The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems through State/Local Initiatives

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The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems through State/Local Initiatives

Over the past decade, many states have become part of an important trend toward creating statewide community-based approaches to building comprehensive early childhood systems. While each state has taken its own approach to a community-based systems-building model, the common denominator is a comprehensive system at the state and local level that is dedicated to promoting the healthy development of and better outcomes for young children from birth through age five or, increasingly, through age eight. North Carolina’s Smart Start was one of the early models of this approach. Launched in 1993, it has helped to spark efforts of nearly two dozen states to develop their own community-based approaches to building early childhood systems (i.e. state/local initiatives or state/community-based approaches). The appendix includes a list of states that have developed state/community-based approaches to early childhood systems building.

As states and localities have advanced these initiatives, their work has been facilitated by entities like Smart Start’s National Technical Assistance Center (NTAC) and the BUILD Initiative as well as through studies and efforts to draw on and document the experiences of selected state initiatives. Despite the fund of knowledge already developed, there is clearly a need for more. State and community leaders across the country want a clearer understanding of what it takes to operate state/community-based early childhood initiatives, the infrastructure created to support this work at the state and local level, what is working and what is not, lessons learned along the way, and words of advice from leaders of these initiatives. In response, this brief offers readers information on the nuts and bolts of efforts to develop state/community-based approaches to early childhood systems building efforts. This brief focuses on a dozen state/local initiatives, many of which have years of experience with these efforts.

Setting the stage for that review, the following section presents background information on past documentation and technical assistance work. The section also includes information on the methodology used to develop the brief and an overview of its contents.

Background

Past Work

In 2006, BUILD launched the Building Connections project, which funded six states to advance the development of state/community early childhood partnerships. In the course of the project, BUILD leaders created a Theory of Change for this partnership approach that at its simplest level can be depicted like this:
One aspect of the work on the Theory of Change was to delineate benchmarks of success that states can use to assess progress in various areas of work that are important for developing successful state/community-based collaboratives (see below). The articulation of these benchmarks has proven valuable in subsequent efforts to understand more about what it takes to develop and operate statewide systems-building efforts.

### Benchmarks of Success for Developing Collaboratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of the Development Process</th>
<th>Select Benchmarks of Success</th>
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<tr>
<td>1) Recognition of Need</td>
<td>• Buy-in from key stakeholders on the notion that making major progress on building early childhood systems requires state-local partnerships.</td>
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<td>2) Relationships and Shared Vision</td>
<td>• Stakeholders from different parts of the early childhood system at the state and local levels are involved.</td>
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<td>3) Leadership, Policy, and Resources</td>
<td>• Communities develop trust and relationships with state and vice versa.</td>
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<td>4) Capacity and Expertise</td>
<td>• Key state leaders champion collaborative development.</td>
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<td>5) Actions, Learning, and Adjustment</td>
<td>• Policies clearly delineate state and community roles and responsibilities.</td>
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<td>6) System Successes and Outcomes</td>
<td>• Funding exists for collaborative development and dedicated staffing.</td>
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<td>7) Scale-Up and Sustainability</td>
<td>• Regular communication mechanisms are in place.</td>
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<td>• Technical assistance is in place.</td>
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<td>• Communities have the capacity and skills to be early learning advocates.</td>
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<td>• Communities set priorities and begin implementing plans for building systems.</td>
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<td>• Authentic two-way communication is taking place.</td>
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<td>• Adjustments are made in response to learning.</td>
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<td>• Collaboratives show measurable impact on the early learning system.</td>
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<td>• Successes make the case for sustained collaborative investments.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Funding is sufficient and secure.</td>
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<td>• Collaboratives are in place statewide.</td>
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In 2006, as part of the Building Connections project, BUILD released *Beyond Parallel Play: Emerging State and Community Planning Roles in Building Early Learning Systems*. The publication featured case studies of six states (Colorado, Iowa, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Vermont) and delineated key priorities that should govern state approaches to building state/local early childhood systems.
Documenting the Lessons Learned

In 2013, in the midst of the many changes underway across the nation in efforts to build early childhood systems, BUILD launched a new review of the approaches that states are taking at the local/regional level and how these community-based efforts connect with states’ efforts to build early childhood systems. The review focused on key components of work that promote successful implementation of state/local connections – notably elements such as governance, funding, technical assistance, staffing, performance measures, advocacy, and state and local infrastructure.

To learn what states and localities were doing in these areas, BUILD interviewed state and local leaders in a dozen states and produced individual profiles on each state’s approach. This brief draws on those interviews and highlights lessons learned and keys to success across the states.

The 12 states chosen for this research were identified as taking a long-term strategic approach to building both state and local infrastructures to support their efforts to build early childhood systems. With one exception, each of the 12 has been engaged in these efforts for more than a decade and each has invested resources at the state and local levels to support the efforts. Of the 12, one state is now moving away from the state and local systems-building approach and one state is still ramping up its efforts, but all have acquired a great deal of experience and have learned many lessons. Moreover, each of the 12 has achieved the “Scale up and Sustainability” level depicted in the Theory of Change diagram shown on the previous page. A key point to emphasize about the 12 states profiled is that the work is continuously changing.

Every state regularly shifts its approach as it learns. This willingness to change is an essential element of any successful or effective state effort to take a community-based approach to building early childhood systems.

Finally, this brief is broken down into sections designed to highlight a variety of the elements of state/community-based initiatives that have been essential to the success of the states profiled, including:

• Mission and Vision
• Reasons for and Roles of State/Community Partnerships
• State Level Governance
• State Level Staffing
• State Level Funding
• Local Level Governance
• Local Level Staffing
• Local Level Funding
• State Level Technical Assistance to Support Local Efforts
• Accountability/Measuring Success
• Advocacy/Public Education
• Major Accomplishments
• Final Lessons Learned and Words of Advice

Each of these sections details some of the work in the states profiled and shares their lessons learned; it is designed to assist other states that are attempting to develop similar approaches.

<table>
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<th>STATES PROFILED</th>
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<td>First Things First</td>
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<td>First Steps County Partnerships</td>
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<td>Vermont</td>
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<td>Building Bright Futures</td>
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<td>Regional Early Learning Coalitions</td>
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<td>Virginia</td>
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<td>Smart Beginnings</td>
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Key Elements of Systems-Building Initiatives: Experiences and Lessons from 12 States

Mission and Vision

Several prevalent themes emerge from a review of the vision and mission statements of the profiled states. One is an emphasis on school readiness. In addition, most statements emphasize that the vision should embrace all children. Another theme is the intent to focus on children starting at birth or prenatally. Looking at the other end of the age spectrum, in recent years, numerous states have expanded their early childhood vision to encompass the early elementary grade years (0-8). These changes reflect recognition of both the scope and the developmental frame of the early childhood years and the need for positive outcomes that extend into the school years.

Examples of common statements that feature some of the themes that have just been discussed include:

- All Arizona’s children are ready to succeed in school and in life.
- All children healthy and ready to succeed in school.
- All Oklahoma children will be safe, healthy, eager to learn and ready to succeed by the time they enter school.

Similarly, Iowa’s vision is “Every child beginning at birth will be healthy and successful.” The state’s anticipated results, as mandated in legislation, are listed in the vision as well:

- Healthy Children
- Children Ready to Succeed in School
- Safe and Supportive Communities
- Secure and Nurturing Families
- Secure and Nurturing Early Learning Environments

Another shared commitment evidenced in the states’ mission statements is a commitment to a community-based approach to the initiative’s work. For example, the mission statement of Vermont’s Building Bright Futures Initiative cites the goal of:

Aligning the work at the state level with the work of 12 regional early childhood advisory councils across Vermont to make improvements in access, quality and affordability of early care, health and education for families and young children 0-6.

In keeping with states’ growing interest in expanding the age ranges covered by their initiatives, Vermont’s statement will soon be amended to read, “… young children 0-8.”

Like Vermont, South Carolina First Steps’ mission statement stresses the local connection. First Steps purpose is to:

provide comprehensive services and support to young children and their families to enhance school readiness and optimal development and to mobilize communities to provide for the enhanced services and supports.

The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, the 501(c)(3) organization tasked with leading the state’s Smart Beginnings Initiative, has a mission “to support school readiness through development of local early childhood initiatives and to serve as a nonpartisan steward for capacity building for advancing school readiness in Virginia.”

Lessons Learned

The overriding lesson learned from states was to design the vision/mission statements to emphasize the comprehensive nature of the work and not be limited to one component.
Reasons for and Roles of State/Community Partnerships

This section examines the rationales for and offers insights into the approach of using partnerships between states and communities (and/or states and regions) to build early childhood systems. As background it may be helpful for readers who are less familiar with state-local initiatives to have a general picture of how they are structured. The details of the structures vary tremendously, but overall the initiatives profiled always involved a state entity working with local collaboratives—coalitions of community groups and citizens concerned with early childhood issues. In some cases, these local or regional collaboratives are organized by city or county limits while others may encompass a larger geographic region. In the states profiled, successful local collaboratives generally have paid staff, receive some funding from the state and often are also supported by other public as well as private resources. The activities that collaboratives pursue vary tremendously across and within states and are based on the level of funding, community decision-making approaches and the emphasis on systems building versus funding individual programs. Most successful state/local initiatives take a public/private partnership approach to the work and often the funding incorporates both public and private funding.

An Evolutionary Process

Over the years, states have had varied reasons for creating these collaboratives. Many states began them as a way of raising awareness of the needs of young children in local communities and/or as a way of improving collaboration at the local level. Often policymakers saw the local collaboratives as something that could be carried out by volunteers and were a way to accomplish more with existing funds, not understanding that the very nature of collaboration required additional funding to support the collaborative process if a community was going to be successful.

Of the dozen states profiled in this research, the primary emphasis has been the importance of building early childhood systems. Regardless of the level of funding at the community level, these local collaboratives now emphasize how to think about the needs of children and families and how these needs can be addressed across systems. They now focus less on funding individual programs and instead look at the overall system, assess the needs and the gaps in services, and determine how to bridge these gaps to reach more children and families through better blending and braiding of funding and leveraging new resources. These are tasks that require a community-based approach and cannot be accomplished with any great degree of success through a purely state-based approach.

States did not always articulate this systems-building approach in the early days of developing these collaboratives. Instead many of the states have come to this view as their work has developed. Part of the evolution has been to recognize that it was important not only to create systems change at the local level but to follow this same approach at the state level.

Lessons Learned

State and local leaders emphasized the following key points about why they thought state/community collaboratives were important in early childhood systems building efforts.

• Children and families live in communities, and while state-level systems are important in furthering goals that promote the health and well-being of young children, for positive changes to occur, there also must be local-level systems in place that understand and respond to the diverse needs of children and families.

• It’s important to have both the state and local levels involved in the work. For example, it is helpful when the state gives localities guidance on developmental screenings by doing research and offering advice on the type of data that would be useful to collect. Thirty different local initiatives don’t need to replicate that work. It helps to have the state provide resources and support for key components of the work but then to allow communities to adapt what is offered to their specific needs.

• Because different regions of a state can vary widely in terms of demographics, what works in one region may
not work in another. Rather than taking a cookie-cutter approach, communities must customize state policies and resources to meet the specific needs of children and families. What works in an urban area will not work in a rural area. What works in a small farming community will not work in a mountainous region where terrain is an actual barrier to services. In one community, there may be no dentists. In another, children may not have access to a formal child care program and must be reached in different ways. These issues vary widely from one region to another.

- Local control and/or local decision-making are essential. Decisions must be made locally by community leaders and families; local leaders are not simply implementers of programs or policies designed and mandated by the state.
- Local engagement and buy-in are critical for creating real change. And this buy-in can happen only when communities have a stake in the decision-making process.
- The model creates a means to use population-based data to find children and families that are most at risk and hardest to reach. Community leaders are able to use data to design the system that will best meet the needs of the children and families in their region.
- State-level systems-building efforts can only be sustained and expanded through local systems building efforts, local buy-in, and local advocacy efforts. This level of engagement occurs when community leaders feel that they have a seat at the table and a vested interest in the success of early childhood systems building efforts.

