

Texas is considering whether and how to reorganize its early childhood services. To date, 14 states have created new agencies dedicated to early childhood, and more than half have done so since 2020. Through [conversations](#) with dozens of key leaders in several of those states, and a comprehensive cataloging of each states' [early childhood governance structure](#), my research team at the Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center has identified key themes that are important for Texas to consider while discussing the governance of its early childhood services.

First, establishing a clear vision and goal for what Texas is trying to achieve is key. Although there is substantial variation across the country, we see three patterns in state goals: workforce participation among parents, school readiness, or whole child and family strengthening. How you organize your programs and services should clearly align with your goals.

Second, change typically takes a long-term commitment. Most states that have reorganized their early childhood services spent 5 to 10 years planning and determining what their shared goal is, how they will reorganize, how they will fund it, and more. Engaging with community leaders and considering how regional governance will be impacted is imperative to success. When change actually happens, it is done fairly quickly (and often on a small budget), because thoughtful planning among advocates and administrators preceded the final decision.

Third, leadership is essential. Early childhood advocates and other leaders can help create a clear vision for their state, however, states that have made major shifts in governance structures have done so when the governor has made it a priority. Having the changes codified in state statute through legislative support is also an important step, but no state has successfully reorganized without strong support from the governor. Additionally, placing a well-respected and highly competent person to lead the new organization is imperative. Change moves at the speed of trust, and the leader of this new organization needs to be someone others will trust.

Fourth, new governance can increase accountability and efficiencies of early childhood services, if done well. Simply moving programs (e.g. child care) under a new department, is not real change, unless the department is reorganized based on a shared vision and understanding of how the programs will intersect. Sharing data, integrating staff, creating shared outcome metrics, leveraging funding – each of these steps will enhance success and allow legislators to understand the value of the new office.

[Virginia](#) and Louisiana offer good models of states that have successfully transformed their early childhood governance, without creating brand new departments. In each state, the goal has been to increase the number of children who are prepared to achieve their full potential when they begin kindergarten. Each state combined their out-of-home early childhood programs - child care, pre-k, Head Start, QRIS, and licensing - within a dedicated division in their departments of education.

The decision to make the move occurred when a supportive governor was in place, following years of advocacy work at the community and state level. Each state also codified the changes in state statute to help sustain the reorganization when leadership in the governor's office changed. Jenna Conway, who is now the State Superintendent of Schools in Virginia, led the change in each state. Importantly, she had the support of the governor and a very senior role in the education department.

The key message to lawmakers and communities was that the state deserved to understand the value of its investments in early childhood, families deserved choice in where and how their children spend their earliest years, and the children deserved the quality environments they need to be ready for kindergarten. Each state leverages funding across programs (where allowed) and shares data among the programs to work toward a common goal.

[Ohio](#) is an example of a state that created a new department with a vision of strengthening the whole family. They combined all the early education programs that Louisiana and Virginia combined, in addition to home visiting, early intervention, and child welfare.

Similar to other states, years of advocacy paid off when Governor DeWine took office and made it a priority. The legislature supported the creation of a new department but did not provide any additional funding and only one additional FTE (the new Director). The state reorganized within a year, and now teams within the department are structured based on function rather than program. This new structure allows them to use data across programs to ensure they are targeting the families most in need and to find opportunities to reduce duplication and increase efficiencies.

The research is clear that there is not one way to organize early childhood services within a state. However, the lessons and examples shared above may help Texas as it works to set a clear vision and implement programs to increase efficiencies for the state and families.

Sincerely,



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