

What Does a Successful Early Childhood Partnership Look Like?

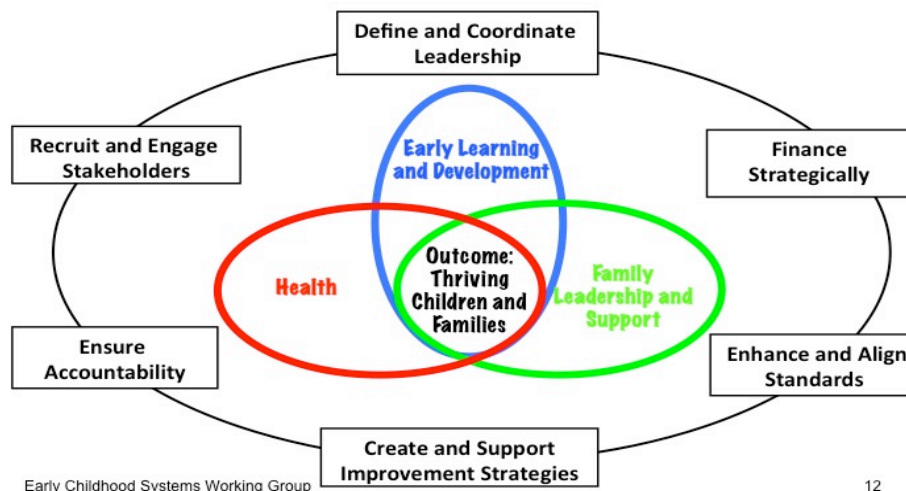
A local early childhood partnership (collaboration, council, coalition, forum etc.) brings together individuals, professionals, organizations, agencies, and community members to address and solve existing and emerging problems that could not be solved by a single organization, group or sector.

Local early childhood partnerships vary in terms of governance & organizational structure, resources, range of activities, and stakeholder involvement. There is no “one size fits all” definition of a local partnership. However, a successful partnership working towards improved outcomes for **all children and families** within the defined community focuses efforts on broad-sector coordination, rather than the isolated intervention of individual organizations.

A local early childhood partnership has the potential to demonstrate collective impact towards large-scale change (e.g., increasing the number of children who are “kindergarten ready”). In order to build an early childhood system on the local level, early childhood partnerships facilitate the following functions:

- Create and support improvement strategies
- Ensure accountability
- Recruit and engage stakeholders
- Define and coordinate leadership
- Finance strategically
- Enhance and align standards

What Are the Functions of a Comprehensive Early Childhood System ?



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Partner. Plan. Act.

Lack of resources, competition for funds and clients, administrative rules and regulations, decentralized programs and services, and lack of leadership and staff to facilitate coordination are commonly cited barriers to collaboration on the local level. Building a local partnership takes time and resources as well as a collaborative mindset among key stakeholders. The final “product” or partnership might look different from town to town and region to region, but the basic roadmap is similar.

Partner

Continuous and intentional engagement of stakeholders from across the early childhood system is the absolute foundation. Successful partnerships think in terms of “vertical” engagement (is a partner organization fully engaged from its Executive Director, through management and line staff?) and “horizontal” engagement (is each sector of the system fully represented?). Successful partnerships go beyond the early childhood system and engage the broader community, all of whom have a stake in the outcome, including business and civic leaders, local philanthropic and service organizations, local government, higher education, K-12 (not just the preschool program!), faith-based organizations, and more.

Plan

A partnership must decide what it is trying to achieve. A vision statement answers the question “Where do we want to go”. Determining the best route for achieving that vision takes some work. A partnership should gather and analyze data collaboratively, adding context to numbers and getting a sense of shared needs and priorities. Getting to the root causes of critical issues is essential to developing strategies for solving entrenched problems. A good plan contains goals and objectives that are linked to the partnership vision and address root causes. A good plan should also include “short wins”-- strategies that can be implemented within a short timeframe (3-6 months).