The Nuts and Bolts of Building Early Childhood Systems through State/Local Initiatives

• Think in terms of creating a public/private partnership approach. It should not be all about government but should incorporate the best of government and the private sector and utilize both public and private funding.

One interesting window on a state’s approach to local partnerships comes from BUILD’s interview with Shanell Wagler, Director of Early Childhood Iowa:

“In 1997–99, when Iowa’s political leaders were determining strategies for supporting early childhood, they were only looking at local approaches. This is because there were varying efforts developed across the state to support parents with young children and it was believed that one approach added at the state level would not work for all Iowa communities and families. During that time, there was a strong belief that there should not be too much intrusion on parents’ relationships with their youngsters. One way to adhere to that belief was to have governments partner with communities. Thus, identification of strengths and weaknesses was necessary at the local level. To support the local collaborative leaders’ planning, flexibility was applied to their use of government funds. It was felt this approach was a win/win for supporting efforts to strengthen what existed at the time. We think the same rationale holds true today. Iowa communities are different and what works in one doesn’t necessarily work in another. Also, the same services aren’t always universally available. Further, the local approach assists with buy-in and trust on the part of the community and the parents.”

Rhian Evans Allvin, who served as Executive Director of Arizona’s First Things First, concurred with Wagler’s observations on state and local roles. “In general,” she added, “the art and science of the work is navigating through what should be the statewide system and what should be left up to the local control of regions.” This allocation of roles is discussed in more detail in the next section.

State-Level Governance

The governance structures of the state/local initiatives vary widely. At the state level, governance structures are housed in nonprofit organizations in North Carolina, Vermont and Virginia, state agencies in Arizona, California, Iowa, Kansas, and South Carolina, and
in a quasi-governmental organization in Oklahoma. (Michigan includes both governmental and quasi-governmental organizations with the Office of Great Start housed in the Department of Education and the Early Childhood Investment Corporation described as quasi-governmental.) Despite the variability of the governance structures, nearly all have boards that include leaders from state agencies like the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services.

Arizona's First Things First and California's First Five state and local entities were established by statewide ballot initiatives that specified both the governance structure and funding mechanisms. For Arizona, Proposition 203 created a new state-level board known as the Arizona Early Childhood Development and Health Board. This board oversees both the funding generated through Proposition 203 and the state agency established to administer the funds. The board includes nine members appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the State Senate. Specific requirements about inclusion of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents were part of the ballot language. The board also includes, as ex-officio members, the Directors of the Department of Economic Security, Department of Health Services and the Superintendent of Public Instruction. The agency overseen by this board is a stand-alone state agency responsible for administering the funding as specified in Proposition 203.

California's First Five Commission is similar to Arizona's board. It is a stand-alone agency with seven members appointed by the Governor, the Speaker of the Assembly and the Senate Rules Committee. There is also a member designated by the California Secretary of Health and Human Services. First Five California is described as “having more flexibility and less government bureaucracy than a typical state agency.” Unlike the Arizona board, First Five California has very limited authority over the First Five county commissions.

Early Childhood Iowa (originally called Iowa Empowerment) was created through legislation in 1998 that decreed that a board would be established to include 15 “citizens” appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Iowa State Senate. Four members of the state legislature (two senators and two representatives) also serve on the board in a non-voting capacity. The heads of the Departments of Education, Workforce Development, Public Health, Human Services, Human Rights and Economic Development are also represented on the board. Rather than being housed in one of the agencies that already focuses on young children, the initiative is staffed by The Department of Management, which was seen as being a more neutral entity to lead the initiative.

South Carolina's First Steps Initiative also has a board established through legislation, with appointments made by the Governor and the state legislature and with ex-officio members, including the secretaries of relevant state agencies. First Steps is part of the Department of Education for administrative purposes but essentially operates as a separate agency.

While Oklahoma's initiative, state board, and board appointment process are similar to other states profiled, the Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness is neither a nonprofit nor a state agency. It is funded through a contract with the Department of Human Services, which serves as the conduit for funding approved annually by the state legislature. Separate from this quasi-governmental agency, state leaders have established a nonprofit organization that is tasked with raising private funds to support Oklahoma's early childhood efforts at the state and community levels.

Michigan's governance structure has evolved. The Early Childhood Investment Corporation was established through an inter-local agreement by Governor Jennifer Granholm in 2005 as the entity responsible for leading Michigan's Great Start Initiative. The Governor appointed the board members for the Investment Corporation although, in the interest of greater bipartisan support, this process
was later changed to include recommendations from the legislature to the Governor for board appointments. The Investment Corporation is neither a government agency nor a nonprofit organization. It is described as a “nonprofit public sector organization” and it can receive both public and private sector grants. Not only is this structure unique but so is the structure of the Investment Corporation’s board. The board has a 19-member executive committee of gubernatorial appointees, which meets quarterly and is tasked with administering the organization. It also has a much larger board that meets annually and is comprised of a representative of each of the 57 intermediate school districts that administer the 57 local Great Start Collaboratives. In 2011, Governor Rick Snyder created the Office of Great Start, housed within the Michigan Department of Education, to lead the work of the local Collaboratives and the overall early childhood systems development for Michigan. The Early Childhood Investment Corporation still provides technical assistance and support to the collaboratives, among other responsibilities, but the Office of Great Start has become the primary leader of Michigan’s state and local early childhood systems building efforts.

Governance of the early childhood initiatives in North Carolina, Vermont, and Virginia is firmly embedded in the nonprofit sector, but these states vary in governance structure. Vermont's Building Bright Futures was established through executive order in 2006 and then through legislation in 2010. It was first housed within a state agency but it became a nonprofit in 2011. The board consists of gubernatorial and legislative appointees, as well as state agency designees.

The North Carolina Partnership for Children, the state organization responsible for the Smart Start Initiative, is a nonprofit established through legislation in 1993. Its board is appointed by the Governor and the legislature. During the early days of Smart Start, state leaders tweaked the legislation, specifying the type of people to be appointed by the Governor and legislature. For example, the Governor must appoint three members from the opposite political party. Gubernatorial appointees must also include a child care provider, a pediatrician, a health care provider, a parent, a business community member, an early childhood educator from higher education, and a representative of a philanthropic agency. Legislative appointments also have similar specific designations. A later change to the legislation required that two representatives of the Local Partnership Advisory Committee (comprised of local Smart Start partnership executive directors and board chairs) also serve on the state board. (In the early days of the initiative, appointees to the board included legislators. However, the North Carolina Attorney General later ruled that this was a conflict of interest since legislators approve the organization’s funding. Today they are no longer able to serve.) Overall, the designations have been helpful in assuring a board that is balanced, reflects a broad array of perspectives, and in all probability is less political than one that would be appointed without these kinds of specifications.

The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) was not established through legislation and does not require gubernatorial or legislative appointments to the board. It follows a relatively traditional nonprofit structure. Despite these differences, VECF has been successful in securing funding from the state legislature to support its local efforts and works closely with state agencies in the state’s early childhood systems building efforts.

Lessons Learned

The interviews and reviews conducted for this brief indicate that while the state-level governance of a state/local early childhood initiative can take many forms, it is
very important that there be a state-level infrastructure to provide leadership to the state and local level efforts, assist with fundraising, advocate for funding and policy changes, and support both state and local efforts to build systems. State initiatives that have local collaboratives and no state-level governance tend to be less effective and often are not sustainable.

Each state’s governance structure at the state level should fit its specific realities, including political realities. If a state is unable to achieve its full ambition in the initial stages of governance creation, leaders should see this as the beginning of the process. Changes in state-level governance in North Carolina and Vermont offer excellent illustrations of how this evolution can proceed. Vermont’s initiative started with an executive order, eventually was authorized by new legislation, and later moved from being housed within a state agency to becoming a new nonprofit organization. And North Carolina has repeatedly changed its legislation to strengthen its governance. In summary, what is important is to start with a plan for a state-level governance structure but to then be prepared to modify it as needs and circumstances change.

As states design and sometimes modify the governing entities, one important consideration is whether the entities have a seat at the state’s systems-building table. In other words, are the entities actually part of the decision-making process about the statewide early childhood system? Many of the state-level organizations that lead the local-level efforts where BUILD conducted interviews are part of that process. These groups play a role in developing the state’s early childhood strategies and approaches. They help determine next steps and integrate the role of the local collaboratives in that state systems building approach.

In cases where states have local collaboratives that do not have a seat at the table, the role they play seems to be substantially minimized. These entities may be doing good work locally, but the work is not resulting in change at the state level. As a result, the barriers to progress that often exist at the state level obstruct local efforts to effect systems change. To maximize the impact of state/local connections, localities must be part of and play a leadership role in the state decision-making process.

Many of the state-level governance entities serve as the early childhood advisory council (ECAC) in their states. This is the case in Arizona, Iowa, Michigan, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Vermont. Other state entities are full members of their ECACs. Also several states have included local collaborative representation on their ECACs to ensure local voice in state-level decision-making.

Another essential point raised by state and local leaders is the need to establish from the outset a common approach or definition to system building/change and to fully embed that in the vision/mission/goals developed at both the state and local level to guide the overall planning and decision-making process.

Other governance advice shared in the interviews includes:

- Give regional coalitions a seat at the table and an opportunity for real input into determining the vision, mission and structure of the local systems-building work. Do not hand regional coalitions the “finished product.”

- Early in the process of developing local collaboratives, it is important to develop a protocol that spells out what it means to gather local input into the systems-building process.

- From the outset, develop both short- and long-term plans for the local collaboratives. Instead of focusing only on short-term goals and resources, think about future directions. The plans for the local collaboratives should specify the role these groups will play in the state’s overall efforts to build early childhood systems. The plans should also consider how the coalitions will be financed over the long term.

- Flexibility and local decision-making are important, but to create continuity and a sense of a statewide initiative, all regional collaboratives should march towards similar visions, goals and objectives. Early in the process it is wise to put in place some structures and practices that promote alignment.

- Develop a clear definition of a local collaborative’s roles and responsibilities early on. It can be problematic to define later after the initiative is launched and local collaboratives are established.
• Build buy-in for the local work at the state level across multiple departments and divisions, and be certain that leaders and staff are thinking about how they coordinate with the regional collaboratives. For example, make sure that the state’s child care licensing office is as engaged in the local efforts as the pre-kindergarten office. It is impossible to build the early childhood system or make the needed changes without strong “horizontal” partnerships that encompass all state agencies and parallel the “vertical” partnerships between state agencies and local collaboratives.

• Developing a two-way communication system between the state and regional boards is essential. To forestall potential problems and tensions, work out practices for good communications early in the process.

• Establish state oversight authority for local collaboratives to ensure that their leaders have the skills they need to effectively carry out the charge. But since this oversight can involve both monitoring and technical assistance, it is also important to sort through the allocation of responsibilities in order to determine both accountability and technical assistance roles – and the balance between these two over time – as sometimes one becomes more necessary than the other. If the distinction between these roles becomes unclear, it can be difficult for people involved in local collaboratives to be honest with state staff about their struggles. It creates tensions between the state and local entities that can be difficult to resolve and can result in negative unintended consequences for the overall initiative.

• If you are establishing a state-level governance structure that houses the entity within state government, consider whether government bureaucracy may impede flexibility and responsiveness. Think in advance about how those bureaucratic problems might be addressed.

• State-level leaders need to understand and value the importance of a system that is not always top-down. For a system to be successful, it must be both top-down and bottom-up; it takes leadership to understand and support that ideal balance.

• States must come at this work from a systems approach, not from a “What-programs-should-we-fund?” perspective.

States must come at this work from a systems approach, not from a “What-programs-should-we-fund?” perspective.

State-Level Staffing

The primary responsibilities of state-level staff of these initiatives are to support, monitor, and provide technical assistance to local collaboratives and ultimately to advocate for the systems-building changes, policies and funding needed to support local efforts. BUILD’s review of the staffing roles and patterns of the 12 initiatives indicates that their staffing situations are as varied as their state-level governance structures. Staffing is better funded in some of the 12 states than in others. But even in the states with limited funding, there is much to be learned about putting in place strong staff to support local systems-building efforts.

