



The Build Initiative

Building Early Learning Systems in the States: Build at 2¹/₂

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Build Initiative, a project of the Early Childhood Funders' Collaborative, was launched in May 2002. With a goal of building early learning systems in the states, the Build Initiative began with four grantee states—Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey and Ohio—and then added Pennsylvania in 2004. Four other states—Hawaii, Washington, Michigan and Oklahoma—joined as the initiative's learning partners. This paper provides a brief summary of an in-depth evaluation of the Build Initiative's work and progress during its first 2¹/₂ years. Case studies on each of the five funded Build states can be found at www.buildinitiative.org.

The Build Initiative did not begin the trend toward building early learning systems in the states. According to *Up and Running*,¹ there are more than 25 major, multi-site foundation and government initiatives focusing on the earliest years of life. Some of those initiatives are operating in each of the Build states today. The Build Initiative, however, is different in at least two important ways: (1) the Build funders did not define a particular framework or delineate the steps for developing a system, and (2) the Build Initiative invested in a core set of leaders from across the public and private sectors in each of the states and gave them broad discretion to collectively plan and take action.

The national Build staff and funders provided technical assistance, oversight and some structure to the states' planning and action, but the states essentially moved forward through planning, doing and sharing with each other. The national technical assistance unfolded in response to the challenges and opportunities each state faced along the way.

As part of this evaluation, case studies have documented the progress of each funded Build state during its first two and one-half years as part of the initiative. These case studies are organized around a "theory of change" about system building that has emerged from the work and experiences of the Build states.

A challenge for the individual Build states, and the national Build Initiative, is to take the long view of their efforts and progress. The K-12 public education system and the higher education system in the United States each required nearly half a century to develop. Establishing an early learning system is enormously complicated and may require a similar timeframe and level of commitment before it can coalesce.

Why an Early Learning System?

The United States may be the only industrialized country in the world without a family policy. Most developed countries have much more extensive support systems for families with young children. Commonly provided services and supports in other countries include family and medical leave, basic income support policies, universal health coverage, home visits, and publicly supported child care and early education opportunities. Other countries have regarded these supports as a public responsibility, while the United States has generally regarded the care and support provided to young children as the responsibility and right of parents. The economic cost of providing support for young children has been considered from a marketplace perspective in the U.S., with parents choosing to enter the workforce while recognizing and managing the costs of caring for their children while they work.

In recent years, the marketplace perspective has come into question, due to several factors:

- Over the past 40 years, there has been a dramatic increase in the proportion of families with young children in which both parents—or the only parent—work outside the home to support the family. In 1970, both parents—or the only parent—worked outside the home in 30 percent of American households with children under six years of age. By 2000, that figure doubled, to 60 percent.
- There is increasing recognition of the value of quality early learning experiences for children. Brain research has shown the importance of the earliest years of life to lifelong learning and growth. And investments in early learning, especially for vulnerable children, have proven to be cost-effective ways of averting subsequent social costs for remediation, welfare, public safety and corrections.²
- The evolution from a manufacturing to an information economy has placed a premium on intellectual development, creativity and success in mastering complex subjects. Research has shown that much of a child's learning and potential for educational success is formed in the years before entry into school and that too many children today start behind and stay behind. In a global world, early learning is key to a successful future workforce.

Where We Are Today

A system is made up of interrelated parts working together to produce a common goal. The goal of an early learning system is the healthy development of young children so that they enter school ready to learn and succeed. Critical contributing aspects include: health and physical development, social and emotional development, language and literacy, approaches to learning and cognitive development.

School readiness requires an array of positive circumstances and supports. These include:

- Primary and preventive health care
- Early identification and treatment of special needs, including developmental delays
- Quality care and supervision that enables interaction and development
- Guidance and instruction in acquiring critical skills
- Safe and nurturing homes.

Currently the systems that address these areas are fragmented, incomplete, uncoordinated and underfunded. These gaps and problems are exacerbated by the existence of multiple and separate agendas and legislative proposals from different early childhood communities. Overall, while federal and state funding contributes approximately \$25 billion annually in public support for early learning activities related to child care, preschool, parenting education, family support, and early intervention services, this represents only a small fraction of the amount of investment necessary to create a system where children are reasonably well-assured that their basic early learning needs are met. Building an early learning system involves multiple actions to secure and effectively deploy such public investments.

Assessing Build's System Building Work

When the Build Initiative was launched in May 2002, the state public/private teams knew they needed to construct comprehensive early learning systems that would incorporate, strengthen and integrate existing programs and services in their state—not create a new system from the ground up. Individual team members had different visions of what a system might look like, largely based on their own backgrounds and involvements.

The national Build Initiative did not impose a specific governance structure or team composition. Instead, Build required strategic planning and communication, and provided the “glue” money to allow the time, space and opportunity for teams to coalesce and develop a common vision. This has resulted in both a broadening and deepening of the work within each state toward developing an early learning system. Moreover, this progress now can be assessed at both a collective level (team activities) and an individual level (actions in their own spheres of influence).

