

National Association of State Boards of Education

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## Collaborating to Support the Early Childhood Workforce

By Courtney Argenti, Alana Eichner, Winona Hao, and Lauren Hogan

**Collaboration among stakeholders in the early childhood education (ECE) field is often upheld as a goal—and with good reason: It promotes effective, sustainable policymaking, creates consistency, reduces redundancy, and fills gaps across local, state, and national systems, policies, and infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> Yet the obstacles to collaboration are persistent and pervasive, particularly between stakeholders with divergent perspectives and levels of engagement and responsibility.**

We experienced some of these challenges when we—as representatives of the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), the National League of Cities (NLC), and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)—came together to advance the ECE workforce. However, we also found that facilitated collaboration between often isolated stakeholders can result in meaningful change that puts a coordinated system within reach. This aligning and sequencing of work, so that each participating organization operates in a way that works best for their areas of jurisdiction and authority, requires shared understanding of each stakeholder's role and support so each stakeholder can play that role from a position of strength.

A lack of consensus, communication, and strategic coordination across the decentralized, diffuse ECE system exacerbates the gaps between research, policy, and practice.<sup>2</sup> While numerous stakeholders are individually and collectively engaging in important work, much of it continues to be disconnected. Such diffusion of effort spreads limited resources even thinner and, in the absence

of coordination, fosters inefficiency and inconsistency across the system.

### **THREE STAKEHOLDER ROLES**

From the director of a local child care center to the director of a state's child care office, every ECE stakeholder in a state has some decision-making power. In order to untangle the complexities of these interconnected roles, collaboration requires understanding how each stakeholder advances the ECE workforce and the opportunities for and limitations of the exercise of their powers.

**State Policymakers.** State boards of education and other state policymakers generally have the authority to create and strengthen workforce policies. They can convene stakeholders to get input, allocate funding, set workforce standards and guidelines, and build accountability systems. During policy implementation, state education agencies, which state boards often oversee, can provide technical assistance and share information and best practices for implementation.

**Local Policymakers.** Regardless of their unique state and community contexts, local leaders can highlight the importance of early childhood educators and the need to support them better. They can allocate funding for professional development or tuition supports for higher education, convene groups to better align workforce support efforts, and advocate for ECE investment at the state level to build upon federal investments.

**Professional Associations.** Professional associations and related organizations that represent the ECE workforce across settings can develop and advocate for policies, standards, and practices—from certification to accreditation to state professional development systems—that can then be adopted and embedded in local, state, and federal

policy. As the profession is strengthened, ECE professional associations, like those of other professions, can facilitate a shared understanding of the scope of practice and ethical standards for conduct. Associations also play a crucial role in ensuring that specialized knowledge and skills are tied to evidence, uniformly taught across institutions of higher education, and appropriately and capably used in practice.<sup>3</sup>

### **MULTILEVEL COLLABORATION**

With support from the Foundation for Child Development, NASBE, NLC, and NAEYC began partnering in 2016 on parallel strands of state and local work to help cohorts of leaders advance the early childhood workforce. For NASBE, this meant an Early Childhood Education Network, spanning four states; at NLC, the Cities Supporting the Early Childhood Workforce project took place in five cities; and at NAEYC, affiliates in five “deep-dive” states received in-depth support as part of the larger Power to the Profession (P2P) initiative. Looking back on our efforts to coordinate these strands, we can reflect on the preliminary steps toward effective collaboration. While launching and sustaining collaboration and alignment can be daunting, costly, and time-consuming, sometimes small steps—a well-placed phone call or a timely facilitated connection—can advance cross-sector work. All stakeholders can participate in efforts like these, as part of a strategy toward deeper integration and collaboration.

**Michigan.** In Michigan, we facilitated connections designed to prevent overlap and foster new opportunities. NASBE and NLC, for example, connected state-level actors with local leaders in the Grand Rapids community, while Michigan AEOYC participated with the NASBE network in working toward building a well-qualified, aligned workforce serving birth through age 8. We found that state leaders at the Michigan Department of Education and local stakeholders in Grand Rapids, while working on similar issues, had much to learn about each other's efforts. By making these connections, we gave each stakeholder a chance to share what specific

information and actions they needed from each other to increase the likelihood that the efforts of each would succeed.

With Michigan AEYC and NASBE, we found that the NASBE state team had established goals—such as defining the ECE workforce—that were already being undertaken elsewhere, including the P2P initiative. While not technically in a NAEYC “deep-dive” state, Michigan AEYC’s familiarity with P2P allowed them to elevate its work, secure the agreement of the NASBE-led group to recognize the role of the profession in this area, and help them prepare to uphold those recommendations in future actions they could lead. By sharing resources, opening access, and widening lines of communication, all stakeholders gained understanding of others’ work, while challenging assumptions about their own and others’ roles and responsibilities.