Iowa is a state with limited funding for state-level infrastructure that has been highly effective. Early Childhood Iowa has state funding for three staff members at the state level who are responsible for the overall administration of funding, accountability and technical assistance to 39 local collaboratives. It would be difficult to provide much support beyond general monitoring with such a limited staff, but the state has decreed that six state agencies (Human Services, Education, Public Health, Economic Development, Workforce Development and Management) will dedicate staff to support the work of Early Childhood Iowa. This team has changed over the years and some departments provide more staff support than others. But in general, throughout the 15 plus year history of the initiative, the team has been strong and effective, providing a great deal of support to the overall initiative and enabling Iowa to advance its state systems-building agenda. The team approach has also been particularly important in supporting work at the local level. State leaders are quick to say that they are not able to offer
as much support to local collaboratives as they would like because of limited state-level resources for staffing. However, the progress made through the team approach illustrates how Iowa has managed to leverage resources beyond the state appropriation for three staff members. Another advantage of the agency-team approach in Iowa has been that it serves as an important model for the local collaboratives. As one local collaborative director in the state noted:

“Collaboration was the model from the very beginning at the state level and that influenced our work at the community level. The leadership took the time to build support from a variety of state departments and we then got support from their expertise. They really complement each other. We don’t just have one perspective. We have a variety of perspectives on how best to build early childhood systems. Building Early Childhood Iowa on that concept of collaboration has also trickled down so when we work on systems building in our community, we take the same approach.”

Colorado is another state that took a cross-agency approach. With limited state funding to support the local councils (then called “pilots”), the state created a cross-agency team to provide technical assistance to the councils. The state also developed a waiver process through which the local councils could receive a waiver on a state regulation in order to pilot a new approach at the local level; it was required that all relevant state agencies have input into this waiver process. These arrangements resulted in the creation of a strong collaborative state-level team to support both local- and state-level systems-building.

The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF), with a staff of nine, has been strategic in the use of its staff funding. The staff includes a president, who leads overall efforts to pursue the vision for the organization at the state and local levels. Another staff member is responsible for fundraising and advocacy. Three positions, funded in partnership with the Department of Social Services, focus on the administration of Virginia’s quality rating and improvement system. Another position focuses solely on technical assistance to local initiatives. For greater efficiency, VECF contracts out other organizational responsibilities, including fiscal management, evaluation, and as needed, special expertise to support local efforts. One noteworthy characteristic of Virginia’s staffing arrangements is that, although the state has limited funding at the local level, it has managed to emphasize systems-building through the amount of technical support that it provides to its local collaboratives.

Michigan’s Early Childhood Investment Corporation has a staff of 34 full-time employees (18 regular and 16 contract employees). Almost half of these staff members are focused on administration of the state’s quality rating and improvement system. The balance is devoted to providing technical assistance and training to the local Great Start Collaboratives, and to administration, communications, finance/contracting and community outreach. Like Virginia, Michigan has limited funding at the local level but has succeeded in providing a great deal of support to local collaboratives.

It is difficult to compare staffing capacities used for each function across the 12 states — especially since responsibilities and definitions of responsibilities vary. Michigan’s technical assistance staff time to local collaboratives may be the highest for this purpose of any profiled state profiled. This brief will later provide details on the approach Michigan takes in supporting its local leaders.

Arizona, California, Michigan and North Carolina have much larger staffs than most of the states profiled. In Arizona, California, and North Carolina, the larger size of staff reflect larger state budgets, and enable them to have much greater capacity to support state and local efforts than is possible in the other initiatives.

Arizona First Things First has a staff of 150 people. This number is slightly misleading, since the state
office employs the regional council directors. In all, approximately 60 staff members employed by First Things First either work for or provide technical assistance and support to the regional councils. Additional staff members are responsible for implementation of statewide programs, including Arizona’s quality rating and improvement system.

First Five California has a staff of 44, with responsibilities ranging from administration and monitoring to communications, research and evaluation, and technology support. In addition, California’s nonprofit First Five California Association, a First Five California membership organization, provides technical assistance and support to the local commissions.

The North Carolina Partnership for Children was created to administer Smart Start and provide support and technical assistance to its local partnerships. It has 47 staff members providing a range of supports that resemble the supports in California and also include financial and programmatic accountability.

Advocacy, communications and public engagement are collectively another big area of staffing for state-level entities. Nearly every state that was interviewed reported that its initiative included staff members who focus on a statewide communications/advocacy effort. First Five California is actually mandated to spend a percentage of its funding on communications and media. Oklahoma’s Partnership for School Readiness has only six full-time staff members but interviewees highlighted communications and advocacy as important staffing responsibilities for this small organization. With an even smaller staff, Iowa’s interviewees noted the importance of these kinds of efforts to their initiative (although, since the initiative is housed within state government, staff also reported that in talking with legislators, they take care to emphasize an educational, rather than advocacy, approach). North Carolina’s initiative, housed in a nonprofit group, has particularly emphasized public engagement and advocacy and has seen these functions as critical to the sustainability of state funding for early childhood programs over the past two decades. More recently, with changes in political leadership, a new entity, called the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation, has been created. In coming years this foundation will assume more of the responsibility for the communication and advocacy activities that focus on state and local systems-building efforts.

Lessons Learned

State leaders who are developing state-level infrastructures for these initiatives should think about the responsibilities that are essential for supporting both state and local level systems-building efforts. To start, with the receipt of governmental funding for these initiatives, monitoring of funding inevitably becomes a central function. Technical assistance to local collaboratives is also essential. This technical assistance should focus on systems-building, collaboration, governance and program development. In order to sustain the initiative, communications, advocacy and public engagement should also be part of the overall mix of staff responsibilities.

How do states with limited funding take on such a broad array of responsibilities? Which ones do they emphasize and which must they leave behind in their quest to balance resources? The answers to these questions, as with so many others in this brief, depend on the political and financial realities in each state. Some of these realities are described in the next section.

State-Level Funding

State-level funding arrangements for the state/local initiatives vary widely. This section reports on some of the figures for funding of the state/local initiatives in the states. (BUILD is reporting on funding for the initiative itself; these figures do not reflect the total spending on early childhood programs in a state.)

The funding patterns for North Carolina’s Smart Start illustrate this point. In FY 2012-2013, funding for Smart Start was approximately $150 million in state general funds. This does not include the far larger amount of funding from the state – more than $1 billion annually – that supports prekindergarten, child care subsidies, the quality rating system, and other programs and activities. Of the approximately $150 million in state funds for Smart Start, local collaborative expenditures of state Smart Start funds totaled $144.8 million. The North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC) expended $4.8 million in state funds and an additional $2 million in local collaborative funds were managed by NCPC to meet legislative requirements and to support local capacity-building efforts. Adding to state funding, the state and local collaboratives are required to match 10 percent of the total state appropriation from cash and in-kind sources.
The state regularly achieves this goal through a mix of individual donations, corporate and foundation grants, federal grants, fees, and other funding sources.

**Arizona and California** receive their early childhood initiative funding from a special tobacco tax that was established via successful ballot initiative campaigns in those states. In Arizona (whose ballot initiative passed in 2006), 90 percent of funds from the tax, support programs for young children and families at the state and local levels, while the remaining 10 percent supports the administration of First Things First. Arizona communities, through the First Things First Regional Partnership Councils, receive 81 cents for every dollar generated from the tax. Another portion of the overall First Things First funding is used to support state-level systems-building efforts under the leadership of First Things First, with activities including support for the infrastructures of a quality rating improvement system (QRIS), pre-kindergarten programs, child care health consultation services, a parenting kit, activities to build public awareness of the importance of early childhood services, and T.E.A.C.H. scholarships, which are made available to some child care providers. Regional councils, for example, may choose to use some of their First Things First resources to “purchase” participation in the QRIS for their child care programs or to fund scholarships under T.E.A.C.H. for their child care providers. Funding under the First Things First ballot initiative averages approximately $225 per child. This is far less than is needed to support all early childhood activities in the state and other state funding for early childhood in Arizona is extremely limited. On the positive side, the First Things First funding is flexible; state leaders can use it to fill gaps and create needed new programs.

Although it is heartening that smoking cessation campaigns in California have been increasingly successful, the state’s funding for First Five has been dwindling as a result. First Five received $450,543,049 for FY 2013, a significant decrease from the funding levels in the early years after passage of the ballot initiative. Of the FY 2013 funding amount, 80 percent was dedicated to the local First Five commissions and 20 percent supported state-level First Five efforts. Like Arizona, First Five has funded some programs at the state level to support local systems-building efforts.

Other states receive less funding than the ones previously discussed, but they have found creative ways to make the most of their resources to support state/local systems-building efforts. **Iowa**, one of the states with more modest funding, was allocated $29 million in FY 2014. Of this total funding, $350,000 is being used to support state-level operations, while the remaining funds support local efforts.
In previous years, funding for Early Childhood Iowa had come from a combination of state and federal funds, but the $29 million available for Early Childhood Iowa in FY 2014 were all state funds. The advantage of not having federal funds was that use of funds for the initiatives was not tied to specific federal funding requirements, allowing for maximum flexibility about funding use.

_Smart Start Oklahoma_ has an annual budget of approximately $1.6 million in state appropriations, as well as additional private funds raised by its foundation. Most of these funds support technical assistance to local communities, as well as local allocations that are generally targeted to staffing the local initiatives.

The FY 2013 state allocation for _South Carolina First Steps_ was $13.46 million, which was intended to support both state and local efforts, including state and local infrastructure and program activities.

_The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation_ received a state appropriation of $1.25 million from the state legislature in FY 2014 to fund the work of local Smart Beginnings Collaboratives. This was a reduction from the previous year’s allocation of $1.5 million. The initiative also receives funds from its state tobacco settlement fund and raises additional private support from foundations and corporations. The combined funds support state-level operations and small grants to the local Smart Beginnings initiatives to support their systems building/collaboration efforts. The Virginia Department of Social Services regularly partners with VECF and often targets special grants to programmatic efforts of the local collaboratives. Similarly, Washington State channels additional funds - beyond the annual grants - to regional collaboratives for specific programmatic purposes.

_Vermont’s Building Bright Futures_ receives an annual state contract of $184,000. That contract funds the full-time executive director at the state level, state council operations, and individual grants of approximately $7,000 to $10,000 that are made to the 11 regional councils. The local grants are expressly designated to fund part-time coordinators in each community to support local systems-building and collaboration.

As illustrated by this use of funding for local purposes, overall, the profiled states that receive limited funding for their state/local initiatives have focused their funding on the establishment of state-level infrastructures to assist with local efforts and on grants that can support local-level staffing.

**Lessons Learned**

Based on their experience over the years, most states recognize that effective systems-building and collaboration cannot occur on a purely volunteer basis. Dedicated staffing is needed for local efforts. Adequate staffing is also needed at the state level to create a strong network of local collaboratives, provide technical assistance and support to local efforts, and build a strong public engagement and advocacy system to sustain systems-building efforts at both the state and local levels.

In addition, adequate funding must be available at both the state and local levels for activities that are designed to fill gaps or create bridges across parts of the early childhood system. These kinds of funds are helpful in getting everyone at the state and local levels to the table. While ideally everyone should come to the table just because they want to help achieve better outcomes for children, unfortunately that is not always the case. Sometimes groups and institutions will not respond without the incentive of funding to help compensate for their special efforts.

Often states have taken the approach of funding programmatic efforts at the local level using a scattershot approach, with many different entities receiving the funds locally. In BUILD’s review of states that have been most successful, we have found it more effective to find ways to bundle resources together at one “table” at the local level that is seen as the early childhood systems-building/decision-making table – a place where a variety of interests and perspectives across the region are represented. As an example, even with limited funding, Virginia and Washington are using multiple funding streams to ensure coherence at the local level.

Another way of avoiding the scattershot approach is to make sure that the state has some role to play in local decision-making that could affect the capacity for systems-building. For example, while North Carolina has a large state appropriation that each local Smart Start collaborative manages, the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC) is also part of the collaborative decision-making at the state level for other early childhood funding that is funneled to the local level. Other states have taken similar approaches.
Ideally, funding for the state/local work should be as flexible as possible while still achieving the overall mission and vision of the initiative. Many federal funding streams come with strings attached, limiting the ability of state and local entities to innovate. When it is feasible to do so, securing primarily state general funds, as opposed to federal funding, for this work can be ideal. Even more ideal is to limit the overall requirements for how these state early childhood initiative funds can be used. At the same time, there must be accountability about the use of these resources and some uniformity in terms of a common vision and goals and an ability to show statewide outcomes, but it is possible to establish these common values, standards and accountability while allowing for flexibility in how a community achieves these. For example, state resources can be defined as innovation funds, as bridge builders and gap fillers that help drive the local early childhood systems-building efforts towards common outcomes. In the long term, flexible local innovation funds will leverage resources that can even exceed the original amount of funding and these funds can serve as the starting point for blending together a variety of other resources.

