

**The Build Initiative**  
Building Early Learning Systems in the States  
A Report on the Fifth Year

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## **Laboratories of Systems Building: BUILD's Emerging National Role in Knowledge Development**

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Build states continue to build their early learning systems, with support from the initiative playing an important role. The Build state teams have been able to use their Build funding and connections to further systemic thinking within their states and to take advantage of opportunities to expand their early learning systems. In particular, Build has helped to broaden actions beyond early care and education and into family support, health services, and programs serving young children and their families in meeting special needs. Build has also supported state activity that recognizes community supports and voluntary networks as a key part of getting young children what they need for their healthy growth and development.

In short and as the individual case studies and the overall Accomplishment Table show (see appendix for Accomplishment Table), Build has supported key leaders within states in thinking and acting systemically in the real world. This has been an unfolding process, involving the continued education and development of state and community stakeholders.

At the national level, Build also has established a Learning Community across the Build states that has enabled cross-fertilization in designing and implementing strategies. In addition, Build has been strategic in forging relationships and collaborations with other early childhood systems building initiatives, including the School Readiness Indicators Project and its State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network, Smart Start and its National Technical Assistance Center (NTAC), and the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Initiative and its Project Thrive Project administered through the National Center for Children in Poverty.

Over the last several years, in particular, the Build work has taken on a national knowledge development role around early childhood systems development. Its Learning Community of states and its collaborations with other national consultants and initiatives have helped to identify specific areas where further knowledge development is needed. In several key areas, Build has taken a leadership role in this knowledge development. It also has been able to bring key leaders together to begin to tackle these emerging issues. Build's leadership has been evident, in particular, in the following areas:

- Developing approaches to governance that recognize stages of cross-system planning, governance and management and the needs for both state and community-level structures;

- Developing a common systems framework across health, early care and education, family support, and special needs;
- Constructing an evaluation and self-assessment framework appropriate for early childhood systems-building work; and
- Integrating a focus on ethnicity, language, and culture into early learning systems-building discussions and strategies.

This role of Build at a national level in knowledge building is the topic of this year's evaluation essay.

## **Planning and Governance**

Systems building requires planning, governance, and management structures that can engage key stakeholders, develop overall plans that extend beyond individual programs and agencies, and establish management and accountability structures to ensure that standards are developed, monitoring and professional development systems created to meet them, and overall accountability structures established to maintain them.

One of Build's unique characteristics is that it has invested in leaders within states to help build overall early learning systems but has not imposed a specific governance structure for this work. Most Build states already had a variety of state planning groups, councils, and other structures charged with developing major aspects of an early learning system, as well as local entities that often developed independently to build such systems.

Throughout the work within states, Build team members have grappled with the issue of how to ensure that necessary planning, management, and accountability structures are in place to push for reform and build systems. At a national level, Build has helped to offer both examples of effective planning and governance structures and important considerations in establishing them.

Collaborating with the State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network (SECPTAN), Build co-produced *Building an Early Learning System: The ABC's of Planning and Governance Structures* in 2004. That publication drew upon the experiences of Build states and School Readiness Indicators Initiative states in first describing the early learning system as a "system of systems," including the health and nutrition system, the early care and education system, the family support system, and the special needs and early intervention system. It established a set of common sense "rules of thumb" for establishing planning, governance, and management systems: (1) form follows function; (2) follow the money; (3) building is done in stages; (4) governance requires consent of the governed to endure; (5) think globally and act locally; and (6) there is no magic bullet or structure that substitutes for passion and leadership. It provides examples of effective governance structures at different stages of systems

development and an overall compendium of current state planning and governance structures. *Building an Early Learning System* itself aligned well with Build's theory of change and offered practical guidance, building upon best practices, for systems building within state government. A joint Smart Start/Build meeting on early childhood system governance was held in August of 2004 in New Bern, North Carolina.

In a second collaboration with SECPTAN, Build co-produced *Beyond Parallel Play: Emerging State and Community Planning Roles in Building Early Learning Systems* in 2006. This publication further addressed the issue of "think globally and act locally" and provided case studies of six efforts to consciously link state and community early childhood systems building efforts – Colorado, Iowa, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Vermont. *Beyond Parallel Play* also provided some of the findings from a joint Build-Smart Start "Beyond Parallel Play" Conference in 2006. Again, drawing upon best practices in the field, Build offered practical guidance to support early childhood systems building efforts to create both state-level and community-level governance structures to develop comprehensive approaches to meeting young children's needs.

Build drew upon both its national evaluation and state evaluation partners in this work, which has been widely used by the early childhood field. One of the strengths of Build in its knowledge development and transmission efforts has been its ability to draw upon Build leaders within the states to provide their insight and feedback on any conceptual models and findings that Build poses.