Act

Implementing a plan is often where early childhood partnerships fall short and where the barriers to collaboration become evident. At the heart of collective impact is collective responsibility. It is the responsibility of each and every member of a partnership to put a plan into action. A strong partnership with a good plan needs to include accountability mechanisms such as shared leadership, regular meetings, and detailed workplans. But most importantly, the plan itself needs to be **actionable**; specific in its goals and objectives and realistic in terms of time and resources. Partners need to be committed **advocates** for the resources necessary to achieve the partnership vision.

To sustain a partnership, the process of **Partner. Plan. Act.** must be ongoing: continuous engagement of new stakeholders; continuous planning to take advantage of new opportunities and address emerging needs; continuous action to implement plans and hold one another accountable for action, and; continuous advocacy for the necessary policies and resources.

What Are Systems-Change Strategies?

Early childhood partnerships at the local level typically come together to accomplish better results for young children and families. Effective partnerships develop and implement strategies to increase access to and coordination of high quality early childhood services within a comprehensive system. The system consists of the full range of programs and services within these broad sectors: **early care and education; Early Intervention & special needs services; health, mental health and nutrition; family support and leadership.**

The following list, adapted from Michigan's Great Start Collaboratives, outlines systems-change strategies that a local early childhood partnership might pursue.

- 1) Increase service coordination and integration (e.g., joint recruitment and enrollment, centralized intake and referral for home visitation). Specific strategies include shifting organizational policies, practices, and procedures to improve access, coordination, and quality of services (e.g., adopt common forms and intake/referral procedures; adopt evidence based programs; coordination that results in adding new program slots; shift where and when to provide services)
- 3) Expand quantity and quality of service supports offered including adopting evidence-based programs and practices
- 4) Actively increase strength and density of exchange networks (i.e., network includes broader range of stakeholders and has greater capacity to implement collaborative systems-change strategies and advocate on behalf of the community's children and families)
- 5) Develop processes to increase mutual information sharing regarding families served by multiple organizations, ensuring that families have signed appropriate documentation to allow this coordination
- 6) Increase sharing of concrete resources such as in-kind resources, funds, co-location of services/staff, facilities, supplies, training, and transportation

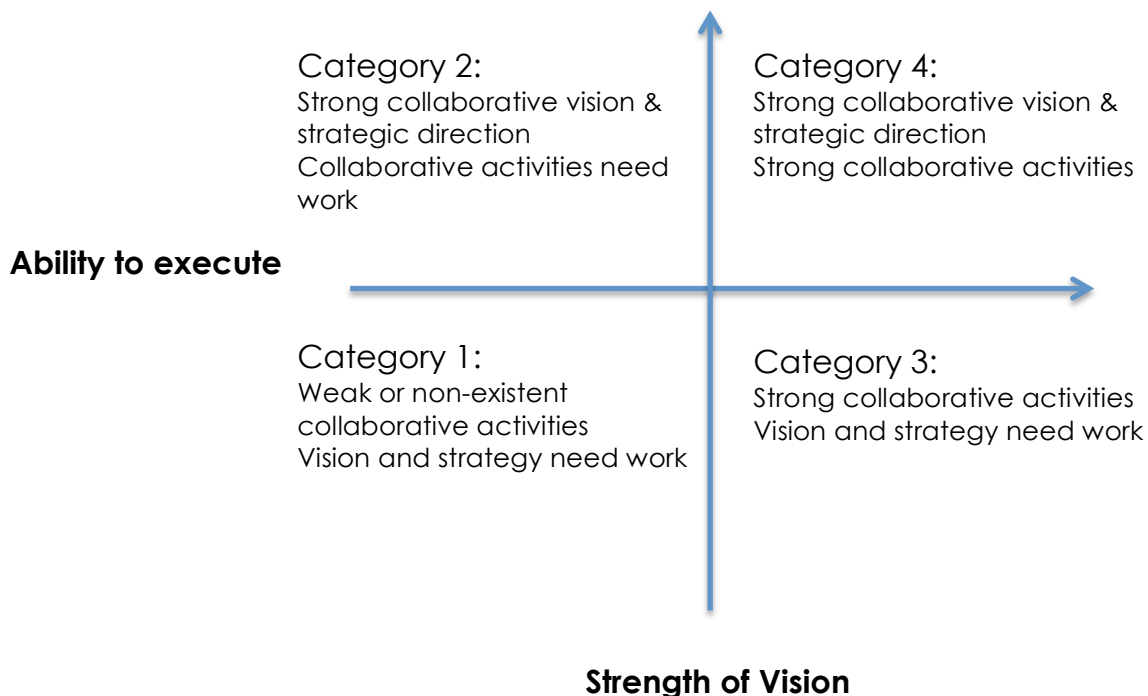
Partnership Framework Where Does Your Community Fit?