Other key points about state-level funding include:

• Initiative funding provided by the state to local collaboratives should be designated as systems building funding. Moreover, whenever possible, the approach to using these funds should emphasize the comprehensive nature of early childhood and not target just one component of it. Think in terms of all aspects of what young children need to be successful including high quality early learning, health, and family support and then prioritize funding to the areas of greatest need first.

• Plan ahead to establish funding to sustain the regional collaboratives. It will not work if these collaboratives are funded in fits and starts. In the early years of developing them, there is also a need for initial funding to maintain consistency across regions and for adequate funding levels to help build their capacities. Flexible funding is also extremely important because it allows communities to tailor their resources to fit their specific needs and realities.

• Try to establish funding streams to support the local work that are not tied to other entities. This approach will limit turf problems and prevent any sense that any one entity has exclusive ownership of these resources.

Any state developing such an initiative should think carefully about what it means for this money to go to the local entities to do this work. Who is going to feel like this money is being taken from them? Who has a vested interest in it? For the local collaboratives to succeed, people involved in them must have a sense of ownership of the work that is about the broader community/region and not seen as belonging to a single entity.

• If the goal is to create a community collaborative, then states should create a funding base that really belongs to the community.

• Think supplement not supplant. When creating a new funding stream to support local efforts, take care that state policymakers do not see that funding as the only funding needed for early childhood. This has been a problem in Arizona, where state legislators have cut other state early childhood funding, seeing the First Things First funding as all that is needed for early childhood activities in Arizona.

• Funding at the state level that may have a targeted purpose (such as for a specific program) is useful, but there should be some funding dedicated to addressing local needs that is at the discretion of a local board. A cookie-cutter approach at the state level — requiring every community to implement the same programs in the same way — does not work.

• Think ahead about the issue of private sector fundraising at the state and local levels. All entities will need to be engaged in fundraising efforts to bring in additional resources. Think about how to minimize competition between state and local fundraising.

• Inevitably, there will be fluctuations in funding. Plan early about how cuts will be allocated across communities in a way that is least detrimental to the systems they are creating.

Local-Level Governance

Variation again emerges as a key characteristic of these initiatives, this time in regard to how the local governance is structured.

Some local entities in the profiled initiatives...
are independent nonprofit organizations that were formed for the explicit purpose of leading the local collaboratives. This is the case in California, North Carolina and South Carolina. In all three states, new nonprofit organizations were established locally with the explicit purpose of leading the local early childhood systems-building efforts. These nonprofit groups manage resources allocated to them from the state level. Each local entity has a board of directors, and the state-level entity, or legislation in the case of South Carolina First Steps, that governs the local groups and specifies categories of membership to be represented on these boards. The many categories of members specified to sit on the local board of directors in one or more of the states include: leaders from the business and faith communities; parents; child care providers; local elected officials; representatives of the local departments of health, mental health and social services; local school superintendents; the presidents or representatives of local community colleges; local librarians; United Way leaders; and representatives of local Head Start programs.

Many other states have established local boards with similar members and decision-making authority similar to the authority that the boards are given in California, North Carolina, and South Carolina, but these states have not chosen to establish new nonprofit organizations. In these cases, the board is typically not part of an established organization but has a fiscal agent that serves as a conduit for the allocated state resources. Most of these states have not specified who the fiscal agent must be, leaving that decision to the local boards. Iowa, Vermont, Virginia and Washington have taken this approach. Local boards in these states do have the option of establishing a nonprofit organization to lead their efforts, and a few boards in each of these states have done so, but this is the exception, not the rule.

Most of the states profiled mandate that certain categories of members be represented on the local board of directors. In Iowa the definition of a membership category is less restrictive than in many of the states. For example, the board must include a representative of health services, but in contrast to the practice in some other states, the member does not necessarily need to be a current staff member of the health department so long as s/he has already acquired the type of public health experience that comes from working in such a department.

Michigan has mandated that the funding for the Great Start Collaboratives and the Great Start Parent Coalitions go to the Intermediate School Districts through the early childhood block grant – 32p of the Michigan State School Aid Act. Most of these school districts manage the designated funding and employ the staff, but a few have chosen to contract with separate organizations to manage the local collaboratives. In one instance, the local chamber of commerce manages the local collaborative and its resources, and in another, a nonprofit organization plays this role. The initial application that funded the local collaboratives specified a list of categories of board members — much like the categories already described for other states. But in Michigan, collaboratives were also required to assure that at least 20 percent of the members were parents. Over the years, membership requirements have become less stringent, with the state leaving it to the local Great Start collaboratives to determine what composition of membership of their boards will help the boards function well. (Uniquely, only the parent membership requirement remains.)

In Oklahoma, many of the local collaboratives had been created before the launch of the state-level effort and were already housed in existing entities. The state chose to continue this structure, but mandated the establishment of a local board, with a composition of members that mirrored that of the state-level board, to oversee the work of the collaborative. Today Oklahoma’s local collaboratives are typically based in such agencies as United Ways, Departments of Youth and Family Services, child care resource and referral agencies, and Community Action agencies. Others are based in local universities or community colleges and one is even housed in a local health department. Each of these agencies serves as a fiscal agent for funding from Smart Start Oklahoma.
Arizona’s strategy, which is different from that of many other states, is reflected in the language of the initial ballot initiative that established First Things First. All local board members are appointed by the state board. As in the other states, there are mandates that representatives of specific categories be included on the local board, but in addition to this mandate, prospective board members must apply for membership and be approved by the state board of First Things First. This requirement for state approval appears to offer local boards less autonomy than they have in the other states, where local boards make their own appointments. But one local board member in Arizona says that the approval process is more “pro forma” than consequential. According to this interviewee, local board members actively recruit participants to apply for board membership. They also mentor and orient new board members.

Another important topic related to local-level governance is how local collaboratives are designated geographically. In some states, decisions about geographical designation are clearly logical. If a state has a strong county-based structure, the local collaboratives will encompass either a county or multi-county region. But in states without a strong county-based structure, determining geographic regions is more challenging. Some states have chosen to designate the geographic lines themselves in order to assure statewide coverage. Most states, though, have left drawing the regions to the local boards.

There is also the related question of how coverage is determined when local leaders apply to be a local collaborative. The state, which has an interest in ensuring statewide coverage by collaboratives, may specify that in order to be considered, the applicant group must intend to serve a certain number of children within its region. In Virginia, for example, a local entity that applied for funding was required to encompass multiple jurisdictions, such as multiple cities or cities and counties. When such specifications about regional coverage are not made, statewide coverage is a challenge.

Another set of challenges presents itself when state/local initiatives that have evolved over the years transition to a statewide approach. These states have often found that in order to achieve statewide coverage, they must ask local collaboratives to change their geographic scope. Local board members may resist, feeling strongly about the region they cover, concern that staff will be eliminated through a merger, or fearing they will be taken over by a bigger entity. These issues emerged in Oklahoma, where local collaboratives had organized well ahead of the state-level effort. They often were located in smaller geographic areas, which meant Smart Start Oklahoma, once formed, had limited coverage across the state. State leaders were then challenged to determine how to take the existing entities and move to an approach in which local collaboratives encompassed the entire state.

Furthermore, having so many local collaboratives, each of which covers only a small region, creates an administrative burden, stretching scarce resources and resulting in collaboratives that are unable to sustain themselves on the limited state resources. In those instances, state leaders often have pushed local collaboratives to merge with groups in other regions, generating a great deal of resistance.

Lesson Learned

In every state where the situation of local resistance to consolidating collaboratives has occurred, the problems have been most successfully resolved when communities are left to make these decisions on their own and are supported by the state in merger discussions through the use of a facilitator or some other type of technical assistance. To help prevent the difficulties that arise when the state wishes to consolidate existing groups, states are strongly encouraged to think ahead about coverage and create criteria that ensure statewide coverage and minimize the number of entities or boards that will be created.

Other key lessons about local-level governance that were raised by state and local leaders interviewed for this brief include the following:

• When establishing local collaboratives, emphasize that their goal is to focus on comprehensive early childhood systems building and not to target one program or single component of the system. Think broadly in terms of early learning, health and family support.
• Build in strategies to assure that the parent/family “voice” is part of the local governance and decision-making processes, and that parents and other family members are at the table for conversations about how best to build early childhood systems. You must make parents a part of the process and support their ability to fully participate in the collaborative. When that happens from the very beginning, it sends a very different message than when parents are included as more of an afterthought.

• Having a diverse group of people on the board of the local collaborative is important. If you only involve early childhood leaders, you will not get very far. Make sure representatives with different perspectives – for instance, business leaders and pediatricians – are at the table because it helps to ensure that a full picture of both the current strengths and needs as well as how to best address those needs can be formed. If only the education and care sector is present, the tendency is to see all problems through that one lens vs. understanding the complex and inter-related nature of school readiness and the programs and services necessary to achieve it.

• Having legislation in place regarding the local collaboratives can foster a steady focus by the state on early childhood issues.

• People get focused on who is at the table, but more important, members of the local collaborative must have the capacity to understand what the real problems are, to say them out loud, to learn what might solve the problems, and to bring resources to bear to make systems changes and innovations. Local board members must also have the ability to oversee implementation of whatever innovations the board decides to make. It is what happens between the meetings that matters more to the success of the work.

• Local collaborative board members should be good at collaborating and well-positioned in their communities. And saying that is a lot easier than actually doing it. Most regularly use the word “collaborate” but often do not know how to actually translate that into action. Technical assistance to support and guide true collaboration is essential.

• The natural tendency of organizations is to implement programs and services that have an impact on a small part of the population (because this is the way funding and state and federal policy associated with it are currently structured). The local collaborative, if seen as a neutral convener, offers a chance to consider a more community-wide approach to those identified needs.

• Administering local collaboratives through a state government system, rather than having them serve as independent entities, has both benefits and challenges. State administration means that each regional council must use the state systems for contracting, data and financial reporting, and other implementation tasks. Thus, the business and other systems must be set up as one-size-fits-all. In these instances, regional councils must find a way to make their needs fit within the realities of the state systems. The benefit of such an approach is that there can be greater economies of scale.

• While there is value in small rural collaboratives, some small counties struggle with leadership, funding and lack of infrastructure and could be better served by merging with another county collaborative and sharing services and administrative costs. In initial planning, states should consider whether there are viable thresholds that make sense in terms of size, scope and scale of local collaboratives. In almost all cases, form should follow function. What is it that a successful collaborative ought to be doing and achieving? What scale does it need to do that?
• Be patient. It takes a great deal of time to alter community priorities. Listen to the community leaders and learn how to do things within the system but also learn how to get things done outside the system. Getting things done successfully will bring additional support. Start where there is shared interest and commitment. Build from small wins.

• In collaboratives where the local board is not strong and engaged, there can be a lack of quality control and accountability.

• The key to the success of local collaboratives lies in local leadership. Strong, diverse, and consistent leadership is essential, and that leadership must be broadened beyond the paid staff. Some local initiatives that have been moving in the right direction struggle when a paid staff member leaves. Create a systems approach to leadership so that everyone is taking responsibility for the work and the results. Staff leadership is essential but sustainability requires ownership and leadership and a feeling of responsibility by the local collaborative board members.

• It is important to communicate the value and purpose of being a collaborative – to both the board members and the community at large. Members of the public know that over the years, lots of collaboratives form and dissolve. So what’s the reason that the public should value this particular collaborative and what will make the community recognize that it will be around for important purposes over the long term?

• In many cases, communities have been doing this work for a long while. Design an approach that values and respects what they are already doing.