**New York.** As a state board in the NASBE network, the New York Board of Regents established the Early Childhood Blue Ribbon Committee to advise the Regents’ Early Childhood Workgroup on state budget investments, education policy, and legislative initiatives. The board has jurisdiction over content standards, higher education, and licensing, all of which are critical areas in advancing the early childhood profession.<sup>4</sup> Yet it had been a somewhat undervalued ECE stakeholder. Thus its establishment of the blue ribbon committee—whose membership comprised national, state, and local stakeholders such as the New York AEYC and members of the Early Childhood Advisory Council—was important. NLC worked to ensure that leaders outside New York City were brought to the NASBE table. For example, Rochester Mayor Lovely Warren’s office hosted a summit in April 2018 to convene a diverse group of local stakeholders with co-chairs of the state board’s Early Childhood Workgroup. The summit elevated the voices of local leaders, who particularly felt they were heard when the state co-chairs committed to relaying local feedback to their state-level counterparts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Building authentic, lasting partnerships is hard and takes time, especially when efforts cross levels of government and nonprofits

that are often siloed. Nonetheless, we owe it to children, families, educators, advocates, and state and local policymakers to connect and coordinate, with the goal of recognizing and respecting each other’s expertise and influence. We learned tried-and-true lessons from our collaborations and elevate these recommendations for state, local, and non-profit ECE leaders:

**Don’t skip the step of establishing a clear vision and shared goals.** Partners should connect, early and often, with leaders and participants of related projects to clarify parameters. They should build on existing partnerships and infrastructure in a state and recognize that many states have multiple, simultaneous ECE workforce efforts.

**Make sure the right stakeholders are in the right rooms at the right times.** Leaders in a collaboration must look to all levels of government and the ECE workforce itself to define which stakeholders need to be present to achieve leaders’ vision and goals and when they need to be brought in. Partners should air and address their preconceived notions about other institutions’ work and priorities and reflect on their implicit and explicit biases in order to build relationships and create trust. They should ask, “What is the purpose of joining together? What will success look like if we achieve it? When do we achieve it?”

**Recognize strengths, define roles, align responsibilities, and adapt to context.** To change the way partners work together, sometimes they must change how they work separately. For instance, they may need to adapt to other entities’ practices and policies related to rules, procedures, monitoring, and reporting.<sup>5</sup> It is also important to understand that local governments have varied relationships with state policymakers. Roles and responsibilities that facilitate good collaboration between New York City and New York state, for example, are different from what will work between Rochester and the state.

**Build in time for increasing awareness, and match the format to goals.** It is hard to keep devoting time and attention to staying abreast of the many efforts that share similar goals. Yet it is important to share information, identify gaps and opportunities for col-

laboration, and consider how best to do this. Is it a monthly meeting? Could it be done via email? Recorded webinars? A spreadsheet that provides comparisons across goals, audiences, and tactics? Respecting and working within the constraints of limited time and resources is critical.

**Leverage national organizations and peer learning to make connections, share resources, and provide technical assistance.** From NLC’s guides to action for local leaders to NAEYC’s blueprint and indicators for state professional development systems to NASBE’s policy recommendations, each national organization offers significant resources to help states and communities invent only the part of the wheel that is specific and adapted to their context. Pulling people together helps early childhood educators, local community leaders, and state government agencies build trust, which will ultimately sustain reform. State boards, city leaders, and professional organizations can lay the groundwork for continued interaction and learning among stakeholder groups, even after funded initiatives end.

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## NOTES

1 Gerry Cobb and Karen Ponder, “The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems through State/Local Initiatives” (Boston: Build Initiative, 2014); Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2015), 288, <https://doi.org/10.17226/19401>.

2 IOM and NRC, *Transforming the Workforce*.

3 Laura Bornfreund and Stacie G. Goffin, “You Can’t Have Professionals without a Profession” weekly article (Washington, DC: New America, Sept. 15, 2016).

4 Laura Bornfreund and Lauren Hogan, “Uncovering the Inner Workings of States’ Early Childhood Policies: Results from a New Tool for Changemakers Focused on Transforming the Workforce” (New York and Washington, DC: NAEYC and New America, 2017).

5 Elliot Regenstien and Katherine Lipper, “A Framework for Choosing a State-Level Early Childhood Governance System” (Boston: Build Initiative, 2013).

# NASBE

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