

How Early Childhood Advisory Councils Can Succeed in Gubernatorial Transitions

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Executive Summary

This paper discusses how state Early Childhood Advisory Councils can use their unique institutional position and collective intelligence during the upcoming gubernatorial transitions. It is intended primarily for people serving on Councils and those who work with and/or advise them. It provides advice on actions Councils can take before and after the election to help guide incoming governors and other key policymakers. Those recommendations focus on how Councils can build relationships with the new administration, and use those relationships to promote policy change that benefits young children.

Introduction

In November 2010, voters in 37 states will have the opportunity to choose a new governor – and in 24 of these states, retirements or term limits have left them no choice but to do so. These gubernatorial transitions will occur just as many Early Childhood Advisory Councils (“Councils”) are initiating work supported by fresh federal grants that are to be

awarded by September 30.¹ The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 (the 2007 Head Start reauthorization) requires states to have these multi-stakeholder advisory Councils.² They are charged with recommending improvements to state early childhood policies (including laws and regulations), with a focus on improving linkages among federal- and state-funded services provided to children between birth and kindergarten entry. Further, federal leaders and others have encouraged Councils to treat those birth-to-five services as part of a birth-to-third-grade policy continuum.

Many Councils were established within the past year in response to the federal grant opportunity, often by executive order of the departing governor. Ideally, over time these Councils will show that as advisory bodies they have the leadership ability, knowledge, and political savvy to positively influence state early childhood policies. Councils start with the advantage of a unique institutional structure and a composition that provide the potential for broad collective intelligence. While some Councils have already established that they have these skills, others are approaching the upcoming transition with very limited experience as a functioning body. These infant Councils are now facing the challenge of meeting for the first time under the authority of a governor who had no involvement in their creation and appointment.³ The upcoming transition will require them to show their mettle as a cohesive and well-functioning group – on an accelerated timeline. This paper offers suggestions on how Councils of any age can use their unique institutional position and collective intelligence during upcoming gubernatorial transitions.⁴

1 While the Councils are set up as advisory, the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act allocated \$100 million to support Councils and their projects. The Department of Health and Human Services – which under President Obama has shown a strong commitment to the Councils’ success – allocated these funds among states, and states were required to develop applications describing the projects they wished to undertake with their allocation. Forty-six states applied for the grants by the August 1, 2010 deadline. The grants are for three years, beginning in the summer or fall of 2010 and continuing through 2013.

2 For more about the basic legal requirements and functions of those Council, please see the appendix.

3 Adding to the early childhood community’s unease about the upcoming transition is the fact that in some states there is a history of collaborative early childhood efforts demonstrating limited results. Satkowski, Christina, *The Next Step in Systems-Building: Early Childhood Advisory Councils and Federal Efforts to Promote Policy Alignment in Early Childhood*, New America Foundation, November 2009, at 5 (http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/next_step_system_building_o).

4 For more general recommendations on the successful operation of Councils, see Satkowski, n. 3 above, at 8-9; Regenstein, Elliot, *State Early Childhood Advisory Councils Presentation*, Build Initiative, May 2006 (<http://www.educationcounsel.com/resources/publications.aspx>).

Exercising Leadership During Gubernatorial Transitions

In some states Councils have roots extending much earlier than the 2007 Head Start reauthorization, but many state Councils were created after the 2007 reauthorization. For these Councils, 2010 represents their first gubernatorial transition. Regardless of the Council’s age, however, those facing gubernatorial change must approach the transition assertively but thoughtfully, to ensure that efforts to help build a strong and coordinated early childhood system move forward. We offer suggestions for approaching the transition while still pursuing a core mission and building organizational and leadership capacity.

In light of their policy focus, our overall view is that an important function of Councils is to bring together the best political, policy, and programmatic thinkers from a state’s early learning community and beyond. If Councils develop recommendations that are politically feasible but not grounded in good policy or practice, children will not benefit (and may even be worse off). If Councils develop recommendations that are grounded in good policy and practice, but aren’t politically feasible, then their recommendations will be ignored. The challenge – and opportunity – for Councils is to balance political, policy, and programmatic needs, and to develop achievable recommendations that will lead to improved child outcomes. Transitioning to new governors will undoubtedly put pressure on the political skills of Councils, and Councils must use those skills in service of their core policy and programmatic beliefs.