• While flexibility is important, there must be some structure and alignment across regional coalitions in order to create continuity and a sense of statewide coverage for the initiative. Consider setting standards for membership on the regional collaborative or for how members will represent the counties within their region. Also establish some common goals and vision that will guide the work of all collaboratives.

Particularly in the early days of the initiative, the more you can be clear on the role of the local collaboratives and how they will function, the more quickly they can get to work.

• Establish local initiatives as neutral conveners in communities. They should be seen as bringing everyone to the table for strategic discussions rather than having their own agendas.

• Focus on building relationships from the beginning – at the state and local level and between the state and local leaders. Understand that it takes a while to build those relationships and be prepared to invest time, effort and resources in the process. In the end these investments will result in a stronger, more collaborative effort.

• Focus on equity from the beginning and how your local system is going to address equity. Be mindful of the diversity of stakeholders; ensure authentic involvement in the process.

• Have realistic expectations about what is possible when you are getting started. It takes time to develop the infrastructure of local collaboratives. Rural communities in particular may be starting from scratch in building the infrastructure to support a new program.

• Establish rules about acknowledging conflicts of interest so that the local collaborative is viewed from the outside as legitimate and authentic.
Local-Level Staffing

In general, states that have been most successful in building local-level systems emphasize that it is important to have staff to support local collaboratives – and all of the 12 profiled states endorse this view. Even states with the most minimal funding have prioritized the need for local staff. Early Childhood Iowa, for example, did not start out with local staff but later mandated it as a condition of funding. In another state with only modest funding, the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation initially mandated full-time staff for collaboratives but later, recognizing that the full-time requirement made it impossible to hire high-quality staff with its limited resources, allowed staff to be part-time. Once the full-time requirement had been eliminated, some Virginia communities chose to invest their resources in part-time staff who had higher qualifications than the full-time candidates the collaboratives could afford to pay.

In the states where funding flows through a fiscal agent at the local level, staff members are often employed by the fiscal agent or work on a contract basis for the local board. In the case of Arizona, local collaborative staff are employed by First Things First at the state level. The state organization is responsible for all hiring. Local staff members are housed in offices within the region that they represent. A local board member who was interviewed for this issue brief did not see this arrangement as problematic. Instead, she viewed the staff person of her local collaborative as “their” local board staff person, responsible for meeting the needs of their region, and she cited the efficiencies of having staff employed by one entity with large group benefits, a common payroll, and other consolidated systems.

In some states with more limited funding, local collaboratives are generally minimally staffed by a part- or full-time staff person who coordinates the work of the local board and manages the resources allocated by the state. Often though, local collaboratives in Michigan have additional staff members whose responsibilities range from program development and/or implementation to fund development, community engagement, and communications. A practice that is used in the Michigan Great Start collaboratives illustrates another kind of staffing position. In addition to hiring full-time staff for the Great Start Collaboratives, each collaborative also hired one or more parent liaisons to lead the work of their parent coalitions. These parent coalitions, which were established by the local collaboratives, have resulted in a very strong parent-empowerment approach to systems-building, and that approach was made more effective by the use of full- or part-time parent staff who have coordinated the coalitions, recruited new parent members, and offered parents a variety of activities designed to get them more involved.

Lessons Learned

Several of the profiled states specify minimum qualifications and minimum levels of skills, education, and experience for local staff members. While in theory this seems like a good idea, it can be problematic in regions of the state where the supply of staff who meet these eligibility requirements may be limited. This is particularly true in poor, rural areas where every local agency finds it challenging to hire experienced staff. Often states find they must minimize their ideal staff criteria in order to take into account the difficulty, and even impossibility, of meeting higher criteria in certain geographic areas. In these situations, more support from the state is often needed to help the staff be successful in their roles.

In the past, state policymakers have often envisioned local collaboratives as being solely volunteer-driven. Legislators have particularly liked the idea of
empowering volunteers at the local level to lead decision-making in local early childhood initiatives. It is true that local board members, who serve in this decision-making capacity, are themselves volunteers. But volunteer board members cannot be as effective as possible without the support of at least some paid staff members. Volunteer board members are generally full-time employees of other organizations and do not have the spare time needed to manage the resources of a local entity, to organize its meetings, to conduct the research necessary that informs board decision-making, and to organize local events designed to engage the public. These are tasks that require staff.

Thus, the profiled states have all taken steps to ensure that local collaboratives function with at least some paid staff members. Interviewees viewed other states that have chosen not to take this approach as often ineffective in their local systems-building efforts. In summary, if the goal is to create effective local early childhood systems on a statewide basis, resources designated to support staffing for these local collaboratives must be funded on a statewide basis.

Finally, the success of local collaboratives often depends on the leadership skills of the director or coordinator. Thus, as noted later in this brief in connection with the topic of technical assistance, it is essential that state resources be focused on building the leadership and collaboration skills of lead staff members of local collaboratives who are responsible for setting the direction and purpose of these entities. As one state leader noted, “Strong leadership makes a huge difference as to whether the system survives when challenges come along.”

Local-Level Funding

Funding to local collaboratives that was provided by the states profiled for this report ranged from as little as $5,000 to local collaboratives in one state to as much as $45 million — for a large urban area — in another one. For states with more generous resources to support the work of local collaboratives, funding is generally allocated on a formula basis that takes into account such factors as the number of children in the collaborative’s geographic area and the poverty rate for young children in the area. In some states, funding formulas incorporate a set baseline or minimum amount that every local collaborative will receive. In North Carolina, state leaders created a lengthy and complicated funding formula that takes into account both the needs of the region served by the local collaborative and the level of resources available in the region. In all states where a funding formula is used, it is updated annually, resulting in changes to funding due to changes in the population or poverty rates.

The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation has developed an approach to local funding that takes into account the stage of development that a collaborative has reached. Depending on the stage, the local collaboratives receive a state grant designated as Planning, Getting Ready, Partnership, Sustaining or Sustaining Partners. The grants for later stages of development, such as the Sustaining Partners grant, tend to be smaller than the initial planning grants. For example, a community may receive a larger grant to help it get started with the planning and development process for its local collaborative, with the funding later being reduced to a $5,000 Sustaining Partner grant once the collaborative is fully implemented. This continues to be an evolving approach in Virginia. Originally, the VECF grant funds were designated to support operating programs, but it was found that once the grant funds to these programs had been reduced, the programs were not sustainable or had only a limited impact on the communities that they served. Today the state’s emphasis is on using state resources to local collaboratives to support systems-building efforts rather than the implementation of programs. Besides the grants, additional resources may be channeled to local collaboratives from state agencies like the Department of Social Services that see the regional efforts as important conduits to their own systems-building efforts.

States with larger funding allocations require that certain percentages of funding be used for specific types of programs. For example, in North Carolina, local collaboratives are required to use a minimum of 70 percent of their funding to support activities related to early education, with the activities including child...
care subsidies in higher quality programs, preschool scholarships, quality improvement efforts, and the provision of quality incentives to programs and teachers. In Iowa, the law requires that 60 percent of Early Childhood Iowa funding be designated for some type of home visiting/family support program. In both states, the remaining funds are used for other early childhood-related efforts including child care, health, family support, mental health, and community engagement, among others.

When states developed their local collaboratives, they often established a competitive application process to determine which regions would receive funding and then gradually phased in funding until the entire state was covered. Once officially approved as a local collaborative under the initiative, communities were then required to submit a proposal or strategic plan that outlined how the resources would be used and what would be accomplished by the local collaborative at certain points in time – for instance, annually, biannually, or over a three-year period. The state-level entity would then conduct approval processes to ensure that specific requirements about how the funding should be used were being met and to make certain that funds were not being spent for a purpose already being funded by the state at the community level. (For example, a local health department might already be funded to deliver specific early childhood health activities or could use Medicaid funding for a particular activity.)

Most local collaboratives also raise public and private sector grants and contributions to supplement their state allocations. Some states take the step of requiring that local collaboratives match at least a percentage of the funds they receive from the state initiative (As noted in the earlier discussion of state-level funding, this is the case in North Carolina.) At a minimum, communities must report the public and private cash and in-kind resources raised and leveraged through their local collaboratives. Often they report this information annually to legislators, making it clear that they have leveraged additional funds as a result of the original investment that the state made in the local systems-building efforts.

In states with more generous funding to support local collaboratives, state funding requirements often limit how much can be spent for administrative purposes. This practice began in North Carolina when the legislature required that local collaboratives could spend no more than 8 percent of Smart Start funds for administration. However, the 8 percent statewide requirement was an aggregate for all communities – in other words, so long as the aggregate amount spent for administrative purposes was no more than 8 percent, the legislative requirement had been met. This way of calculating the ceiling amount meant that small rural collaboratives with limited allocations could receive as much as 25 percent of the funds for administrative support, while larger urban areas might be granted as little as 3 percent of their allocations to use for these purposes. Several other states that have ceilings on administrative expenditures require no more than 8 to 10 percent being expended for administrative purposes not in the aggregate but in each individual local collaborative. For collaborations that have very small allocations, this restriction can be extremely burdensome, since it allows for only a minimal amount of funding to support the collaborative’s infrastructure.

Lessons Learned

The funding allocation process is often an evolving one, with most states making adjustments in response to what they have learned, to changes in legislative requirements, and to increases or decreases in the level of resources available to the initiatives. As states move forward and respond to changing circumstances, they should expect and accept this kind of evolution.
One key challenge connected to local-level funding is how to expand a finite amount of resources that were originally designated for only part of the state so that the resources can be used statewide. States struggle with how to protect the local infrastructures that they first funded while still broadening coverage to the rest of the state. For long-term sustainability, it is important to expand to cover the entire state, but there are never easy answers to the myriad questions that are raised in this process.

Other key points about local-level funding that were raised by state and local leaders interviewed for this brief include the following:

• In funding local collaboratives, it is important to recognize that they may have limited fiscal capacity, which, in turn, may result in poor financial audits that can undermine the initiative as a whole. Think about these potential problems early in the process of developing an initiative. Numerous state and local leaders interviewed emphasized the importance of overall organizational capacity as being critical for the fiscal agent and/or backbone organization.

• At the local level, “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.” Raise and diversify funding from multiple sources and blend/braid/leverage resources to support local efforts.

• Securing funding is a bigger challenge for smaller local partnerships, which can find it more difficult than larger collaboratives to raise private funds.

• In states with limited funding to support local efforts, there is often a temptation to use the local collaborative funds to support programs instead of community-level collaboration and infrastructure. Both state- and local-level leaders in Virginia who were interviewed for this brief commented that they have learned through experience that program funding is often not sustainable. They now endorse the use of their funds to support the local systems building efforts and at the same time look to the blending and braiding of funds to better support local efforts. The interviewees also stressed that a small funding pool that is used to support the infrastructure of systems building can leverage much more additional funding than funding that is simply used to support individual programs.

• As local initiatives get stronger and multiple localities begin to compete for limited resources, tensions can develop. It is a challenge to create a system that supports greater collaboration and that discourages competition and turf battles. Unfortunately, without overall increases in funding, competition between local entities may be inevitable.

• Often rural areas with limited allocations need additional resources when their budgets don’t provide the means to fund a staff member to lead the collaborative systems-building process.

Technical Assistance

One important key to the success of a state/local initiative is the state-level infrastructure that supports technical assistance to the local collaboratives. While communities naturally want to make their own decisions about what is needed for children and families, it is essential that they have the knowledge and expertise to support the development of a comprehensive local early childhood system. And technical assistance to help make that happen does not mean just informing community leaders about effective program practices. It also means helping them become better collaborators who understand effective systems-building approaches that often have nothing to do with funding individual programs — the “go-to” approach of some local boards that may prefer funding a program to thinking more strategically about systems building. For collaboratives that have significant resources from the state, it also means technical assistance focused on how to create a stronger local governance structure, how to effectively monitor the grants that the collaboratives are making to other entities, how to accurately account for the collaboratives’ use of resources from the state, and how to evaluate collaborative activities.
Interviewees from all profiled states, with limited as well as ample resources, stressed the need for technical assistance — although some interviewees acknowledged that modest funding and staffing may hinder how much is possible. At minimum, states profiled for this brief have brought together their local collaborative leaders for regular meetings and webinars to share the latest research and other information and to create peer learning networks.

