As more parents and women join the labor pool, states have had to address a rising need for quality child care and early education. As a result, public programs are expanding to support larger and more diverse populations of children who are provided education and care through programs commonly managed by multiple entities. Many policymakers are responding to this growth by changing how these programs are governed.

These new governance structures reorganize and reassign authority over education systems for children ages 3 and older, often by consolidating, creating or coordinating oversight bodies. By doing so, policymakers seek to improve the quality and efficacy of services, more readily address infrastructure needs and improve program reach.

Governance structures typically evolve out of a need for accountability and administrative streamlining. They look different in every state because of the wide array of cultural, social and systemic conditions. In the past year, a few states developed more comprehensive and responsive structures to oversee their early learning programs.

Did You Know?

- State spending on preschool rose from $3.9 billion (adjusted for inflation) in 2002 to $8.1 billion in 2018.
- One-third of the nation’s 4-year-olds—more than 1.3 million children—are enrolled in state-funded preschool.
- The percentage of 3- to 5-year-olds enrolled in preschool who attend full-day programs increased from 47% in 2000 to 56% in 2017.
State Action

State policymakers are tackling a host of issues as state preschool systems grow and become more robust. These include data governance, instructional and curricular alignment, along with workforce professionalization and preparation. Administrative authority over these programs—and the issues facing them—is best determined in statehouses because state legislators create and manage the direction of child care and early schooling systems. The following examples of governance restructuring—consolidation and creation—illustrate how legislation enacted last year seeks to streamline and make accountable state early education programs.

Consolidation. Hawaii began offering prekindergarten for eligible students in 21 public elementary school classrooms in 2014. Over the last six years, the state has been gradually extending its free programs to each of the state’s islands, providing a total of 36 classrooms for up to 720 children. By slowly expanding its prekindergarten program, Hawaii provides its coordinating bodies an avenue to maximize expansion while also prioritizing continuity between pre-K to third grade. In 2019, the state statutorily consolidated administrative authority over both public and private prekindergarten programs within the state’s Executive Office on Early Learning (EOEL), seven years after it was created.

Creation. Prior to consolidating early education program management within the newly created Early Childhood and Care Department, New Mexico functioned under a coordinated governance structure that held three state agencies accountable for all early childhood care and education. As part of a continued focus on reducing duplicative services, the Early Childhood and Care Department is charged with overseeing state early childhood programs and developing the state’s early prekindergarten and preschool programs. This includes coordinating with federal Head Start agencies to avoid duplication of effort and ensuring that available resources are maximized.

Maine’s approach prioritizes identifying opportunities to reduce barriers to statewide coordination and collaboration between existing programs. The state created the Children’s Cabinet Early Childhood Advisory Council to review early childhood policy and services and to inform the initiatives and plans of Maine’s newly reinstated Children’s Cabinet. This option has limited costs and allows commissioners of certain state agencies to direct policies and programs to achieve the goals of preparing children for kindergarten entry and life after graduation. Similarly, Utah’s Early Childhood Utah Advisory Council was created to advise the recently established governor’s Early Childhood Commission by identifying ways to improve communication and coordination between state agencies responsible for administering programs for children.

Federal Action

The progress states have made toward creating and developing public early education programs and the structures that govern them has been influenced by federal initiatives and funding. These include the Improving Head Start Act of 2007 and the Preschool Development Grants Birth-Five (PDG B-5) program. The Improving Head Start Act of 2007 led to the creation of early childhood advisory councils in every state, 25 of which still exist in state statute. These councils have continued to help provide direction and create collaboration and coordination between state agencies managing early care and education programs, ranging from infants’ and families’ programs to Head Start. State advisory councils have also worked with state education agencies to produce policies that support high-quality preschool programs; however, they do not have the authority to oversee any state program.

Congress passed federal funding bills with bipartisan support in 2019, including more than $1 billion in increased funds for early learning and care programs. This does not include the recent funding increase for the PDG B-5 grant program, which aims to help states maximize parental choice and improve transitions and the overall quality of state early learning and care programs.

Additional Resources

- NCCL’s Preschool Through Third Grade Legislation Tracker webpage
- “Early Childhood Governance: Choices and Consequences,” Teachers College Press
- PDG B-5 State Contacts, Office of Child Care, U.S. Administration for Children & Families
- “State of Preschool Yearbooks,” National Institute for Early Education Research

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