I. Promoting Policy Change: Be True to Your Values, and Respect the New Governor’s Priorities

A. Represent the Core Beliefs of the State’s Early Childhood Community

Councils were created to facilitate the development of a coherent policy framework and provide continuity for that framework during political transitions. Their charge is to define an early childhood agenda for a state, with a long-term vision and short-term actions that address the many components of a coordinated early childhood system. In each state, the early childhood community’s policy framework will be informed by a set of core beliefs that animate the work of stakeholders. While every state has difficult unresolved issues, Councils can ensure that their state at least has a well-defined inventory of the

important issues that no longer are open for discussion. Now is an opportune time for Councils to show leadership by clearly articulating these consensuses, and using them as a platform for educating incoming governors, state legislators, and state agency appointees.

Because elections are less than two months away, Councils that have not already engaged in significant consensus building do not have time to undertake a prolonged process to do so – but they can and should still hold a session or two that leads to a delineation of the state’s consensus, even if only at a broad level. Even this limited amount of process can help reinforce the early childhood community’s sense of identity from a policy perspective, and provide a better chance for the community to stand together in the face of gubernatorial (and potentially legislative) change. Additionally, stakeholders whose core focus is not early childhood will benefit from being reminded of the community’s shared core beliefs, and can help a Council with mobilizing influential voices to shape the new administration’s views.

B. Give New Governors Room to Operate

As part of building relationships with new governors, Councils will want to be sensitive to the need of new governors to define their own agenda. Councils should seek to work collaboratively with new governors (potentially behind the scenes), to learn what kind of help is needed. Even if a new governor does not have a history in early childhood or well-articulated positions on key early childhood issues, he or she will almost certainly have an education and human services agenda that in some way impacts early childhood policy. The Council should figure out how the governor’s overall policy agenda could support the Council’s work and then suggest opportunities for gubernatorial initiative.

C. Serve Up Some Victory

New governors like to come into office and make changes; they want early wins that will set a positive tone for their administrations. Councils that have built a strong consensus around priority policy changes can present those changes to new governors as a chance to score early victories with the legislature, constituents, or the media. In pursuing this possibility, Councils should identify what the new governor would consider a “win,” and try to tailor a proposal to meet the new governor’s needs and interests. With gubernatorial leadership and unified support, Councils can initiate and facilitate needed policy change – while simultaneously creating an opening to build a relationship with the new administration.

D. Promoting Policy Change: Summing Up

There can be tension between giving new governors sufficient room to operate and pre-packaging early victories – and navigating this tension is a key issue for Council decision-making. Councils need to ascertain how aggressive they can be with a new administration. If Councils are too forceful and try to paint new governors into a corner, they will lose the trust of their administrations; on the other hand, if they are too passive during the first year of a new term, they will miss an important opportunity to build relationships and advance an agenda. This tension puts a premium on Councils knowing what they stand for, understanding the agenda of new governors, correctly interpreting the local political climate, and then taking appropriate actions.

In some instances, though, Councils will have to accept that new governors are hostile to their agenda and/or the purposes for which they were established. If the political environment is toxic, the right move for a Council may be to keep a low profile, focus on the scope of work outlined in its federal grant, and plan for better days ahead. Hopefully Councils will not find themselves in this situation –but if they do, the federal statutory requirements and grant support should help them forge ahead with a long-term agenda.

II. Don’t Ignore the Campaign

A. Connect With Members Involved in Campaigns

Councils are official governmental bodies, and in most instances it is not appropriate for them to play an institutional role in political campaigns. But even if Councils as official bodies remain uninvolved, some Council members will undoubtedly be engaged in political campaigns and activity. Indeed, the overall work of Councils benefits significantly from including members whose orientation is more political than programmatic.⁵

The election is an opportunity to take advantage of the informal relationships embedded in or created by the Council’s formal role. All members who can appropriately work with or on campaigns should be doing what they can to make sure all major candidates are aware of the importance of early childhood and making it part of their campaign (while being clear that they are not speaking officially on behalf of the Council of which they are a member).

