



INTEGRATIVE THINKING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: Developing Proximate Solutions to Contradictory Ideas in System-Building

2010 Build Initiative National Meeting Framework

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind and still function.
– F. Scott Fitzgerald

This citation begins Roger Martin’s *The Opposable Mind*, which argues that brilliant leaders are skilled in “integrative thinking” – holding two contradictory ideas in their minds and able to reach a synthesis that contains elements of both but improves on each. While focused upon business leadership and success, this observation may be even more relevant to work in systems building.

Leaders in the Build states (along with leaders in other systems building efforts) constantly grapple with seemingly contradictory expectations in their work. They are asked for simple solutions to complex problems. They are asked to develop collaborative processes but to achieve pre-established results. They are asked to expand programs and innovate but reduce fragmentation and ensure coordination. They are asked to work for long-term solutions but show success before the next election.

Fortunately, Build leaders have “opposable minds” and have been able to educate, navigate, and find workable, proximate solutions to many of such contradictions they face in their systems building.

The first part of the 2010 national Build meeting will involve brainstorming on some of these contradictions and how to productively address them – with state Build team leaders introducing the discussions and state evaluation partners facilitating and recording the discussions. These discussions will focus on the set of contradictory ideas shown below, with the first four focused upon products and accountability and the next four focused upon process and leadership.

Contradictory Ideas in Early Childhood Policy Development

Eye on the Prize (Products and Accountability)

- Program advancement vs. Systems development
- High returns on investment vs. Closing the gap in results
- Evidenced-based practice vs. Needs-based strategy development
- Individual accountability vs. Collective responsibility

Contradictory Ideas in Early Childhood Policy Development

Path to Success (Process and Leadership)

- Sustainability of gain vs. Continued change and growth
- Advocacy and mobilization vs. Implementation and control
- State standards vs. Community initiative
- Individual leadership vs. Overall governance

Program advancement vs. Systems development. While programs are needed and simpler to market, they are not silver bullets and cannot be implemented effectively without a systemic focus. Communicating a systems building approach is inherently challenging, as is aligning program advancement and oversight with larger systems building and collaborative expectations.

- How can leaders use opportunities to create or expand programs to further system development?

High returns on investment vs. Closing the gap in results. Return on investment (ROI) analyses have helped to promote certain programmatic investments in early childhood, but they cannot be equated with what is needed to close the gap in results. For reasons of fairness and equity, society has a responsibility to address opportunity gaps that low-income and minority children may face and to address special needs children have, regardless of whether the solutions can demonstrate high ROI's. Further, programs with high ROI's at best have shown the ability to reduce the gaps for some children and not eliminated them.

- How can leaders integrate efforts to produce good ROI's with goals for closing the gap in results?

Evidenced-based practice vs. Needs-based strategy development. While there are select programmatic efforts that have credibility as "research-based" or "evidenced-based" practice, there is much more limited "hard scientific evidence" of effective strategies for strengthening child and family protective factors and fostering resiliency. At the same time, science is clear that strengthening protective factors is absolutely essential to making major gains in children's healthy development and readiness for success in school.

- How can research and evidence be used to promote both adoption of "evidenced-based practices" and development of effective strategies (and investments) to needs for which there currently is not a strong programmatic research base?

Individual accountability vs. Collective responsibility. Individuals and programs need to be responsible for their actions, but their own actions rarely are sufficient to produce the overall goals for the system. This is particularly true when the goal is to achieve results that can be demonstrated on a statewide level. Often, those at the top establish accountability for overall results, but then ask those below them to be accountable to strategies achieving them, although they are not provided the resources or range of opportunities to do so. This results in establishing accountability systems that do not match what individuals and programs themselves can achieve.

- How can leaders establish accountability structures that create fair individual accountability expectations for individuals while maintaining overall collective responsibility for achieving larger overall goals?

Sustainability of gain vs. Continued change and growth. Early childhood systems are being built, and the change and building process itself must be sustained, while the specific advances that have been made must become an enduring part of the developing system. As states work to develop management structures to manage and maintain advances they have made, they also need to continue to build additional aspects of the system and ensure that management is adaptable, responsive, and innovative in its continued systems building.

- How can leaders create a culture of systems building that both sustains and manages advances while fostering continued growth, innovation, and development?

Advocacy and mobilization vs. Implementation and control. Advocacy can play a critical role in policy development and securing investments, and there often needs to be external pressure on state systems to produce change. At the same time, administrations implement policy and need to have ownership over and commitment to making those policies work, often through regulation and monitoring. This requires strong, if not perfectly aligned, coordination of advocacy outside government with leadership within state government.

- How can state leaders develop as much alignment as possible between advocacy for change and effective management of what works?

State standards vs. Community initiative. Young children live in neighborhoods and need supports that largely are provided within their communities and often in multiple and diverse settings. This requires developing and building upon local community assets and fostering local initiative and collaboration. At the same time, the state has a responsibility to guarantee that some level of supports and opportunities is available throughout the state and a child's likelihood of success is not dictated by community or geography. Federal as well as state standards and regulation for most funding for young children and their families are defined by services and not by geography.

- How can state leaders develop effective partnerships between states and communities in meeting the needs of young children and their families that provide for community contouring of service delivery and accountability to some level of state standards?

Individual leadership vs. Overall governance. Governance structures are designed to be enduring decision-making entities with assigned roles that transcend individual leaders. Multiple types of leadership are needed for systems building, and effective and passionate leaders need to be fostered and new leadership developed. Governance structures set up formal decision-making that may or may not position those with leadership skills in appropriate places. Strategy matters more than structure in achieving results, but structure is needed as well.

- How can state leaders develop both governance structures and leadership development strategies that ensure there are well-positioned, passionate and effective leaders able to achieve systems building work?