Virginia is an excellent example of a state with limited resources that has analyzed the technical assistance it was providing and then changed it to make it more effective. At the outset, the state’s technical assistance focused more on helping local groups be fiscally accountable and develop governance structures. In recent years, however, Virginia has begun to shift to a more targeted systems-development approach. The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) has partnered with the Department of Social Services and other state agencies to further this systems-building effort, thus maximizing resources available for technical assistance. Sometimes working with its state partners, VECF now regularly calls on content-area experts to be part of the technical assistance efforts and through this technical assistance, state leaders are helping local leaders think more about how to blend/braid funding, eliminate barriers to services, and increase access to programs. As Virginia's state leaders have worked on these fronts, they have found that local partners were often struggling to understand exactly what is meant by “local systems development” and what it entails. In response, state leaders also implemented a statewide Smart Beginnings Leader Institute that focuses on developing the capacity of local leaders to build comprehensive local systems.

Michigan is another state that does not allocate a significantly large amount of resources to its local collaboratives but manages to emphasize a more systems-building approach in the technical assistance that it provides. The state regularly brings its local leaders together for webinars and meetings and has created a strong, extended peer learning network that includes both staff and volunteers. Learning communities that focus on a variety of issues have been developed, and state leaders have invested in special trainings that emphasize parent leadership, the collaboration process, and approaches to systems change. The trainings generally include both coaching and personal consultation focused on helping participants actually put what they have learned into practice. Trainings follow a cycle of activities that move from learning interaction, to follow-up, to new infusions of learning, to coaching/consultation between training sessions, to more training, and then to more coaching/consultation. The state also now offers local collaborative directors a training called “Above and Below the Line (ABLe) Change Framework,” which has proven to be extremely effective. In addition to these trainings, each local collaborative has an individual technical assistance plan and a system that tracks every single contact related to technical assistance that is made with local leaders in each collaborative.

North Carolina also takes a diversified approach to the technical assistance that it offers to its local collaboratives. Over the past two decades, the state has adjusted how it handles technical assistance in response to both lessons learned and the skills and needs of local leaders. In recent years, one of the state’s most effective approaches has been its Leaders Collaborative, an eight-month curriculum that is offered to a group of 12 local collaborative executive directors at a time and that now is being implemented for a fourth round of local leaders. One notable feature of the training arrangement is that state-level staff members join the local leaders in the sessions, so that the two groups experience the same process. For the eight months that participants are involved, the curriculum is offered as monthly three-day sessions complemented with individual coaching/consultation between sessions. Key topics that are covered in the sessions include Appreciative Leadership, Data-Driven Decision-Making, Theory of Aligned Contribution (a theory related to theory-
of-change analyses), Facilitation Skills, Leading for Equity, and Protocols for Convening Community Conversations. Long-time local executive directors who have participated in the many evolutions of technical assistance that have been offered by the North Carolina Partnership for Children, the state-level organization, say that the Leaders Collaborative is the most effective support they have ever received and that the experience has moved them much further along in their ability to understand and effect change in their communities.

Two states, Virginia and North Carolina, also have developed “effective-practice” guides as part of the technical assistance that they offer to their local collaboratives. Virginia’s “Evidence-Based Directory” analyzes specific evidence-based and evidence-informed early childhood programs and practices. One local collaborative director reported that the guide has been extremely helpful in informing community conversations and helping local leaders take a more systems-building approach to their work. Likewise, North Carolina’s Smart Start Resource Guide to Evidence-Based and Evidence-Informed Programs and Practices has been useful to local collaboratives in the state, offering them information designed to help them make better use of local resources.

**Lessons Learned**

While states with more staffing resources have the ability to offer more in-depth technical assistance to localities, even states with limited staffing should think strategically about what is possible to provide since technical assistance is essential to success at the local level. Without this support - and without, at a minimum, chances for local leaders to meet and learn from each other - the local groups are just individual collaboratives with no real connection to one another and no inclination to think from either a local or statewide systems-building approach.

And while resources are definitely important in furthering technical assistance efforts, partnerships at the state level may be even more helpful. The example of Virginia reaching out to its state partners to support local technical assistance suggests that state-level partnerships can result in a much stronger capacity to provide technical assistance to localities. The same is true in Iowa with its cross-agency technical assistance team. Likewise in *Colorado*, where limited resources in the early days of development of the state’s local early childhood councils meant that the lead agency had to rely on state partners, the result was not only a much stronger partnership focused on early childhood issues at the state level but helpful technical assistance at the local level.

One refrain that was heard from some local interviewees was the importance of having the state leaders occasionally make in-person visits to local collaboratives as part of the technical assistance process. While these interviewees recognized the realities of limited time and resources and the need for state staff to cover the entire state, technical assistance still resonated most strongly with them when state staff met with their board members and partners at the local collaboratives. These local leaders felt that the visits gave state staff more understanding of the realities the collaboratives were dealing with. They also felt that the visits seemed to strengthen the trust local leaders felt in state leaders and to create stronger bonds between the leaders at the two levels. This dynamic is important in light of the distrust between local and state leaders that so often manifests itself, not only in the field of early childhood, but in all state/local governmental relationships that feature a funding/monitoring connection. Given that distrust often seems to be an inherent part of relationships between state and local leaders in a variety of fields, interviewees in...
states where apparently stronger mutual trust had been established indicated that this development had been a very important one and they saw it as a result of making the effort to meet local leaders on their own “grounds.”

Other key points about technical assistance that were raised by state and local leaders interviewed for this brief include the following:

• Training and technical assistance should be built into the model from the very beginning with an approach that is about meeting the local leaders where they are and helping them be successful.

• Ensure that there are adequate resources at the state level to provide technical assistance to the regional coalitions and make certain that that technical assistance is consistent with the vision of the initiative.

• Emphasize peer learning in all technical assistance opportunities. Local collaboratives have much to learn from each other.

Accountability/Measuring Success

One of the biggest questions that states must answer is how to measure the success of the local collaboratives. Ideally, collaboratives tailor programs and strategies to the needs and realities of their communities. But how and what do you measure when every region is doing something different? And if the local approach is focused on collaboration and systems-building with no targeted funding provided for programs, how do you measure outcomes? Finally, from the vantage point of trying to build political support for and sustain the initiative, how do you articulate messages to legislators and funders that make them aware of both statewide successes and positive outcomes at the local level? These are challenges that every state faces. The states profiled took different approaches to addressing these challenges.

Some states are still formulating strategies for measuring outcomes and, in the interim, they have been reporting on outputs, such as the number of children and families served by particular types of programs across the state. While this approach does not promote an understanding of changes being made in systems, it can be very effective for communicating with legislators, who like to have information on the number of children in their districts or across the state who have benefited from an appropriation they have made. Thus, in the short term and from a political perspective, reporting on outputs can be very helpful.

But over the long term, states must put in place a strategy that tells them not only what they are doing but whether their efforts are working and whether they are working at both the state and local levels. But again, how can states do that while still honoring the need for flexibility and local decision-making in diverse communities? Most states ask local collaboratives to conduct evaluations of every program they fund and submit annual reports with the results from these evaluations. But these reports do not necessarily give state leaders a coherent picture (or powerful message) of what has actually been accomplished by the initiative across the state.

Some states have tried to use statewide evaluations of specific components of the state/local initiative using a sampling approach. These reports can be extremely helpful, although most states do not have the funding to support such an evaluation — and while legislators want to hear about outcomes, they are typically not interested in funding such an evaluation.

Using limited resources, state leaders involved in Early Childhood Iowa (ECI) have taken multiple approaches to reporting on outcomes — approaches that enable them to report on whether they are meeting performance measures and to document that they are fully accountable for the resources they are receiving from the state. In 2011, the Early Childhood Iowa State Board adopted a single set of program measures for Iowa’s early childhood system, and all local collaboratives must now annually report their results using these program measures. The data is then compiled statewide and reported annually to the state legislature. In addition, ECI has established a “Levels of Excellence” rating system for its local collaboratives. Every local collaborative must undergo the rating process on a regular basis and is ultimately rated as either probation, compliant, quality or model. Collaboratives then must...
follow requirements that vary according to which rating they have been given.

In Michigan, the Early Childhood Investment Corporation has taken a multi-pronged approach to evaluation, conducting both an annual evaluation of the Great Start systems-building efforts at the local level as well as measuring progress towards outcomes. Notably, the annual evaluation has clarified key levers for positive change at the local level. The levers that appear to play the most important roles are:

- readiness for change
- intentional systems-change actions
- authentic parent leadership and voice

Other important levers for change include:

- equitable system pursuits
- an engaged constituency

In addition to being part of the state-level evaluation, local Great Start collaboratives must focus on specific performance goals. As part of a performance-measurement system that is a new one for these collaboratives, the Office of Great Start now has specified outcomes that the collaboratives must try to reach as they pursue their ongoing activities. The outcomes are:

- children born healthy;
- children healthy, thriving, and developmentally on track from birth to third grade;
- children developmentally ready to succeed in school at the time of school entry; and
- children prepared to succeed in fourth grade and beyond by reading proficiently by the end of third grade.

Each collaborative must choose which outcomes it will work on and then must build its strategic plan around them. Collaboratives next identify which activities they will carry out to help realize the outcomes they have chosen. They also must choose a specific performance measure for each outcome for which they will be held accountable. They report their progress twice a year via an online system through the Michigan Department of Education.

As a state that launched its early childhood local collaboratives more than two decades ago, North Carolina has evolved over the years in its approach to evaluation and performance measurement. During the first 10 years in the life of Smart Start, the state was fortunate to have state funding for annual evaluations of the initiative that were conducted by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG). The studies examined issues of collaboration, child care quality improvement, and specific areas of support, such as health and family support. FPG also conducted a longitudinal evaluation focused on school readiness.

Funding for these studies was eliminated by the state legislature in 2001. Moreover, despite the fact that 32 research studies reported that Smart Start was making a difference in school-readiness skills, the message did not resonate with legislators. They wanted more specific evidence that the work at the local level (in their legislative districts) was making a difference, and they repeatedly called for a new accountability system for the local Smart Start collaboratives. While state leaders were developing that system, they used the strategy of reporting statewide outputs, which satisfied legislative demands in the early years.

In 2001, state and local leaders and experts from outside the state created the Performance Based Incentive System (PBIS), which measures each local collaborative’s annual progress towards specific population-based indicators. PBIS was developed with input from local partnerships as well as advice from national experts. While the incentive component of the system turned out to be very limited in scope due to budget cuts and not what was initially envisioned, the measurement system was fully launched and is in place today.

PBIS is a collection of 24 population-level indicators that track healthy conditions for young children. The indicators, which are broken down into categories of early learning, health and family support, include such measures as the number of children in child care programs that have been rated as being of 4-star or 5-star quality.
(not only the total number of children in these higher-quality settings, but also the number of children receiving child care subsidies and the number with special needs participating in these programs), the number of child care programs rated at levels 4 and 5, educational levels of early childhood teachers, number of children receiving early intervention services by age, number of children receiving well-child exams under Medicaid, infant mortality rates, early childhood obesity rates, and number of children with elevated blood lead levels.

The full set of indicators encompasses both a subset of core indicators that every local collaborative must meet annually and additional indicators for which collaboratives may choose to be held accountable. Each indicator is connected to a statewide data source and can be broken down on a county-by-county basis. There are minimum levels of performance for each indicator that each local collaborative must meet and “high-achieving” levels for which they are publicly recognized. Each collaborative receives an annual report card that reflects its achievement on the required and selected indicators. Statewide annual reports - nine since the inception of the system - present the aggregate data across the state. As the minimum and high-achieving indicators have increasingly been achieved each year, the goals have been raised, and as new data sources have been developed, new indicators have been added to the system.

One particular challenge associated with using the system is the lack of a statewide data source to measure progress that results from the use of family support-related programs. State leaders did develop a family survey that was used for several years for all families participating in Smart Start-funded family support programs, and analyses of the results indicated that families were responding very positively to the programs. However, the survey was ultimately deemed to not be a reliable indicator and was removed from the PBIS requirements.

PBIS will continue to evolve but is now firmly in place as a strategy for measuring the performance of all local Smart Start collaboratives. Following the development of the system, other studies have been conducted in North Carolina by outside evaluators who have focused on child-level outcomes (as opposed to population data outcomes), but it is PBIS that legislators most often agree on as the measurement to which Smart Start is being held fully accountable.