⁵ *State Advisory Councils Presentation*, at pp. 4-5.

The earlier this work is done the better. Although many states have already held primaries, it may still be possible to make a difference before the general election. Even in states where candidates have already stopped paying attention to policy development in order to fundraise and stump full-time, it may be possible to use informal networking to lay the groundwork for key Council members to influence the post-election, pre-inauguration transition period.

B. Assume Nothing When You Wake Up November 3

Early childhood is increasingly a bipartisan issue, with members of both parties showing leadership on early childhood issues. This is particularly true among governors, who are responsible for the state’s overall education system and can see early childhood as a key strategy for succeeding in that responsibility. So regardless of the winning candidate’s party, Councils should not overreact to anything the winning candidate said during a campaign. Vocal advocacy during a campaign does not always result in actual support after a successful election, and even vocal opposition can be turned around when someone finds themselves accountable for education outcomes. Whatever happens in the election, Councils should be prepared to press ahead with their work.

C. Don’t Ignore the Campaign: Summing Up

New governors may have much of their initial policy agenda defined before voters head to the ballot box. While Councils have institutional limitations on their ability to influence campaigns, individual members will have the ability to be involved and carry forward the broader messages being developed. It is essential for members to undertake this work so that governors and their staff are informed by the expertise of the Councils. However, Councils should not assume that what was said in the campaign will automatically be remembered by to the new administration, and should be prepared to work with the new administration to ensure the best possible policy outcomes.

III. Engaging with the New Administration

A. Be Ready to Help the New Governor Hit the Ground Running

Staff to the outgoing governor may prepare “transition books” to help inform the newly elected governor – and if the outgoing staff is not, somebody else (campaign staff, think tanks, or others) almost surely is. Ensuring that early childhood education and Councils are included in transition materials is an important foundational step. Strong orienta-

tion packets can help new governors and administrations make an immediate impact. All Councils should have access to someone close enough to the outgoing governor (and incoming governor) to be aware of what transition materials are being prepared, and be taking whatever steps are necessary to include in transition materials.

Immediately educating new governors and their administrations about the community’s core beliefs is critical, both offensively (giving the governor the opportunity to build on work already completed) and defensively (dissuading the governor from trying to unravel progress already made). Unfortunately, the condition of many state budgets means that Councils may have to focus more on protecting existing programs and services than on obtaining new funds – but this reality only underscores the stakes for the Councils as they articulate their early childhood community’s beliefs. To ensure that Councils’ efforts are not ignored during this critical period, Councils may want to designate a member who is likely to retain his or her Council membership to manage a transition strategy – including development of initial relationships with the new governor, relevant cabinet officials, and appropriate staff.

B. Prepare for Membership Change – It’s Almost Certainly Coming

The membership of Councils will undoubtedly change with new governors. Indeed, many Council members are on Councils by virtue of the office they hold, and the offices they hold are frequently political appointments. So when new appointments to those offices are made, Councils should be proactive about (i) contacting the Governor’s office to ensure that the new appointee is aware of the Council and its responsibilities and (ii) reaching out to the new appointee to help bring him or her into the work.

Not all Council members are appointed explicitly because of their jobs. Council leaders should help identify for new governors opportunities to appoint good people to the Council, particularly in states where (i) the Council was created by executive order, and therefore the governor may have broad flexibility in appointments, and/or (ii) the Council has a high proportion of members who are political appointees or external stakeholders identified with the outgoing governor. If Council leaders have a list of potential candidates – including people who may have already been involved in Council activities – they might provide those to the new administration. While Council appointments may take a back seat to appointments on boards or commissions with significant statutory responsibility or budgetary control, Councils should be prepared to work with new governors on appointments from November 3 onward.

Changes in membership are hard on any organization, but in the context of an advisory committee they may be easier to manage smoothly. In some instances respected leaders from an outgoing administration can still play a valuable role behind the scenes, even if they no longer are officially on the Council. Councils should anticipate the coming changes in membership and identify specific ways in which outgoing leaders can continue to provide support, while at the same time creating space for new leaders with strong connections to the new administration.

