



The Build Initiative

Building Early Learning Systems in the States: A Report on the First Year

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By The Child and Family Policy Center

The Build Initiative was launched in the summer of 2002 to support the creation, implementation and strengthening of early learning systems in the states. Sponsored by foundations that are members of the Early Childhood Funders' Collaborative (ECFC), the initiative focuses on children from birth through age five. The Build Initiative seeks to reshape and coordinate early learning programs, policies and services into an inclusive, broad-based system, so that all young children can be safe, healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed in school.

The Build Initiative (www.BuildInitiative.org) provides grant money and technical assistance to collaborative efforts in selected states to advance the development of early learning systems. The Build states are given flexibility to determine their own planning and governance structures, as well as the scope and shape of their activities. Each state is required to establish a team of public and private sector partners, including state agencies, service providers and advocacy organizations, to undertake planning and implementation.

The Build Initiative is staffed by a national project director, two part-time consultants, and two representatives from the Civil Society Institute, which is the fiscal sponsor. A Funders' Advisory Council, comprised of ECFC members that provide funds to Build, furnishes strategic oversight.

Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Ohio were chosen to be the first Build states. They were selected based on a number of criteria, including their readiness to build comprehensive systems for early care and learning. Each of the states decided to operate in a collaborative, flexible way, with a nongovernmental entity acting as fiscal agent and lead grantee. Each was awarded a grant of \$350,000 for the first 18 to 24 months to design a system, plan and implement strategies, and build public awareness and support.

The national Build team defined the necessary elements for building and reforming an early learning system to include infrastructure development, quality improvement, evaluation, financing and public engagement. The Build work in each state began with the development of a long-term strategic plan to address those elements.

The Child and Family Policy Center in Des Moines, Iowa, was selected to provide evaluation services to Build, using an outcome-based, interactive approach. The first year evaluation was designed to assess the Build states' progress in developing the foundation for constructing an early learning system, particularly in developing a strategic plan and establishing an organizational structure. Center staff visited each of the states to meet with the evaluation partner, participate in a Build meeting, answer questions, and provide support for the evaluation process.



Observations and Lessons Learned

The individual state reports on first year activities reflect broad differences among the four states in background situations, existing structures and supports, stakeholder approaches and expectations. Several observations and general lessons, however, can be drawn from the reports:

- The national Build Initiative work joined an array of planning structures already existing and underway within each state. The Build Initiative needed to learn about past and current efforts within the state. It had to identify the essential roles it could fill and not presume that it would be recognized immediately as the authority in the state on early learning.
- The Build Initiative derives most of its power and potential from the creativity and passion of the core membership of each team.
- The systemic focus of Build has helped to distinguish where it fits and can “add value” to other work underway.
- Strategic planning, information gathering and collaboration have occurred simultaneously, but remain a balancing act. Cross-cutting committees or work groups are being developed and require increasing management skills.
- A “child outcomes” focus is emerging, although this was not the initial or explicit driving force of the Build Initiative.
- Public will building and mobilization are seen as a high priority in all the states. Broad public messages have been utilized so far, but attention is beginning to turn toward developing different messages for specific audiences and enlisting non-traditional allies.
- While all Build states have defined an early learning system in a comprehensive way — to include health and human services, family support and early intervention — most states have focused initially on early care and education.
- Most Build states will need to integrate community-based efforts with their state-focused efforts to build early learning systems. Questions will have to be addressed on whether comprehensive systems are established at the state level or the community level, and the different roles and responsibilities of each.
- As the Build Initiative matures and develops, the issues of sustainability and role clarification likely will become more pressing. All states are faced with the challenge of balancing administrative planning through state government with mobilization and public advocacy from the outside. Creating public and private partnerships that recognize each individual partner’s role may be both the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity for Build.

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First Year Activities and Progress

The first year of the Build Initiative was spent organizing, planning and strategizing. During this time, all four Build states:

- Broadened their partners and stakeholders,
- Established a niche for their work and connected it to the work of others,
- Moved beyond a programmatic focus,
- Expanded their capacity for advocacy and mobilization, and
- Took concrete steps to move specific policy agendas forward.

Each state began to lay its foundation for building an early learning system, doing so in a way that specifically addressed their state's unique needs and circumstances.

Each state also selected a state evaluation partner to observe planning activities, provide evaluation advice, guide data collection, interview key stakeholders, and write a case study. The state evaluation partners each submitted a report on Build work in their state through May 2003. The following is a brief recap of their reports.

Illinois

Lead Organization: Ounce of Prevention

Illinois stakeholders have a long history of working together. The Ounce of Prevention initiated a Birth to Three Project in 1998, involving partnerships with government agencies and other key stakeholders, focus groups with providers and families, and hundreds of stakeholders in working on systems development for children from birth to three years of age.

