing duplication of services
  - Creating, expanding or streamlining of programs
  - Educating families of young children about systems resources

INFRASTRUCTURE
Background & Discussion Guide

Background

Sometimes a system's main problems or needs do not exist as much at the actual point of service as at the level of governance, financing, or other critical supports that challenge their functioning or existence.

Systems initiatives focused on infrastructure make changes that facilitate a system's development and functioning. Infrastructure development helps to ensure that systems have the supports they need to function effectively and with quality.

Examples of activities to improve infrastructure include:

- Developing new governance proposals
- Improving quality (e.g. quality rating systems, standards)
- Developing teachers skilled in/reflecting the diversity of the children
- Improving state-local connections
- Developing better two-way communication (e.g., between and among, state leaders, community leaders, planners, and implementers)
- Monitoring the system

Examples of infrastructure outcomes, which depend on the kinds of supports the initiative aims to establish or enhance, may include:

- Cross-system governance
- A financing system exists that allows funds to flow to a wide range of programs thereby changing the look of the individual system components
- Budgets reflect and support key systems goals, with funding that is less category-specific, more flexible, and more sustainable
- Leveraged use of policies and funding that support the responsiveness and effectiveness of the system (e.g. ensuring that language and culturally appropriate information is available to families across health care, child care, early intervention, etc.)
- Mechanisms for two-way communication (e.g., between and among, state leaders, community leaders, planners, and implementers)
- System-wide use of data
- Practitioner supports

State Team Discussion

1. Brainstorm examples of infrastructure successes and challenges in your state. Examples may include outcomes, work-in-progress activities, early conversations that are bringing attention to relevant issues – or lack of these data points. *Use the worksheet to record a few particularly proud successes and daunting challenges.*

   Tips:
   - ✓ Use the Infrastructure Success Indicators to get your conversation started.
   - ✓ Allocate approximately 30 minutes to discuss and create your short list.

2. Identify one or two recommendations that can contribute to meaningful progress. *Use the attached worksheet to record your recommendations.*

   - ✓ Remember that amplifying or advancing existing successes is a way to achieve impact.
   - ✓ Allocate approximately 10 minutes

INFRASTRUCTURE – Success Indicators

Use this sample list of success indicators to get your conversations started.

Cross-system governance

- Shared and coherent accountability and responsibility across agencies and groups
- Conflicting or inconsistent rules/regulations becoming aligned
- Local infrastructures decreasingly fragmented and increasingly linked
- Universally accepted and used quality rating systems and assessments

Funding

- Financing policy facilitates layering funding from multiple sources for a single child or program
- Cross-sector funding streams are linked to standards
- Active inter-organizational efforts to effectively manage and pool resources
- Budgets reflecting and supporting key system goals
- Resource development formalized and coherent across agencies
- Funding decisions and practices that:
    - Support sustainability of comprehensive systems
    - Are increasingly less categorical and more flexible
- Funding base from diverse resources across public, private and non-profit sectors

System-wide use of data

- Shared understanding of data to be collected
- Shared understanding of how to use data for planning, continuous improvement and accountability
- Data collection supporting achievement of desired outcomes

Communications

- Open, collaborative, goal-driven internal communication among stakeholder groups
- Two-way communication between:
    - state-level leaders and community leaders
    - internal groups and the public/parents
- Core messages continually updated to connect to public's concerns
- Close collaboration among agencies to keep public and policymakers well informed

Practitioner supports

- Professional development includes cross-sector certifications or credentials promoting career development and shared understanding
- Trainings and most professional development predominantly tied to college credit—with one-shot trainings limited
- Formal agreements with higher education systems to promote access to high-quality professional development
- Professional development system ensures that teachers are culturally competent and reflect the diversity of the students
- Professional development is developed and funded to address specialized knowledge about babies and toddlers for caregivers and teachers

State Discussion Worksheet

State_____ Element _____

- ✓ Focus on ONE element you have selected for this conversation.
- ✓ Use the relevant Success Indicators to get your conversation started.
- ✓ If you have chosen Components, identify successes & challenges for each component.

1. After brainstorming examples for your state, record a short list of particularly proud Infrastructure successes and particularly daunting Infrastructure challenges

Proud Successes

Daunting Challenges

2. After identifying successes and challenges, identify one or two recommendations that your team thinks will contribute to meaningful progress.

Recommendation (Comment briefly on anticipated impact and immediate next step(s) required)

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