To this end, Council leaders should thoughtfully prepare for the orientation of new members. Some Councils have developed briefing packets and/or short trainings for new members. If they have not already, Councils should devote time this fall to developing an orientation packet for new members, including briefings on the Council’s history, protocols, and federal grant. Additionally, individual members who continue on through the transition should meet individually with new members to learn about their interests and respond to questions.

C. Use Federal Grant Money to Support Policy Continuity

Councils’ federal grant work gives members – and the new administration – tangible activities on which to focus during this time of change. That grant work may also produce medium- to long-term wins that can be shared with the administration, presenting further opportunities to build relationships. Indeed, given the weakened condition of many state budgets, federal support gives Councils a chance to establish a place in the state policy landscape.

Many Councils will also be using their federal grant funds to help define a long-term agenda. Defining a long term agenda and moving toward its implementation is critical in the best of times, but in tough times it takes on even greater significance in order to ensure that limited resources are being used for maximum impact. The grants can and should be used to support Councils in this important organizational and strategic task.

D. Engaging with the New Administration: Summing Up

Preparedness and organization matter. If Councils have a contextually-sensitive plan for helping to educate a new governor, a clear process for ramping up new members, and organized grant work underway, they will be well positioned to establish credibility in times of uncertainty and change. These elements may be particularly important in states where Councils are created by executive order, providing governors with greater freedom

to make changes. Accordingly, Councils should spend time this fall putting in place the processes and systems needed to implement a smooth political transition.

Conclusion

This is an important transitional moment both for Councils and for new governors – and political transitions are times of opportunity and challenge. For Councils, they present a chance to move forward with their existing agendas, develop organizational capacity, and build on their existing strengths. If Councils show leadership and create partnerships without overplaying their hands, they can succeed at gubernatorial transition and thrive in the four years ahead.

About The Authors

Elliot Regenstein is Chicago-based partner of EducationCounsel. He served for more than four years as co-chair of the Illinois Early Learning Council, and remains a member of its Executive Committee as Chair of its Data Work Group. From 2004 to 2006 he served as Director of Education Reform for the State of Illinois. At EducationCounsel, Mr. Regenstein has worked with and presented to early childhood work group and advisory councils in numerous states, as well as presented on the topic of State Advisory Councils for several national organizations. His background includes extensive experience working with state education leaders on a variety of policy initiatives, including early learning and college and career readiness.

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Appendix: What Are the Councils?

Section 642B of the Head Start Act required states to establish Councils. The intent of the federal requirement was to advance efforts to develop coordinated state-level policies to support the development and education of young children, and to establish relationships across sectors within the early childhood field. Ideally, the Councils will bring together individuals in senior leadership positions inside and outside of state government, who together can catalyze significant policy change and alignment.

Councils are required to have representatives from key early childhood, K-12, and human services entities, but states are free to add additional stakeholders. In some states existing multi-stakeholder groups have been designated as the Council, sometimes with some modest changes to the group’s memberships. While the Head Start Act gives governors the power to designate a Council without legislative action, in some states Councils have been created by statute. It is important to note that while Councils can play a valuable role in any state governance structure, the Head Start Act does not anticipate their functioning as a governing body.

The Councils are advisory, and required to make recommendations on a variety of subjects – generally elements of improving access to high quality early learning experiences. Specifically, the Councils are charged with:

- Conducting a periodic statewide needs assessment concerning the quality and availability of early childhood education and development programs and services for children from birth to school entry;
- Identifying opportunities for, and barriers to, collaboration and coordination among federally-funded and state-funded child development, child care, and early childhood education programs and services, including collaboration and coordination among state agencies responsible for administering such programs;
- Developing recommendations for increasing the overall participation of children in existing federal, state, and local child care and early childhood education programs, including outreach to underrepresented and special populations;

- Developing recommendations regarding the establishment of a unified data collection system for public early childhood education and development programs and services throughout the State;
- Developing recommendations regarding statewide professional development and career advancement plans for early childhood educators in the state;
- Assessing the capacity and effectiveness of 2- and 4-year public and private institutions of higher education in the State toward supporting the development of early childhood educators; and
- Making recommendations for improvements in state early learning standards and undertake efforts to develop high-quality comprehensive early learning standards, as appropriate.

Under the Head Start Act governors can also assign their Councils additional responsibilities.