Lessons Learned

All states launching state/local systems-building initiatives should focus on how to measure performance early in the process of developing the initiatives. When leaders of local collaboratives hear from the state about performance measurement that don’t match their approach after they have begun developing their own programs and approaches to systems building, they are rightly frustrated and the state-local relationship becomes tension-filled. Local leaders then have to change activities and approaches, which in turn creates problems in the community where residents are likely to be upset about the potential loss of programs in which they already feel invested. The earlier a performance measurement system for local collaboratives is implemented statewide, the better chance of avoiding these kinds of problems later on. Moreover, such a system must be developed with the full input and involvement of local collaboratives. Without this local involvement, there will be backlash later on, with possible reactions including attempts to eliminate the measurement system entirely.

Other key points about performance measurement that were raised by state and local leaders interviewed for this brief include the following:

- Having a clear set of desired outcomes at the start – outcomes that are part of a larger agreed-upon goal
of improving school readiness in all children through systems-change - is key to achieving success.

- Make sure adequate data are available to use in decision-making and, early in the process, think about what data you will want to use in the future and what is needed to collect that data. At the same time, have realistic expectations about what data is possible to access and about how any data that are accessed can be used.

- With limited funding and with varied levels of capacities for performance measurement across a state, it is difficult to answer the question of how the collaborative’s work is affecting levels of school readiness. It takes a long time to answer this question.

- The lack of consistent measurements to track the effectiveness of the community-based work results in an inconsistent message about the success of the overall initiative.

- It is easy for a state to get caught up in the monitoring process and particularly in making sure there is accountability for every public dollar being spent. While that work is certainly important, the state may find that too much time and too many resources are being spent on accountability, with less time and fewer resources devoted to collaboration and innovation. While every dollar must be accounted for, what creativity is lost in the process? Be aware of these potential pitfalls and find ways to build flexibility into the accountability process.

Advocacy/Public Education

Advocacy is essential to efforts to advance and sustain a systems-building policy agenda and to secure the financial resources needed to support these efforts at the state and local levels. Local collaboratives can and should play a leading role in a state’s advocacy and public education efforts, and in fact, both state and local infrastructures are critical to the advocacy work that is needed.

The state entity can play a leadership role in the effort by developing common messages, materials, and other tools. States can also provide training to local collaborative leaders about how to mobilize volunteers to advocate with their legislators throughout the year in the legislative district and in the state capital during legislative sessions. At the state level, the entity that leads the systems-building initiative should be the “go-to” organization for legislators with questions on early childhood issues, and this group should be coordinating ongoing statewide efforts designed to promote the policy agenda.

Developing common messages and materials is another important support that state entities can provide to local collaboratives. But because the “all-politics-is-local” approach is definitely a key to success in politically moving an early-childhood agenda, the state’s messaging efforts should include creating template messages that local collaboratives can customize with local data and success stories.

At the local level, collaborative leaders should be the “go-to” for the legislators in their districts on all early childhood issues. Local leaders should both be regularly meeting with their legislators and as noted, arranging for opportunities for volunteers such as child care providers, parents, and other community members to talk directly with legislators. Local collaborative staff and board members should also develop events that showcase the community’s early childhood needs and successes. Whenever possible, they should engage legislators in these sessions. In addition, local leaders should be regularly speaking with organizations like local chambers of commerce and service organizations like the Kiwanis and Rotary Clubs, educating members of these groups...
about early childhood topics, and mobilizing them to advocate with and educate legislators about funding and policy issues. To ensure that the collaboratives take every opportunity to build support for an early childhood agenda and educate the public and policymakers, these kinds of outreach activities should occur not just during the legislative session but throughout the year.

Ongoing public education efforts build sustained support for a state’s early childhood agenda. And even more importantly, encouraging volunteers to speak to public officials empowers average citizens in ways that many of them do not otherwise experience. Child care providers, parents and community members move from feeling intimidated at the idea of talking to an elected official to feeling empowered because their advocacy allows them to be heard and to support change.

In one state, a group of family child care providers (non-unionized) came together to advocate on behalf of the early childhood agenda in their state. They arrived at the legislature with their strollers since they were continuing to work and care for children on this regular work day. Most of them had never met an elected official before. They returned home excited that they had been heard by legislative leaders and felt empowered to advocate again – both on the issues that had brought them to the legislature and on many other issues. In another case, a van full of parents and community members drove two hours to the state capital, quiet and filled with trepidation about the idea of talking to their elected leaders. On the return home, the van was filled with chatter about the conversations they had had with legislators. These same volunteers became regular advocates at home, meeting with legislators and talking to others about the importance of the state’s early childhood agenda.

In the states that were profiled, many were emphatic about the importance of including advocacy in the roles that local collaborative leaders play. Local leaders are responsible for building a strong list of volunteers who are willing to write, call, and speak with legislators about early childhood issues. When the alarm goes out from the state level about legislation that can threaten key policy items or funding, local collaboratives from all over the state press a “button” to literally thousands of volunteers who immediately respond. In the midst of one particularly heated legislative session in a state, the speaker of the house said to the state early childhood organization representatives, “Turn off the faucet. We have heard you and will do what you want. Tell them to stop calling and emailing and visiting us.”

This same state did such a good job of creating a local advocacy effort that legislative candidates from the two opposing political parties would both cite their support for early childhood services in their campaign brochures. One legislative campaign debate actually featured an argument between the two candidates over which one of them was doing more to support early childhood efforts.

To mobilize their local collaboratives, state organizations often hold “Day on the Hill” annual advocacy days at the legislature on behalf of an early childhood agenda. One state has instituted a “Tuesdays for Tots” and “Tuesdays at Home” advocacy approach, bringing in community leaders and volunteers every Tuesday during the legislative session to meet with legislators and encouraging this same approach with legislators at home when they are not in session. The results have been extremely positive, sustaining early childhood funding and support for early childhood policies even through gubernatorial transitions and shifts in party leadership in the legislature.

Several states have developed advocacy tool kits to support local collaborative efforts and regularly train local leaders and volunteers. Such trainings can demystify advocacy and help local leaders understand and develop the strategies they need to be effective advocates.

In one state, a large number of the local collaboratives combined resources to fund a statewide media campaign and sustained the campaign over a period of several years. This campaign was aligned with the state-level initiative’s strategic communications plan.
Communications outreach staff were also funded at the local level to support the statewide campaign.

Both state and local leaders should also be building champions. In one state, the president of a major statewide bank went from office to office in the legislature, sharing a paper he had written on the importance of investing in early childhood services. Local collaboratives capitalized on his commitment by pointing out what he had done. This helped mobilize other business leaders in their communities to speak out.

**Lessons Learned**

Key points about advocacy that were raised by state and local leaders who were interviewed for this brief include the following:

- Advocates should speak with one voice at the state and local levels to all legislators. The inability to coordinate efforts and messages can divide the early childhood community and ultimately harm young children and their families.

- The state/local initiative should have a strong statewide identity. There should be statewide branding and communications strategies so that everyone in the state recognizes and understands a state’s early childhood brand and what it means.

- State-level marketing of the systems-change initiative must be coordinated, not duplicative. Multiple, especially contradictory, marketing campaigns are ineffective. If the state creates a marketing campaign that local groups can tailor, that is a good use of resources.

- At the local level, it is critical to keep legislators of all political persuasions educated and on board with local collaborative efforts.

- Determine how your mission fits those of existing organizations, and be part of the answer to achieving the missions of those institutions. For example, if the goal of the Chamber of Commerce is to maintain and improve the community’s quality of life, show how school readiness is part of the answer to achieving that goal. Sell the goal of school readiness as everyone’s job and everyone’s win.

- Use site visits as a tool to take legislators of all political viewpoints to see what is happening as a result of your early childhood funding.

- Expand the dialogue to include members of the broader community, including business and civic leaders. These leaders should see an investment in early childhood activities and services as an investment in the future of the community.

- Bipartisan political support for an early childhood initiative is essential. Emphasize that approach from the very beginning so that both Democratic and Republican leaders in the state legislature and the Governor’s office have a sense of ownership of the initiative.

- Reach out to likely and unlikely allies for support. Particularly engage business and faith leaders as spokespeople for your local and state advocacy efforts.

- Securing buy-in from the governor and legislators is needed from the outset. Continuously communicate the outcomes you are achieving and let them hear success stories from local community leaders.

- Develop champions of the initiative at both the state and local levels.

- Bipartisan political support for an early childhood initiative is essential.

**Major Accomplishments**

The states studied for this brief had many accomplishments to share including:

- expanded financial resources to support early childhood programs and services;

- changes in policy at the state level;

- better outcomes for children and families including improved third grade test scores and higher graduation rates;

- stronger collaboration at the state and community levels;

- more engagement in, support for, and understanding of the importance of work focused on investing in early childhood programs on the part of both likely and unlikely proponents of these investments;
• increased involvement and empowerment of parents who are engaged in advocacy efforts focused on the needs of their young children; and

• systems changes at both the state and local levels that have eliminated barriers to services and bridged funding gaps, thereby supporting increases in services for children and families.

The most recent evaluation conducted of the Michigan initiative clearly articulates some of the state’s accomplishments. The 2013 evaluation report noted that parents now have a greater say in early childhood advocacy efforts and have increased access to early childhood services. More collaboration exists among agencies and increased support for early childhood programs and services. The report concludes, “On every outcome area examined in this evaluation, Great Start Collaboratives and Parent Coalitions are accomplishing far more than in 2010. In ways big and small across the state, young children and their needs are becoming more and more of a priority.”

Among the report’s specific findings:

• Fifty-nine percent of survey respondents for this study (compared to 38 percent of respondents to a 2010 survey) stated the Great Start Collaboratives and Parent Coalitions have expanded the array of early childhood services available in their communities.

• Fifty-five percent (vs. 36 percent in 2010) stated the collaboratives and Parent Coalitions have increased families’ access to early childhood services.

• Fifty-three percent (vs. 35 percent two years ago) stated the two groups have increased the level of community support for early childhood programs and services.

• Sixty-four percent (vs. 52 percent in 2010) see parents benefiting from participating in one of the two groups.

From a state-level policy perspective, the successful efforts of the Early Childhood Investment Corporation and the local Great Start Collaboratives undoubtedly have played a role in the establishment of the Office of Great Start, the state government entity now responsible for coordinating and leading the state’s early childhood policies and programs. The state legislature has also approved a substantial investment in funds for pre-kindergarten services during the 2013 legislative session, again due in part to the greater awareness of early childhood issues and the greater empowerment of families and community volunteers that has been stimulated by the local Great Start Collaboratives.

In North Carolina, where state and local Smart Start efforts have been underway since 1993, there are many tangible results. Based on the Performance Based Incentive System (PBIS) results from 2012, the following population-based outcomes have been achieved:

• Seventy percent of North Carolina children in child care were in care rated at the 4- or 5-star level.

• Eighty-one percent of North Carolina children receiving a child care subsidy were enrolled in child care rated at the 4- or 5-star level.

• Ninety-four percent of children with special needs were enrolled in child care rated at the 4- or 5-star level.

• Seventy-six percent of children enrolled in Medicaid received a well-child visit.

• Five and four-tenths (5.4) percent of children ages 0-2 received early intervention and/or special education services. (This is in line with the “high achieving” goal that state leaders had set.)

Other outcomes found for Smart Start include:

• The evaluation by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute that was conducted more than a decade ago found that North Carolina children who participated in high-quality child care programs were arriving at school with higher levels of readiness and sustaining that readiness through third grade. The evaluation also reported that the achievement gap between at-risk children and those at lesser risk had narrowed.
An econometric analysis completed by Duke University in 2012 found that taken together, Smart Start and North Carolina funding for prekindergarten services yielded an average of a five-month advancement in reading instruction and a three to five month advancement in math.

Researchers at Duke University found that Smart Start funding was related to a 9 percent decrease in placements in special education at 3rd grade.

High school graduation rates rose to 82.5 percent in 2012, an increase of 14.2 percent in the past seven years. The need to raise high school graduation rates was one of the issues that was initially used to make the case for investments in early childhood services when Smart Start was getting started in 1993.