### **Common Systems Framework**

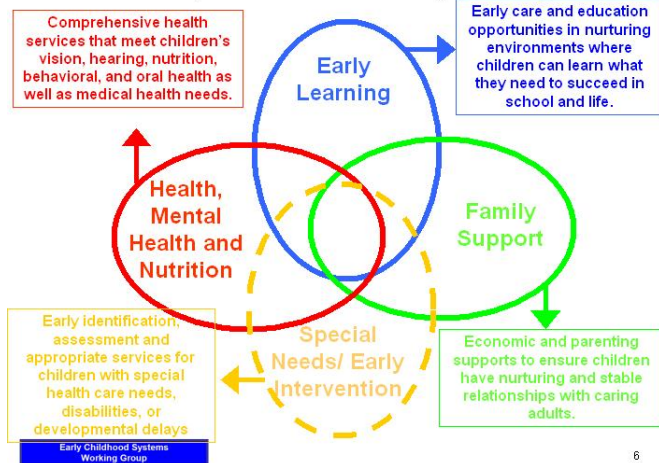
In 2006, Build worked with the Smart Start National Technical Assistance Center to convene a group of early childhood leaders who had been consulting in various states to discuss how to coordinate efforts. These leaders were eager to ensure that their work was aligned, particularly when they were involved in the same states. The outgrowth of the initial meeting was a commitment to share conceptual models and seek to develop a common framework all could employ in describing the elements of an early learning system.

This Early Childhood Systems Working Group<sup>1</sup> adapted Build's "system of systems" framework in creating a common description of an early learning system – composed of: health, mental health, and nutrition; early learning; family

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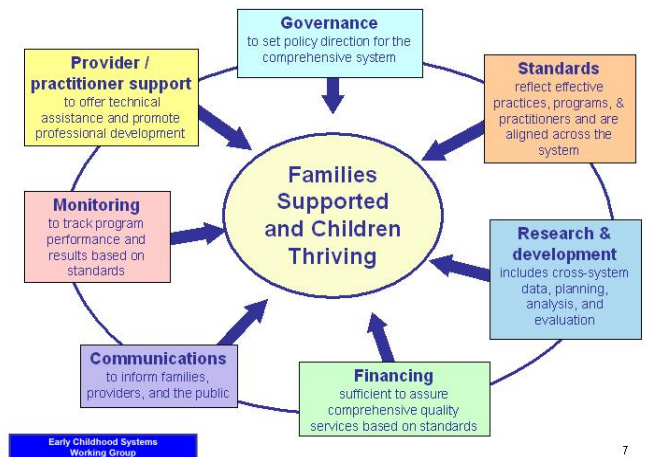
<sup>1</sup> Members of the Early Childhood Systems Working Group are most of the key organizations which have been working with states to build early childhood systems – the Alliance for Early Childhood; the Build Initiative; the Center for Law and Social Policy; the Children's Project; the Council of Chief State School Officers; the National Association for the Education of Young Children; the National Center for Children in Poverty/Project Thrive; the National Child Care Resource and Information Center; the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices; the National Conference of State Legislatures; the Smart Start National Technical Assistance Center; the State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network; United Way of America; and Zero to Three.

## State Early Childhood Development System



6

## Core Elements of an Early Childhood Development System



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support; and special needs/early intervention. Build and SECPTAN played a major role in developing the common definitions for the elements in the early learning system, visually shown on the next page with the earlier *Building an Early Learning Systems Framework*.

The common framework subsequently has been used by the different members of the Systems Working Group, reinforcing within states the importance of viewing the early learning system as much more than early care and education and preschool.

Subsequently, Build partnered with the Smart Start National Technical Assistance Center in conducting a day-long pre-conference session to the annual Smart Start Conference on the framework in 2007, producing more detailed papers on each of the elements of the system. Also in 2007, as part of its Governor's Summit on Early Childhood sponsored by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Build developed additional detailed papers on these systems elements. The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices is producing its own policy brief on the framework, again drawing upon Build's leadership. Build again is partnering with NTAC in conducting a day-long pre-conference session to the Smart Start Conference in 2008, this time focusing upon governance issues in building the early childhood systems and its four component elements.

Build has continued to be a leader in developing the framework, also working with the National Center for Children in Poverty and Project Thrive on ensuring that the health, mental health, and nutrition elements of the system are incorporated into state systems building efforts.

In this work, Build has become a leader in the field not by seeking to take on all responsibilities for knowledge development, but rather by collaborating with others in joint work to take on core policy issues, recognizing and supporting their contributions. Build also has been able to draw upon state and community leader

practitioners both in testing the validity and utility of the overall conceptual models that are developed and delving into the many nuances that must be addressed.