As the lead Build organization in Illinois, the Ounce convened a steering committee that included Birth to Three participants, but soon expanded the effort to become the Birth to Five Project. Early care and education groups that focused on three- to five-year-olds were added. This wide range of early childhood stakeholders then worked on the development of a logic model, specifying the desired long-range and

intermediate outcomes for children and their families. A strong emphasis was placed on supplementing and supporting existing collaborations that include but extend beyond early care and education services.

Media outreach efforts raised awareness of early childhood policy issues during the 2002 Illinois election cycle, resulting in both gubernatorial candidates voicing positions in support of early care and education. Newly elected Governor Blagojevich then made early childhood a high priority in his administration, and he led a successful effort to secure additional early childhood funding from the 2003 legislature in spite of severe state budget constraints. The General Assembly also created an Illinois Early Learning Council to address early learning issues during this time. Illinois Build continues to strengthen relationships with policymakers and provide advice on early learning.

Minnesota

Lead Organization: Ready 4 K

The state of Minnesota has a long history of support for children's programs. Ready 4 K was established in 2001, with funding from the McKnight Foundation, to build support for a more comprehensive early childhood system, including grassroots organizing, communication to build public awareness, business engagement and public policy development. The Build Initiative provided additional support and credibility for Ready 4 K to play this role and to draw in the participation of public sector entities.

A Statewide Advisory Committee and two subcommittees — the Vision/Blueprint Subcommittee and the Finance Subcommittee — were established to lead the Minnesota Build work. Active connections to communities had already been developed through Ready 4 K community organizers and a three-year, \$6 million initiative supported by McKnight and six Minnesota Initiative Funds to help 36 Minnesota communities create early childhood agendas. Build

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worked to sharpen the focus of the existing work in Minnesota on the development of a comprehensive and integrated early childhood system. It also identified the need for a governance model that encourages local ownership while providing state financing and quality assurance.

The Minnesota Build partnership had hoped the 2002 state elections would result in increased support for early childhood programs, but due to serious budget deficits, they saw a decrease in funding instead. The Minnesota Build Initiative involves governmental partners within its work, while also employing advocacy and campaign strategies outside government to accomplish system reform and system building.

New Jersey

Lead Organization: Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ)

The Build work in New Jersey is integrally connected to the 1998 state Supreme Court decision, *Abbott v. Burke*, which mandated the development of high-quality preschool programs in the state's poorest school districts. The court case resulted in the appropriation of millions of dollars in state funding for preschool programs in the Abbott districts and the development of a strong administrative infrastructure. The Association for Children of New Jersey had organized advocacy and participated in implementation planning for Abbott-related programming, so it was a logical choice for leading Build's work in the state.

New Jersey Build focused its first-year activities in two areas: broadening the partnership base beyond those who had been involved in Abbott, and developing an agenda that includes not only high quality, universal preschool, but also integrates early care and education, health and nutrition, parent support and education, mental health and early intervention. The Build organizational structure was established, including a core partnership team of approximately 20 key stakeholders and a larger "Partners for Early Learning" group.

ACNJ led a data collection effort from December 2002 through February 2003, which included a scan of existing programs, focus groups and parent surveys. The data

were used in establishing priorities and creating an early care and education agenda.

Ohio

Lead Organization: Ohio United Way

Ohio has a long history of support for early childhood education. Ohio's former Governor Voinovich (1990 – 1998) was a champion of early learning and led the expansion of state-funded Head Start. The Ohio Family and Children First cabinet-level council and local county counterparts were created by Governor Voinovich to streamline and coordinate services to children and families. Preceding the Build grant, in April 2002, Action for Children, the Ohio Child Care Resource and Referral Association, Start Smart in Franklin County, and the Department of Education convened a broad range of stakeholders to develop a long-range comprehensive strategic early learning framework for Ohio. This work was underway but not completed when Build Ohio was created.

The Ohio United Way was selected to serve as the fiscal sponsor for Build Ohio and to convene the stakeholders. A Build planning retreat in September 2002 revealed confusion about the relationship between the early learning framework and the planning for Build Ohio. An interim plan was submitted to the national Build team, and a full strategic plan was to be completed by May 2003. An Administrative Board was established to serve as the governing structure for the Build Ohio Alliance and to address outstanding issues.

A second Build retreat, in February 2003, helped to resolve the confusion between the early learning framework and Build Ohio planning by using the early learning framework as the basis for identifying Build Ohio priorities. Build Ohio selected early learning standards and accountability, professional development infrastructure, and communication and public will building as its priorities. Three work groups were established to develop work plans with goals and milestones focused on early care and education. The Build Ohio Administrative Board ended its first year continuing its effort to clearly define its governance role and relationship to the broader Build Ohio Alliance as it moved toward hiring a project director. Work groups began implementing plans.