As measured by the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), reading and math scores of North Carolina children in elementary and middle school have substantially increased since the inception of Smart Start. The most recent NAEP results on outcomes for middle schoolers across the country show that North Carolina’s students performed well above the national average, trailing students only in Massachusetts, Vermont, New Jersey, Minnesota and New Hampshire, and that they outperformed students in 40 countries, including Israel, England, Italy and Sweden.

Smart Start also can point to legislative successes. While early childhood services have experienced their share of funding cuts as a result of the economic recession, these services still receive substantial legislative funding, including the previously mentioned $150 million annually to support Smart Start, as well as a similar level of state appropriation for pre-kindergarten services, funding increases for child care subsidies, and solid support for a child health insurance program. This level of funding has been sustained as a result of tremendous public support for early childhood services that has been built over the past two decades in response to the work and outreach efforts of the local Smart Start Collaboratives.

Following are capsule summaries of other successes cited by some of the states:

- **Arizona**: In just over five years, 31 regional councils have been established. More than 300 individuals at the community level are focused on how to improve and support the health and development of young children. Despite the severe funding cuts to early childhood services that the Arizona legislature has made in recent years, First Things First (FTF) has been able to maintain the system and minimize the harm to children and families. Partnerships are being established and working at the local level in a way that would not have been possible before the development of FTF, including, for example, FTF partnerships with the health system, coordination among various family support agencies, and stronger connections with school districts. While it takes time to build and strengthen those partnerships, the return on investment is enormous. Communities are now beginning to talk less about how to fund programs and more about what the community needs, about how to address those needs and strengthen services, and about the role that funding can play in helping to meet the needs.

- **Iowa**: As a result of Early Childhood Iowa, there is greater public awareness in the state of the importance of early childhood services and of the work being done to support young children and families. An important factor in building this awareness among many different sectors and levels of government has been the composition of the local boards, with memberships that include both local citizens and community partners. The boards have been able to identify gaps...
in services and needs, and they have worked to meet those needs through planning and collaboration and the use of resources provided at the state and local levels. Moreover, state leaders have built strong partnerships with both the local boards and state-level public and private institutions – partnerships that have emerged as a result of Early Childhood Iowa and that did not exist before the initiative was developed.

- **Kansas:** Over the past 10 years, Early Childhood Kansas has advanced understanding of the concept of early childhood development — and especially what the concept means for children with risk factors — to the point that this kind of awareness is now embedded in thinking throughout the state. There are no longer arguments about the importance of early childhood education. Even the most conservative citizens who typically question using tax dollars for social purposes agree that early brain development is critical to children’s later development.

- **Oklahoma:** Smart Start Oklahoma partnerships provide the table where all early childhood topics can be discussed and acted upon, and as a result, there is a concerted focus on young children at the state level and in 18 regions of Oklahoma. In addition, as a result of the collaborative environment created at the state level, Smart Start Oklahoma has been requested to facilitate special projects that involve more than one state agency – for example, using the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems funding to include training for home-based providers of early intervention and home visitation services in the Child Care Professional Development Registry.

- **South Carolina:** First Steps’ efforts have resulted in: 1) the ability to reach a statewide population of children and families – especially those with fewer resources, who have less access to services; 2) the creation of stronger community partners and locally generated initiatives built on relationships and trust; 3) the development of non-traditional partners - especially in the private sector - who are now engaged in efforts to expand and improve early childhood efforts; and 4) improved quality of services throughout the state with a particular focus on the fidelity of programs to proven program models. Most notably, since 2001, the first-grade retention rate in South Carolina has been reduced by 48 percent.

Improvement on this measure, the only statewide measure that has been identified for assessing school readiness, is attributable to all early childhood stakeholders in the state, both public and private. (First Steps is the only statewide entity specifically charged with a school readiness goal.)

- **Vermont:** Vermont’s statewide network of early childhood councils has helped eliminate fragmentation and led to better coordination. Building Bright Futures has been flexible enough to transform itself in order to meet new challenges and opportunities and to make improvements in population-based health, education, social and economic indicators that measure child/family/community well-being.

- **Virginia:** Business engagement has been an essential element of the success of early childhood systems work in Virginia. The Virginia Early Childhood Foundation (VECF) and the Smart Beginnings local collaboratives would never have been created or sustained over the past decade without strong business support and advocacy. The legislature regularly hears from business advocates about the important work underway through Smart Beginnings and VECF. Business leaders contribute both time and resources to create a true public/private partnership. Another important success is communities’ use of data to guide strategic planning efforts. Local-level decisions are no longer made reactively, but instead are based on data-driven planning. This came as a result of the state-level technical assistance provided to local leaders.

- **Washington State:** While still early in the developmental process of the state’s regional coalitions, Washington leaders see the strength of the regional
coalitions as key to the successful implementation of their state early learning plan and to their capacity to effectively implement their Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge (RTC-ELC) plan. They recognize that these efforts will not be successful without the work of the coalitions in customizing and implementing the key programs funded under RTT-ELC to meet local needs and realities.

Final Lessons Learned and Words of Advice

The interviews that BUILD conducted with leaders of the 12 profiled states captured numerous lessons learned and led us to formulate advice, much of which has already been summarized in this issue brief. However, there were many other “nuggets” of wisdom on how to start up and implement a state/local initiative that did not fit into any particular section. Some of these lessons are:

• A statewide strategic framework from which to make decisions is critical. Without that roadmap, lots of individually funded programs can exist that are not connected and that do not help you advance at the local or state level towards a system that can result in real change and positive child outcomes.

• Creation of a statewide framework for the development of the early childhood system is essential.

• Not everyone understands what it means to build a system. It is important to take this abstract vision of a system, make it more concrete and involve all partners in the development of a plan that is transforming and not just about funding programs.

• Attention is needed over time to reassess and sustain the elements of the system. You are never done. Continuous improvement and development will always be important.

• This is a developmental process. There is no one right answer. Continually position yourself for the next right thing. Try some things, learn some things, and then determine where you go next.

• Celebrate each step forward. When we start systems-level work, we tend to focus on the big goals and forget all the little actions that are required. Celebrate each advance. That will bring more people on board. Success breeds success.

• Turf, habit, and culture can get in the way of services to children and families.

• When skilled coordination, strong influential leadership, and community commitment come together, success is amazing. This powerful combination can make things happen.

• Create a balance of local autonomy to reflect local needs and ownership, and state oversight to ensure accountability and work towards overarching common goals.

• The relationships between the state and regional councils should be a priority for every statewide network, but building these relationships can take a long time. The regional councils should realize they can’t do it without the state council and the statewide network can’t exist without trust and collaboration of the regional councils. An early childhood system is far more effective as a single statewide network made up of semi-autonomous pieces, than as fragmented leadership.

• Keep the community perspective in mind in everything that you do. Think in terms of the successes you can all claim as a community or a state, rather than as an individual organization or agency.

• There are constant tensions between state and local control and what that means. The goal, of course, is to maintain a balance but the perception of what that balance is varies based on the state/local perspective.

• It takes a long time to build infrastructure and move a system forward. Often, you will be building the plane and flying it at the same time, and as a result, decisions will be made and resources expended without anyone having a
full sense of the statewide strategic direction. These uncertainties inevitably result in a number of changes in direction later on and will likely create frustration at the local level. You should be aware of these dynamics from the beginning, and at the same time to minimize local frustrations, you should do everything you can to build flexibility for local collaboratives into the initiative.

- There must be coordination/collaboration at both the state and local levels. The state is asking local coalitions to take a system-wide perspective and to partner with one another. The state must do the same by fostering partnerships among state agencies. A comprehensive statewide early childhood system includes all the partnering agencies and organizations, and it’s everyone’s job to partner for better outcomes for young children and their families.

- What we have learned in our initiative has come in stages, which, like the stages of human development, layer on top of one another – in this case, to create a complex understanding of processes, relationships, communications, and practice. It is essential that we view learning and systems building as a process that is never finished. We continue to learn and improve — we are not running a race to reach a finish line.

Conclusion

This story is far from complete – for the states we have profiled and for many more states that will launch similar efforts in the upcoming years. The evidence bears out that greater success can be achieved through a state and community-based approach to early childhood systems building than in a state without a mechanism for effective two-way communication, local buy-in, and state supports for local partnerships. Flexible funding to support local collaborative efforts is essential as is a strong state-level infrastructure to support local systems building efforts. “Flexible” is the watch word for all efforts at the state and local level. This is not an effort that can be created and then implemented in the same way over and over. It must grow and evolve, with state and community leaders learning from both the challenges and successes. And just as communities within a state have much to learn from each other, states have much to learn from each other as well. The more opportunities we can create for states to learn together from their mutual state/local systems-building efforts, the stronger and more effective will be the outcomes across all states.

Appendix

State Community Partnerships to Build Early Childhood Initiatives

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Name of Initiative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>First Things First</td>
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<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>First Five</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>Early Childhood Councils</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>School Readiness Councils</td>
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<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>Early Learning Coalitions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>Early Childhood Iowa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>Smart Start Kansas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>Community Early Childhood Councils</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>Great Start</td>
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<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>Smart Start Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>Local Early Childhood Advisory Councils</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>Family and Children First Councils</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>Smart Start Oklahoma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>Early Learning Hubs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>Regional Hubs</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>First Steps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>Pre-K Advisory Councils</td>
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<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Smart Beginnings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>Building Bright Futures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>Regional Early Learning Coalitions</td>
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<tr>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td>County Collaborative Early Childhood Teams</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
State and Local Resources *(Click on a listing to visit the website)*

**Arizona**
- First Things First website
- Proposition 203
- First Things First 2013 Annual Report
- First Things First Strategic Plan (June 2012)
- FTF Strategy Toolkit
- Regional Council Member Job Description
- Regional Council Member Application Guide
- Regional Council Member Recruitment Flyer

**California**
- First 5 California website
- First 5 California Association website
- First 5 Amador website
- First 5 Siskiyou website
- Proposition 10

**Colorado**
- Colorado Early Childhood Councils

**Iowa**
- Early Childhood Iowa website
- Early Childhood Iowa legislation
- Early Childhood Iowa State Board
- Levels of Excellence Rating System
- Early Childhood Iowa - State System Development
- Early Childhood Iowa Areas - Local System Development
- Local Collaborative Toolkit documents and other Local Tools

**Kansas**
- Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund website
- Pittsburg Family Resource Center website

**Michigan**
- Great Start website
- Office of Great Start website
- Early Childhood Investment Corporation website
- Executive Order establishing the Office of Great Start
- Section 32p Michigan School Aid Act (Great Start block grant funding)
- 2012 Great Start Evaluation Report
- Ionia County Local Collaborative 3-year strategic plan
- Montcalm County Great Start Collaborative website
- Ionia County Great Start Collaborative website

**North Carolina**
- Smart Start website
- Guilford County Partnership for Children website
- Smart Start legislation
- Smart Start evaluation results
- Performance Based Incentive System (PBIS) statewide report (2012)
- Smart Start Resource Guide of Evidence-Based and Evidence-Informed Programs and Practices

**Oklahoma**
- Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy website
- Smart Start Oklahoma website
- Success by Six Norman website
South Carolina

South Carolina First Steps website
York County Partnership for Children
First Steps Annual Plan Format
First Steps Renewal Plan Review Checklist FY 2014
First Steps Grant Agreement
First Steps Program and Accountability Standards FY 2014
First Steps Program Standards

Vermont

Building Bright Futures website
Work plan from Southeastern Vermont
Building Bright Futures
Vermont Legislation
Building Bright Futures Data Reporting System

Virginia

Smart Beginnings website
Evidence-Based Program Guide
Smart Beginnings Investment Framework
Smart Beginnings Strategic Plan
Smart Beginnings Request for Proposal
Smart Beginnings Letter of Agreement
Smart Beginnings Grants Manual
Building an Effective Comprehensive Early Childhood System Toolkit
2013 Smart Beginnings Annual Report

Washington

Thrive by Five Washington website
Department of Early Learning website
Washington State Early Learning Plan
Washington State Early Learning Regional Coalitions
State and Local Coordination Project - Final Recommendations (2013)
Special Thanks

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