Illinois Action for Children has developed a framework for assessing early childhood partnerships in order to design technical assistance and training packages that build on strengths, improve areas of weakness, and push communities to stretch themselves. Embedded in this framework are the critical factors for sustaining a partnership that accomplishes better results for children and families: leadership, organizing and engagement of key stakeholders, and advocacy.

Communities with varying levels of collaborative early childhood infrastructure can self-assess along two continua: **strength of vision** and **ability to execute**.

Strength of Vision: Has a partnership articulated a shared vision for the community? Does the work of the partnership flow from that vision? How broadly is this vision shared across the community? Is the vision fully embraced by all partner organizations—leaders, managers, and line staff? To what extent does the work of partner agencies align with the community vision? Does the vision inform a community advocacy agenda?

Ability to Execute: Does the partnership actively pursue systems-change strategies? Are there specific outputs or outcomes attributable to the partnership? Who does the partnership work; is leadership and staff work concentrated or diffused among partners? Are key sectors or constituencies missing from the partnership? What accountability measures are in place? How strong is the partnership's capacity for advocacy?



Category 1: Getting Started

A community in this category may have some of the following characteristics:

- There is no network or partnership focusing specifically on early childhood issue (but there may be issue/sector networks (e.g., family child care association, LIC, LAN) that are formed for a specific purpose and should be considered in partnership development efforts)
- When an early childhood challenge or opportunity arises, there is no community-wide table/forum at which to address the issue
- Professionals within the community do not know much about what other resources (programs, services, relationships) might be available for their clients and/or themselves as professionals

Category 2: Strengthening Execution

A community in this category may have one or more of the following characteristics:

- Existing community partnership has good representation from a broad range of stakeholders and articulated vision/mission statement or goal
- Key stakeholders may be missing from partnership, limiting ability for strategy implementation
- Partnership meets regularly, but doesn't accomplish much in between meetings and members can't identify specific outcomes of collaborative work
- Activities are program-focused rather than systems-focused and may not be addressing root causes of critical issues
- The workload of the collaboration is carried by a small number of partners

Category 3: Building Vision and Strategic Direction

A community in this category may have one or more of the following characteristics:

- Partnership may meet regularly and pursue collaborative activities, but partners have different answers to the same question: what are we hoping to achieve?
- Partnership is limited in its focus or has been convened for a specific purpose and/or target participants; vision/strategic direction not inclusive of full system
- There are multiple early childhood partnerships in the community working on similar issues and with similar stakeholders; but no overall community vision
- Partnership isn't representative of the full system; key sectors are missing
- Participants are "bought in" but leadership and/or line staff within partner organizations are not engaged in partnership work

Category 4: Model for Community Partnership

A community partnership in this category may have the following characteristics:

- Strong organizational structure, possibly with paid staff
- Clearly articulated vision that is shared by broad range of stakeholders at various levels within partner organizations
- Collaborative activities are used as models by emerging partnerships