

Elliot Haspel

TX child care governance responses

1. For states that consolidated ECE governance in an existing or new agency, what has success looked like? And what policy or leadership decisions have been critical in making the shift as effective and least disruptive to programs and families as possible? (i.e. could be dedicated funding, a children's cabinet/advisory council to get continuous stakeholder input, a focus on workforce retention/pay, a single budget for ECE, a long transition timeline, etc).

The most successful consolidations are those with a clear theory for why the consolidation is happening. As the Prenatal-to-3 Policy Center says, Despite the growing trend to restructure governance in the early childhood field, research remains inconclusive about the “ideal” governance structure. Therefore there must be an understanding of what the consolidation is attempting to accomplish, concretely. A brief from the Administration for Children and Families lays out a helpful distinction between *coordination*, *alignment*, and *integration* in early childhood governance.

The brief explains that coordination can be defined as “a set of arrangements under which programs and activities work with one another.” Alignment is “the process of ensuring that the policies, regulations, and standards to which programs that serve young children must adhere are configured so that they are nonduplicative, streamlined, and of high quality.” Integration meanwhile “can be defined as the merging of two previously distinct subsystems into one new subsystem that has increased or enhanced functionality,” such as merging of monitoring duties of child care licensing with monitoring for QRIS standards.

Consolidated governance can be an enabling condition for coordination, alignment, and integration. It is especially useful for integration, as two offices that may have literally sat in different agencies can come together physically and structurally. It is not, however, a guarantee: a fundamentally dysfunctional system is going to be dysfunctional no matter how you rearrange the building blocks. Texas should consider: what would a proposed new structure mean for the decision-making processes and the

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day-to-day, week-to-week work of every level of implementer, and how would it reliably result in (positive) different outcomes than the existing structures?

When consolidation decisions are made, a long runway for transition is important. At least one state I am aware of tried to stand up a new department in about 14 months, at the same time the state was trying to implement new programs and policies, and this led to significant capacity shortages, communications breakdowns, and suboptimal outcomes. Adequate funding is important, and consolidation can be more costly than a state may expect: the reorganization of roles and responsibilities can lead to staff turnover or the need for new staff with different skill sets, and nickel-and-diming an already capacity-strained system will reliably result in problems.

2. Have any states improved governance without a full structural reorganization? What has success looked like in those states?

Yes, states have leaned into the coordination and alignment types of governance reform and have been successful at reducing duplication and streamlining services. In many cases this has been preceded by some version of an 'audit' of existing state processes and regulations. This has successfully led to the elimination of unnecessary steps, improvement of service delivery by centralizing points of communication, and increased efficiency due to better process alignment.

3. How can states best sustain the benefits of governance reform as gubernatorial administrations or lead agency personnel change?

A few points:

- Strongly empowered high-level "civil service" leaders (that is, the highest level of non-appointed role) can help maintain continuity and institutional memory. This is similar to how the Senior Executive Service functions in the federal government as key nodes of continuity across presidential administrations.
- Similarly, distributing leadership functions across multiple senior leaders rather than having disproportionate authority vested within a single politically-appointed leader will help with both gubernatorial changeover and the potential of any given leader leaving for either personal or professional reasons.
- The more that state legislatures can codify key pieces and principles of the early childhood system in law – without making it so prescriptive that agencies lack needed flexibility and autonomy, which is a delicate balance – the more

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continuity will exist. (While future legislatures can hypothetically undo the work of previous ones, that is rarer than a future governor undoing the work of their predecessors). This is especially important with regards to identifying dedicated funding sources so that agency budgets are both adequate and predictable.

4. Pre-k, child care and Head Start in Texas each have different rules and standards to follow and different funding models. Have other states moved towards applying consistent standards across programs and, in turn, expected (and seen) similar increases in child outcomes across settings as a result? What is realistic to expect?

I don't have much to add beyond Elliot Regenstein's response that, "This has been a central focus of governance changes in states like Louisiana and Virginia, where the ability to create a unified expectations and supports have been at the heart of governance reforms. In both states the early returns suggest improvements in quality at the provider level – and not improvements in quality as measured by bureaucratic inputs, but improvements in quality as measured by actual child experiences. At this time both of those reforms are too new to demonstrate long-term child outcomes, but the early returns are promising." I agree with him.

I will say, as a caveat, that it's vitally important any attempt at standardization takes into account the diverse needs of different provider types: as a simple example, a licensed family child care provider has a different operational model and needs a different form of engagement with the state than a licensed pre-K program attached to a school district. That is the case more intensely for family, friend, and neighbor caregivers. So even if there is a move toward bringing expectations and support closer together among pre-K, Head Start, and child care, there *must* be room underneath that umbrella for substantial diversification and differentiation of processes. The risk of unintended negative consequences is high if that lens is not used.

5. Is there any other lesson in governance design or implementation that you want to share?

Key links that may be of use:

- ACF governance toolkit (coordination/alignment/consolidation definitions): https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ece/Early%20Childhood%20Governance_A%20toolkit%20of%20curated%20resources%20to%20assist%20state%20leaders.pdf

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- Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center: <https://pn3policy.org/how-states-structure-early-childhood-governance-and-why-it-matters/>
- Center for American Progress: <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/states-look-to-improve-early-childhood-outcomes-through-consolidated-governance-structures/>
- NGA on New Mexico: <https://www.nga.org/publications/strategic-financing-for-early-care-and-education-systems/>
- Rhode Island governance review:: <https://dhs.ri.gov/media/6901/download?language=en>