Collective Progress

Each of the Build states has taken a different specific path toward building an early learning system. However, all have moved forward in establishing trust and ownership across a wide range of stakeholders. In *Ohio*, relationship building has consumed much time and effort over the past two and one-half years. In *Minnesota*, continual outreach to the state public sector has been needed to overcome partisan perspectives and priorities. *New Jersey* has had to expand beyond the (N.J. Supreme Court’s) Abbott decision and its mandated high-quality preschool in the state’s poorest districts. *Illinois* has taken strategic actions that have resulted in new stakeholders and a different collaborative mix. *Pennsylvania* has moved within state government itself to capitalize on gubernatorial leadership.

Despite their differences, collective activity has begun to produce a vision in each Build state that is greater than the individual agendas of the participants. Each state has demonstrated significant progress in seven key areas: comprehensiveness, coherence, clarity and credibility, communication, connectedness, clarity of roles, and commitment.

(1) Comprehensiveness

The overall vision for an early learning system has become more comprehensive in each state. Most teams began with a primary focus on early care and education but have now accepted the importance of linking health and early intervention. They also have broadened their thinking beyond the formal system of child care centers and registered homes to include informal family, friend and neighbor care. Several states have undertaken specific new actions that illustrate this comprehensive approach such as *Minnesota*’s development of culture-specific best practices with family, friend and neighbor caregivers.

(2) Coherence

The Build states are working toward a more seamless system of supports. There is a growing understanding of how important it is that an early learning system be coherent to families and children, and not only across various services. Young children and their families need safe and supportive communities, with gathering spots for children to play and learn together and families to be connected to voluntary institutions. This evolving coherence is at varying stages, both across the states and within the teams themselves. For example, *Ohio*’s Build board is working to facilitate linkages and coordination within the state. *New Jersey* is supporting legislation for an Office of Early Learning and an Early Learning Board connected directly to the Governor’s Office.

(3) Clarity and Credibility

During the past two and one-half years, there has been an increase in the clarity and credibility of Build and its contributions to the process of developing an early learning system. Each Build team has had to establish its own role, identity and credibility within the early childhood community in the state. Some have progressed further than others, but all have established a recognized niche within their states as a key contributor to early learning system building. The *Pennsylvania* team, for example, has built credibility through partnering with statewide early care and education leaders such as the Pennsylvania Child Care Association and United Way.

(4) Communication

State Build teams have recognized the need to increase public awareness and understanding about the importance of early learning. Some states have used traditional public education and awareness activities and some have employed more strategic grassroots and “grasstops” strategic actions or community planning processes. *Minnesota* has implemented an aggressive media campaign, encouraging the public to contact their legislators to support early childhood legislation, and has successfully connected with the business community to promote the economic and workforce benefits of early learning.

(5) Connectedness

Setting priorities and clearly connecting actions to the larger work of system building has helped state teams avoid agenda fragmentation and serious disagreements. *Illinois* uses a steering committee to act as a clearing-house that ensures communication and coordination at both the state and local levels. *Pennsylvania*'s team has lead staff from the Department of Public Welfare, the Department of Education and the Head Start State Collaborative working on a number of projects across departments.

(6) Clarity of Roles

State Build teams have dealt with the challenge of public sector and private sector roles by using private sector partners for advocacy while keeping public sector partners engaged in other work that is appropriate for their public roles and responsibilities. Build teams coordinate both inside and outside strategies for early learning system development.

(7) Commitment

Build work in the states has resulted in an increase in the number of people committed to building an early learning system, including new participants, leaders and advocates. All the states have or are planning to bring in new leaders or citizens from nontraditional constituencies such as the business community. *New Jersey*, for example, has used its governance proposal to approach potential new leaders.

Individual Growth

Build has provided key committed individuals with the space and structure to learn from one another, broaden their visions and expand on their personal goals. In its first two and one-half years, Build has encouraged individual growth and leadership development as much as collective activity. During a time of state fiscal crises and federal budget deficits, Build has created a support system for leaders that helps them feel less isolated and recognize they are part of a larger community of leaders across the country who are working toward similar goals.

iii Conclusion: The Build Initiative at Two and One-Half

This evaluation essay on Build's progress and status at two and one-half years focuses on the growth of Build's own understanding and capacity to impact change. It looks at Build both as a collective entity and also as a vehicle for the education and leadership development of its members.

Like a child at two and one-half years old, Build is just barely walking and talking, in human development terms. But it has taken its first steps, expanded its vocabulary and now is exploring and learning across the diverse elements of early learning. Building an early learning system will require many years, and the types of investments needed for Build are likely to change as the work grows and matures. Like the historic development of the K-12 public school system and the higher education system, progress will be incremental and uneven, and will require a long time horizon and steady support for those who are doing the heavy lifting.

1 Floyd, S. *Up and running: A compendium of multi-state early childhood initiatives* (2nd Ed.). State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network. Des Moines, IA. July 2004.

2 Bruner, C. *Many happy returns: Three economic models that make the case for school readiness*. State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network. Des Moines, IA. December 2004.

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to prepare our youngest children for a successful future.*