## **Evaluation and Self-Assessment**

As Build’s work has proceeded, both within states and nationally, issues of evaluating such collaborative, systems building efforts have continued to emerge. Build’s own national and state evaluation partners have supported the evaluation of Build’s state systems-building efforts and created self-assessment tools to help track progress and engage in continuous learning. Build’s evaluators also have been involved in national evaluation efforts of other state and community systems building initiatives and are recognized in the evaluation community as well as within Build.

While there have been a number of foundation initiatives to develop more comprehensive early childhood services and systems, a recognized “systems building evaluation field” does not exist to guide evaluation efforts. The issue of fairly evaluating these systems building efforts while continuing to keep an “eye of the prize” of improving results for children has been a major interest in the field among funders, state governments, and those charged with developing the systems.

Drawing upon the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative, national evaluation experts, and leaders in the field in developing early childhood systems, Build convened an Early Childhood Systems Building Evaluation Symposium in May 2007, to flesh out the many issues related to systems building evaluation and to begin to establish a common framework for addressing them. To frame the discussion, Build’s national evaluation partner, the Child and Family Policy Center, produced a case study modeled after those conducted by the Harvard Business Journal and commissioned expert commentary on that case study from practitioners, funders, and other evaluators. That case study, *The Case of Top Beginnings and the Missing Child Outcomes*,<sup>2</sup> was based upon the Build Initiative and served to raise key evaluation challenges in systems building work. The Symposium itself helped to sharpen, if not resolve, these issues, making a particular distinction between evaluating “systems building work,” which entails planning, mobilization, and advocacy, and “systems change implementation,” which primarily involves putting agreed-upon changes in place. The Symposium also stressed the importance of distinguishing among the different audiences for an evaluation and their needs – funders, practitioners, researchers – and designing an evaluation structure accordingly. Finally, the Symposium stressed the importance of evaluating leadership and its development in systems building work, with evaluation rigor and with attention to different levels at which

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<sup>2</sup> The case study and expert commentaries have been accepted for publication in the *American Evaluation Review*.

leadership needs to exist – political, policy, administrative, service, consumer, and community.

Julia Coffman, Build’s New Jersey evaluation partner, then worked with Build to produce an overall systems evaluation framework that emphasized the need for employing different evaluation tools and expected outcomes for different levels of systems building: context, components, connections, infrastructure, and scale. The proceedings from the Conference describe the state of the field and multiple perspectives on evaluation, offering a “state of the field” assessment and pointing to avenues for additional work. The framework already is being used in the evaluation field, both within and beyond specific Build states. Build also has taken the framework and its five levels of system building and created a self-assessment tool, successfully employed both at the national Build conference in 2007 and, most recently, in the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems conference in 2008. Build is working with the National Center for Children in Poverty/Project Thrive in further developing self-assessment tools for the field, based upon the evaluation framework.

As with the other areas where Build has taken on a knowledge building leadership role, one of the aspects that Build has been able to bring to the work is to bring together multiple stakeholders and constituencies. In evaluation, Build has brought funders, researchers, and practitioners to discuss how to evaluate systems building work in ways that can meet all three audiences’ needs.

### **Ethnicity, Language, and Culture**

A fourth area of knowledge development leadership that Build has assumed in early childhood systems building has been on ensuring that such work addresses issues of ethnicity, language, and culture. Again, this work emanates in significant measure from the work within Build’s own states. New Jersey has been a recognized national leader in building a state preschool system, triggered by the Abbott Supreme Court decision and the need to provide equity in educational opportunities, with an emphasis upon New Jersey’s poorest school districts, most with very high concentrations of children of color. Washington State has experienced dramatic demographic changes in its population and has a large native American population as well. Its experience in developing its state early learning standards pointed to the need to employ a multi-cultural lens in defining what children should know and be able to do at different ages and stages of development.

In 2006, both at the “Beyond Parallel Play” Conference and at the 2007 Smart Start Pre-Conference, Build started a discussion among its and other states on how to design and build early learning systems that meet the needs of the diverse young child population. As well as incorporating such discussions into all its work, Build has drawn upon diverse early childhood leaders in further defining

and exploring these issues, through both a small planning meeting and an invitational Summit in 2007.

Build has framed this work around four key themes: (1) closing participation gaps that may exist within the early learning system components that exist by ethnicity, language, or culture; (2) ensuring that programs, practices, and standards are developed through a multi-cultural lens and that are culturally- and language-competent; (3) building an early learning workforce that reflects the diversity of the children and families being served; and (4) structuring planning and decision-making processes that share power and recognize the expertise that exists within different cultural and language groups.

In particular, Build has begun to develop specific policy briefs and reports on these issues and is planning a larger Summit in 2009 to further address these issues. Among the research in progress by Build in this area is:

- An assessment of the experiences and lessons learned of New Jersey's expansion of preschool through Abbott on developing a more-skilled and yet culturally-diverse teaching force;
- A content analysis of a variety of state early learning standards and quality rating and improvement systems and the degree to which they make mention of or incorporate cultural or language elements; and
- A case study of Washington and Alaska's development of early learning guidelines that represent the most extensive incorporation of multi-cultural perspectives of any in the country.

Build has worked collaboratively with leaders of color in the early childhood field in all of this work, as well as drawing upon the experiences of Build state leaders, who often are working in environments that have not given explicit attention to issues of ethnicity, language, and culture. Build also hopes to draw other leaders from the Early Childhood Systems Working Group into this critical discussion for the field.

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While the Build Initiative itself has a small staff, Build's emphasis upon collaboration and coordination with others in the early childhood systems building field has leveraged substantial additional leadership and expertise to knowledge development across the four areas discussed above. The issues of governance, systems building development from a broad and comprehensive perspective, evaluation and self assessment, and ethnicity, language and culture are all critical to building early learning systems that truly ensure that young children are healthy and ready for success in school and life.

While continuing to maintain a learning community among its states, Build's work has evolved to also playing a major role in establishing a national learning community on early childhood systems building. The two, however, are not separate and distinct, but are synergistic.

Measuring the impact of state-level systems building work within the Build states represents a major challenge and there is no single metric to do so. The case studies and accomplishments table show both the richness and complexity of the work, but does not make it easy to ascribe the actual added-value that Build has provided to these efforts and their overall benefit in relationship to the investment.

Measuring the national impact of Build in knowledge development may represent even more of a challenge. At the same time, it is clear that each of the four issues described is much more a part of the early childhood systems building discussion than it was five years ago, when Build began. The issues are better defined and their importance to early learning systems development is more clearly recognized. Build has contributed at least proximate answers to some of the questions being raised. As Build continues, its overall impact upon the early learning field and its knowledge development should be recognized and opportunities for further leadership explored.

## APPENDIX I: 2007 BUILD STATE ACCOMPLISHMENTS TABLE

<b>Build State Accomplishments in Early Childhood System Building</b>							
<i>Note: ✓ denotes something accomplished in the states since Build involvement (if bolded it was accomplished in the last year) ● denotes accomplishments prior to Build involvement</i>	IL	MN	NJ	OH	PA	WA	MI
<b>Infant/Toddler Focus</b>							
Developed/developing infant-toddler strategy	●		✓		✓		
<b>Preschool Expansion</b>							
Increased funding and children served	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Quality Rating System</b>							
Developed frameworks	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
In pilot process	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Moving to scale	✓			✓	✓		
<b>Child Care Subsidies and Access</b>							
Subsidy rates increased	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Early Learning Standards</b>							
Developed standards birth to kindergarten		✓				✓	●
Have developed prekindergarten standards	●	✓	●	✓	✓		
Infant toddler standards/guidelines being developed		✓		✓	✓		
<b>Parent Leadership</b>							
Created council or leadership initiative			✓		✓		✓
<b>Family, Friend &amp; Neighbor Care</b>							
Sites participating in Sparking Connections initiative		✓				✓	
Developing focus or planning around FFN Care		✓			✓	✓	✓
<b>Health, Mental Health Services</b>							
Expanded health coverage	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Expanded developmental health services, child mental health	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Cross-sector planning on EC mental health/health	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Improved early intervention (Part C) and other services for children with disabilities	✓	✓			✓	✓	
<b>Political Will Building &amp; Public Engagement</b>							
Building on gubernatorial leadership	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Engaged in educating gubernatorial candidates	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Significant business outreach and engagement		✓			✓	✓	✓
Public engagement, public relations, communications campaigns launched	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Participating in Born Learning Campaign		✓				✓	
Developed informational websites	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Implemented advocacy campaigns using web technology	✓	✓	✓			✓	
<b>Multi-Cultural and Multi-Lingual Focus</b>							
Thinking and planning efforts focusing on ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse young children and their families	✓				✓	✓	✓
<b>Governance and Leadership</b>							
Created state-level planning/governance structures	✓	✓		✓	●	✓	✓
Expanded/improved state-local connections	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
More integrated cross-sector planning in coordination with the MCH Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems grant	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
<b>Financial and Data Systems</b>							
Early Learning Left Out studies completed	✓	✓	✓	✓		●	
Statewide Economic Impact Studies published	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Cost benefit studies of ECE programs		✓			✓		
Produced school readiness indicators		✓	✓	✓			✓
Conducted kindergarten readiness assessments		✓		✓			
Other significant data collection advances	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓





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